



Vol. 2 No. 2 (July 2017):

Creative Writing from the Islamic World

ISSN No:2583-4347



SAMYUKTA: A JOURNAL of GENDER AND CULTURE

Creative Writing from the Islamic World

Vol. 2 No. 2 (2017):

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Guest Editorial

This issue marks quite a divergent path for Samyukta which has so far been engaged in publishing critical analyses of literature and culture. The idea of this unique issue on creative writing from the Islamic world, evolved from the deliberations and discussions generated by the previous issue on Islamic Feminism. Those deliberations were a timely aide-memoire that we in the Indian academia were yet to constructively engage with religious life worlds, especially from the Islamic/ Muslim milieu. As academicians, the present political turmoil also provoked us to recognise how Islamophobic public discourses have been furthering communal distrust and divide. Of late, more public intellectuals and academicians are engaged in analysing how geopolitical structures of statist violence, increasing economic inequality, and unjust wars have left the Muslim populations ravaged and though scant, there are attempts at documenting its wide-ranging impact on the everyday life of Muslims. This important yet difficult task has been more daunting for the difficulty in developing new incisive critical apparatus with existing theories and terminologies which are biased. But it is an indefatigable truth that even when we are challenged in academia by the absence of appropriate terminologies, the ebb and flow of creative articulations are not stemmed by such challenges. In this special issue we have tapped into that possibility of a 'non-academic' language to deal with the myriad hues of the Islamic world. This special issue of Samyukta completely focuses on creative voices from the Islamic world that would provide an insight into the life worlds that the world at large perceives to be different by virtue of faith. It is by design that we used the term Islamic world in lieu of Muslim world; to keep it open for all voices that adhere to/ engage with Islam; rather than to use battered media categorizations that would limit the scope of this volume to specific geographic locations or cultural specificities that are usually seen only as Arab and hence Muslim. Universalizing Muslim belief and tradition has been the prevalent media practice, though Muslims in different parts of the world live very different lives and talk about being Muslims in different ways. A key point is that there are not only diverse varieties of 'living-as-a-Muslim' but also differences of opinion among people who identify themselves as Muslims in their understanding of "Islam". The bouquet of articulations put together here stands testimony to this fact. This volume brings together a series of searing political commentaries and personal narratives very varied in their flavour and thrust. I believe these articulations would contribute towards such an understanding and engagement, resulting in positive transformations.

Guest Editor - VARSHA BASHEER

The Nakba: Narrating the “Non-Existing” Palestinians into History!

HATEM BAZIAN

I have been engaged in a constant writing project that intends to highlight Palestinian narratives since 1948 up to the present. The dispossession narrative touches every Palestinian family including my own. During the 1948 Nakba and the war period, two family members on my father side were martyred, Jawdat Ali Rida Muhammad Bazian and Imran Ali Rida Muhammad Bazian, while another relative, Rida Ali Muhammad Bazian, was tortured by the British and released to the family bleeding and unconscious in a coma and died at home after a few days, in 1946. The Bazian’s narrative is but a small part in a large picture that includes Faouzi As’ad Bazian and 14-year-old Khalid Bazian who were martyred in 1967 and 2000, respectively. The Bazian family narrative includes the dean of prisoners, ‘Alaa Bazian, a blind man but endowed with piercing vision for freedom, resistance and a towering figure in the prisoners’ movement.

On my mother’s side of the family, my uncle Yusuf went missing during the war and until this day no one knows what happened to him. Every Palestinian family has one or more of its members killed, wounded, imprisoned or expelled first by the British and then followed by the Zionist during the 1947-48 Nakba.

On a daily basis, I receive hundreds of requests via email, Facebook and Twitter to highlight a cause, an important issue or a silenced narrative that can benefit by adding one more badly needed voice. Being a Palestinian in the diaspora and an academic that does work on Palestine and its painful history adds a personal dimension to requests coming from people living under occupation. How to narrate the stories of so many victims past and present? How can one record the past when the present Israeli death machine is still adding more bodies and countless victims daily?

Narrating Palestine means to write back into history the names, faces and narratives of all those who were killed, maimed, wounded and dispossessed to bring Israel into existence. Names of Palestinians killed are not recorded and are mere numbers mentioned in passing as if having no families, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, cousins or neighbours who recall their joys and sorrows. Palestinian bodies have been piling up since the beginning of the 20th century and Europe's plan to solve its "Jewish question" by creating a Palestinian-Arab one.

Palestinians have been facing structured, multi-layered and systematic erasure at local, regional and global levels. Locally, they suffer under direct and brutal Israeli occupation with daily attempts at dispossession and never-ending violence. The visible scars are itched into people's faces speaking of trans-generational sufferings. Young Palestinian bodies made old by the suffocation of occupation, dispossession of land, checkpoints and fascist settlers stomping over everything that has meaning including the human him/herself. The Nakba continues in the building of the Apartheid Wall that separates families and villages, and pollutes the senses with a most profound ugliness that has no contemporary parallel on earth.

Yet more painful for Palestinians is the never-ending disfigurement of the land since 1948 and erasure of the past to replace with the architecture of violence, destruction of meaning and a "spirituality" rooted in worshipping power as the new modern deity. Adding insult to injury on the anniversary of the Nakba is a Palestinian Authority that acts as the face and hands of the occupation that protects the settlers while punishing again its own population. How to narrate the multiple stories of betrayal and the selling away a people's rights for some VIP privileges for the few?

The Palestinian Nakba anniversary is again ushered in with a continuation of structured violence committed against the Palestinians by the Israeli State. In Western press, the custom is to look at events in Palestine through the Israeli lens. On the one hand, the press erases past and present Palestinian narratives while on the other, humanizes and rationalizes Zionist violence. A Palestinian is either murdered or violently attacked daily but the Western press never finds the time or space to narrate their story and give a name, face and complete picture as to who they are as a person. Palestinian deaths and suffering is narrated in numbers while their victimizers are introduced as people with feelings, families and histories that matter.

At a regional level, the Nakba for Palestinian has transformed them into refugees and tools for settling accounts between various Arab states and leaders. Consequently, whenever two Arab countries had a conflict, the Palestinians became the bargaining chip to exert pressure or gain the upper hand in whichever distorted sense of nationalism was being introduced. Also, the Nakba transformed Palestinians into stateless people and subject of states that have accepted their dispossession as a pre-condition to gaining their own post-colonial banana republics. Palestinians post Nakba became a regional toy to raise, abase and bundle in all types of Cold War machinations, monarchies versus nationalist, Sunni-Shia rivalry, oil market manipulations and war on terror obfuscation. How to narrate the violence of regional machinations that makes of Palestinian refugees as instrument for state craft?

On the global level, the Nakba has meant that the Palestinians have become wards of the international community. Importantly, the international community as a group celebrates Zionism and the founding of Israel as an atonement for their own historical anti-Semitism and the death visited upon European Jewry during WWII. The Nakba meant that Palestinians have become a fixture at United Nation meetings and a never-ending spectacle for obtuse foreign policy “experts” to offer ideas on how to solve the unsolvable. How to solve the Palestinian dilemma in an institution and among member states who celebrate Palestine’s dispossession, provide economic and military aid to Israel, cooperate in targeting Palestinians around the world and cast the Veto to prevent any change from taking place?

Narrating Palestine is the order of the day and it has to be undertaken under the most cruel of circumstances. How to narrate the Nakba when Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Myanmar, Yemen and Somalia are all ablaze and facing various levels of death and destruction? Arguably, the Nakba could be seen as a minor issue in the face of the destruction currently under way in Syria and Iraq, which is of biblical proportions. However, the level of destruction should not obscure the nature of the Zionist settler colonial project and its connection and investment in the on-going regional conflicts.

The alliance between Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt is undertaken within the framework of a regional containment strategy that made Syria and Iraq the acceptable terrain to settle strategic accounts. Palestine and Palestinians are once again the bargaining chip to be offered to safeguard seats of power in various capitals and Israel is in the driver seat to secure its land robberies.

The Nakba is not a single event that unfolded in the past and Palestinians have had a long period of time to recover from it. Indeed, the Nakba, for Palestinians, is a never-ending epic that continues to shape their daily lives. The stories of dispossession are continuous and trans-generational in nature since the losses and destructions inflicted upon Palestinians in 1948 was followed by constant dislocation, targeting and movement as refugees in near and distant places. Israel was built on top of Palestinian graves and a wholesale robbery of Palestine's cities, villages and orchards. What started in the 1948 Nakba continues today in land confiscations, settlement building and the suffocating occupation that has no end in sight.

A narrative of every Palestinian family is intertwined with the 1948 Nakba, 1967 Nakhsa, 1970 expulsion from Jordan, 1976-80s multiple wars in Lebanon and a new exile in Tunisia, the 1st and 2nd Intifadah, 1991-92 removal from Kuwait, ejection from Iraq and wards of U.S. occupation forces on the borders, siege in Yarmouk and camps in Syria, and sadistic assaults on Gaza. The Nakba rears its ugly head every time a Palestinian is stopped at a boarder and in airports to be incessantly asked about violence, terrorism and why are they traveling in the first place, as if it is a crime. How does it feel when you are asked to justify your existence and innocence to the criminal enterprise that committed the crime in the first place?

The Nakba is Zionism's trans-historical bullet that is lodged deeply into Palestinian bodies and minds, continues to torment daily and works to negate Palestinian peoplehood, history, connection to land and the ability to narrate itself. Narrating the Nakba is writing Palestine and its people back into history while asserting their centrality to the past, present and future. The Nakba continues in the daily humiliation suffered by Palestinians inside and outside of Palestine. The Nakba continues in the building of the Apartheid Wall that separate families and villages, and pollutes the senses with a most profound ugliness that has no contemporary parallel on earth. Lastly, narrating Palestine is not complete without the thousands of Palestinians who languish in Israeli, Arab and world prisons for no other reason than demanding freedom and dignity. Certainly, a prison may lock-up the body but it never can capture the mind of a free people!

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Justice for Najeeb: Between Identity and Insaaf

HEBA AHMED

“Rahiye ab aisi jagah chal kar jahan koi na ho

ham-sukhan koi na ho aur ham-zaban koi na ho”

—Mirza Ghalib

(Go and stay in a quarter where no one lives

None to hear your speech, none to speak in your tongue)[1]

This is a personal statement of facts about an event that occurred in Jawaharlal Nehru University last year. Since the disappearance of Najeeb Ahmad from JNU in October 2016, students especially Muslims have felt tremendous insecurity in campus. I have written many pamphlets and have posted many updates on social media, describing the protests for ‘Justice for Najeeb’, the dwindling number of protesters, the lack of justice and creation of further injustice. But there are other more narratives, about personal tribulations as influenced by political events, about coming to terms with one’s own vulnerability as a Muslim student in a campus where progressivism is now only a veneer, about the alienation of that progressive space itself. With the disappearance of Najeeb and the protests which followed after it, I became fully involved in student activism on JNU campus. But there are many lingering discontents, about the nature of politics itself. Where do Muslim students place themselves, in a campus where the traditional left has also descended into thinly disguised Islamophobia, where the ‘new left’ also has immense secular anxieties about Muslim organisations? Should we distinguish ourselves from ‘the left’ by subscribing to the mores of ‘identity politics’? Or should the term ‘identity politics’ be

jettisoned completely, because of the sheer condescension and disparagement shown by the left when speaking of it? Should Muslim students evolve their own vocabulary of politics, as Ambedkarite student bodies have done very recently? Should they ally themselves with a re-invented notion of leftist progressive politics or give up any hope for the left's reinvention, especially because the benchmarks of progressivism are always used as a measure for Muslims? The answers to these questions are not uncomplicated. But these questions, regarding the Muslim Self and its location in university politics, have emerged during protests. During protests demanding for justice, one's own positionality and identity are reckoned. We may not have immediate responses to our own doubts and we have not proffered our own discourse. Nevertheless, our questions are substantial enough to provide us with a vantage point from which we can give critiques to the extant modes of student activism in JNU. And these critiques cannot be ignored, they demand a hearing. It is not easy to launch a critique of those who denounce criticism. It is not easy to confront alienation from these well-established actors bearing indubitable progressive credentials. But the enunciation of identity as the 'personal confronting the political' is very necessary in times of fascism, when minority identities face greater levels of victimisation. Therefore, how do we imagine *insaaf*? How we understand the lack of it? Najeeb's Muslim identity seems to be the prerequisite for many cycles of injustice. This essay is an exploration of this. This essay lays down and reflects upon the facts of Najeeb's disappearance. These facts have been twisted beyond credibility. An honest appraisal of the narratives about Najeeb's disappearance is sorely needed.

The life of Najeeb Ahmad is marked by his absence. He came to be known as the person who disappeared. His last known place, the premises of Jawaharlal Nehru University where he was enrolled as an M.Sc. student of Biotechnology, became aware of his existence only after his existence itself became untraceable. He was in JNU for barely a month, and had probably not even familiarised himself to its environs. But after he disappeared, Najeeb began to be featured in screeching news headlines, in circles of rumour-mongering, in half-hearted protest gatherings. He became the focus of numerous questions: Where is Najeeb? Has he been found? Some questions were deliberately arranged by a controversy-generating media to hint at something murky: did Najeeb watch ISIS videos? Has Najeeb joined ISIS? Did Najeeb go away out of his own volition? Some other questions were unspeakable: Is Najeeb alive? Will he ever be found? Such is the nature of these questions that they cannot elicit any satisfactory answer.

The disappearance of an individual casts a permanent doubt about not only his life, but also the circumstances of his disappearance. A disappeared person's life is itself marred by the

conjectures of others. His life becomes a post-life as it were, in which he is defined by the statements of others. He loses any chance to represent his own life in his words, to hold any stakes about his own existence, to express any dissonance from the many narratives that are circulated about him. But since a disappeared person's existence is still held in limbo, since he has not yet been marked 'dead', there are many narratives which are constructed about him. This, then, is his post-life, wherein frame upon frame is imposed upon him, each of these frames jostling with each other for credibility.

In the wake of a disappearance, there are other lives whose vulnerability and assertion together become visible. These lives are of those who are immediately affected by the absence of the disappeared person. Fatima Nafees, Sadaf Irshad, Mujeeb Ansari, Hasib Ahmad are the family members of Najeeb. They have raised their voices, tremulous at first, but with a gradually increasing vigour. Their demand for justice, for *insaaf*, for the return of the disappeared, makes them extremely susceptible to more injustice. But their cry for an ever elusive justice is far more resonant than their cries of pain and anguish.

Finally, there is a bevy of individuals and collectives who are involved in the demand for justice for the disappeared individual. Belonging to university spaces, or the larger civil society, these individuals are simultaneously engaged in a process of creating discourses about the disappeared individual, vulnerable identities, and statist agents. These individuals have varying social locations, which determine their power vis-a-vis the state. Not all these activists are motivated by concerns of justice. Some are present only for the sake of maintaining a progressive vocation. These individuals are those who believe that they are destined to enunciate the maxims of every protest that takes place anywhere. They are always engaged in carving out an electorate for themselves. Of course, electoral politics is an essential element in every democratic institution and its significance must not be undermined. But the urgency to be triumphant in student union elections trumps all other considerations. Therefore, for many progressive leftists organisations, especially those that are affiliated to parliamentary political parties, participation in protests for 'Justice for Najeeb' is valuable only to the extent that it ensures Muslim votes for them in the next Students' Union election in JNU. But solidarity does not arise from a self-professed claim to uphold justice for the sake of gathering vote counts. Solidarity arises from a feeling of identification and empathy with the disappeared. Thus, solidarity may be determined by identity, but need not be reducible to it. Be that as it may, it is not possible to sustain the momentum of any movement by excluding those who have vested interests. Such an effort might as well be self-righteous and counter-productive. Thus, the quest for justice involves all shades of motive and concern.

The Event of Disappearance

The prima facie “narrative” of the events which occurred on 14th October 2016, at the premises of the Mahi-Mandavi hostel in JNU, is fundamentally flawed and rife with contradictions. It has been alleged by the members of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (the student organisation affiliated to the Bharatiya Janata Party) that Najeeb was the one who had precipitated the incident of violence which took place. Najeeb had apparently slapped Vikrant, an ABVP member, who had visited Najeeb’s room on a campaign for the upcoming elections in Mahi-Mandavi hostel. The reason behind this ‘attack’, as given by ABVP, seems bizarre: that Najeeb had taken offence to a sacred thread on Vikrant’s wrist. No witnesses have testified to this story; it is clearly a fabrication, designed to play off the trope of the butthurt Muslim. The counter-attack on Najeeb which occurred seemingly in response to this has been justified by ABVP as a ‘reaction’. The action-reaction formula for justifying attacks on Muslims had been popularised by Narendra Modi during his tenure as the Gujarat Chief Minister. And the counter-attack was vicious. Najeeb was brutally beaten up even in front of the hostel warden. He was lynched repeatedly by ABVP members and also given threats that he will be sent to the “bahattar hoor” or ‘72 virgins’. The anti-Muslim slur and the verbal violence implicit in this threat is unmistakable. Besides, graffiti saying ‘Pakistan ke mullah wapis jao’(Go back, Muslims of Pakistan) and ‘Muslims are terrorists’ was scribbled in the hostel washroom and dining table respectively; and the same ABVP ruffians also intimidated other (Muslim) students who had gathered to shield Najeeb.

When the initial account of the events on the night of the 14th of October was made known to the larger student body in JNU, it emerged that in the written version of the scuffle, Najeeb was portrayed as the ‘accused’ and not the victim of a brutal assault. This document, which was prepared immediately after the assault on Najeeb, was written and attested by a committee chaired by the warden of the Mahi-Mandavi hostel. This committee consisted of the senior warden of the hostel, the mess warden, the JNU Student’ Union’ president, the then president of the hostel, the former president of the hostel and Najeeb’s roommate. As per the decision of this letter, Najeeb stood guilty of physical violence on Vikrant and was expelled from the hostel forthwith. It was decided by this letter that Najeeb would have to vacate the hostel by 21st October 2016. It was even written in this letter that Najeeb had admitted to his act of violence. Najeeb’s intense vulnerability to a near mob attack was completely obscured by the signatories. The president of the Students’ Union himself was complicit in the anti-Muslim victimisation of Najeeb.

Najeeb had called his mother, Fatima Nafees, on the night that he was attacked. Fatima Nafees immediately left her hometown, Badaun (which is approximately 230 kilometres from Delhi) and travelled to JNU to see if her son was safe. She even spoke to Najeeb on the morning of the 15th of October. But when she arrived, Najeeb was missing. His roommate did not have any knowledge about his whereabouts. No one could provide any clues. Neither the security guards perpetually sitting at the gates of the hostel, nor the hostel authorities could furnish any information about where Najeeb could be.

‘Framing’ the Disappeared

From the account provided above, it is obvious that a frame of guilt was imposed on Najeeb immediately in the wake of his assault. Najeeb’s defenselessness and inability to resist being framed is a contrast to the power of those who framed him, sentenced him, and made a mockery of the injuries borne by him. In his hour of extreme vulnerability, when his life itself was in danger, Najeeb was forced to accept that he had ‘started the whole thing’. He was forced to acquiesce to falsehoods about him. He was forced to witness his own humiliation. But this frame of guilt, which was imposed upon Najeeb in his presence, was just the beginning of a more sordid narratives.

In the days following the attack on Najeeb and his subsequent disappearance, there was a sustained attempt by the government to stereotype and demonise him. He was said to be of depressed and unsound mind, thereby suggesting that he alone was to be held responsible for his disappearance. Meanwhile, Najeeb Jung, the then Lt. Governor of Delhi declared that Najeeb had been sighted in Darbhanga, a place associated with terror modules of the Indian Mujahideen. More rumours were set afoot, of Najeeb joining ISIS, of Najeeb watching ISIS videos on his laptop. These rumours were published in leading newspapers such as the Times of India. Rumours of Najeeb having been sighted in Darbhanga, or speculation that he has gone astray to join global terror groups, constantly impose a frame upon Najeeb and his disappearance.

All these frames have been imposed because they coincide with a demonised, stereotyped notion of Muslim identity. Najeeb’s susceptibility to getting framed is directly related to the fact that he was a Muslim. But the Muslim-ness of Najeeb is invoked only while framing him as the culprit or the terrorist. His Muslim-ness is neglected and obscured when it comes to the question of acknowledging vulnerability and giving solidarity. For example, the likes of Kanhaiya Kumar and JNUSU office-bearers have repeatedly insisted that the

near-fatal attack on Najeeb must be seen as one that occurred on a common student. This 'common student', as per leftist vocabulary, is not marked by any identity. The 'commonstudent' is not Muslim, not a minority, not someone who will force the majority to lift their veil of ignorance as it were. The vulnerability that Najeeb bore as a result of his Muslim identity is not acknowledged. No efforts have been made by these leftists to render his targeted Muslim identity free from blame and suspicion.

Therefore, when Najeeb was 'framed' after his disappearance, his identity as a Muslim was emphasised or suppressed only as per the convenience of the framers. The framers are those who belong to the majoritarian identity, or can be easily ensconced within the majoritarian identity. Majoritarianism exists within the ranks of both the Hindutva right-wing and the Brahmanical, Islamophobic left-wing. The right-wing actively persecutes and demonises Muslims, whereas the left-wing refuses to counter right-wing propaganda. Both right-wing and left-wing governments use anti-terror laws to incarcerate innocent Muslims. Both are active in bolstering discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion of Muslims. Thus, it is a part and parcel of the minority's benighted status in a majoritarian state to constantly battle with the frames that are imposed on it. These frames arise due to Islamophobia, anti-Muslim hatred, Hindu caste supremacy. The Muslim man is framed as the Pakistani, as the Taliban or Al-Qaeda or ISIS sympathiser, as the fundamentalist and the terrorist, as the obvious suspect in any counter-terror regime, as the quintessential misogynist who oppresses women, as the bearded and backward patriarch with a circumcised penis. Muslim lives come to be defined by these frames of suspicion and supposed guilt, such that these frames become more real than life itself. But after Najeeb disappeared, how could he possibly resist any of the myriad frames that were imposed upon him: the violent student who slapped a fellow student, the Muslim who took offence at the sight of a sacred thread of Hindus, the mentally unstable individual implicitly believed to be a misfit and wrongdoer, the disappeared person sighted in a place known to be infested with terror modules, the ISIS recruit? Even though Najeeb continues to be missing, the frames attached to his life have stuck. Like branded cattle. Like the yellow star in Nazi Germany.

The Chequered Path of Seeking Justice

On 16th October 2016, there was a blockade of the main gate of the JNU campus. The demands of the students from the chief proctor of the university were: punish the students responsible for assaulting Najeeb and file an FIR reporting the disappearance of Najeeb. When it became clear that the administration intended to make light of the whole matter and that the JNU vice-chancellor was refusing to assume any responsibility, students

imposed a gherao of the administration-bloc. This was sustained for nearly 24 hours during 19-20 October before it was unilaterally called off by the Students' Union. Protests by JNU students, whether at Vasant Kunj police station or Delhi Police headquarters at ITO or at India Gate, were met with the usual high-handed apathy of the administration and detentions by Delhi police. There were no signs of succour; Najeeb's sister, Sadaf Irshad reported intimidation by the JNU Vice Chancellor. During the march to India Gate on November 6th, even Fatima Nafees, Najeeb's mother, was dragged away into a police vehicle. She was detained until the intervention of Arvind Kejriwal, the Delhi Chief Minister. The images of the manhandling of Fatima Nafees went viral, made it to national headlines and were soon followed by mutual blame-gaming among the country's top political parties.

News of the cruelty meted out to a mother were immediately sought to be diverted by invoking a cliched trope about the JNU campus being a hub of terror and crime. A bagful of weapons was found near the JNU gates immediately the day after the protests at India Gate. It was linked to 'outsiders' who were regularly visiting the campus to join the 'Justice for Najeeb' protests. The incident provided the perfect alibi for the ABVP members on campus to notify the VC about the 'threats' they were facing, supposedly by Muslim students, on campus; the VC responded with alacrity, announcing that CCTV cameras would be installed to monitor the movement of students to and from campus. Incidentally, the 'outsiders' alluded to happened to be students from Jamia Milia Islamia (JMI) and Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), who have been an integral part of the student protests in and outside JNU. Needless to say, it was again a consciously stereotyped Muslim identity which was demonised.

While the fascist minions in the JNU administration ranging from the VC, the rector and the proctor continued to make a mockery of justice for Najeeb, the JNU Students' Union demonstrated that it is increasingly inept in undertaking any sustained mobilisation or carrying out any coherent struggle within the campus to ensure justice for Najeeb. The initial demands of the students were also forgotten in course of time. A 'Chalo JNU' was held on the 15th of November, and it was attended by students from AMU, JMI and Delhi University. But this was another cosmetic exercise and even lacked a proper agenda. These solidarity meetings were held only to pacify Muslim students and to give them a sense of false comfort. They were not backed by any stringent action against the apathy of the administration.

As protests waned and struggle diminished on campus, a University General Body Meeting (UGBM) was called in late November 2016. But the UGBM failed to achieve anything concrete. In fact, the UGBM in JNU has just been reduced to a body which indulges in petty public slander of students who oppose the parties which form the Union. Moreover, the UGBM functions on a majority-minority division of the attending students, wherein JNUSU supporters are in the obvious majority. The sole intent of the JNUSU in the UGBM held for 'Justice for Najeeb' was to gather two hundred-odd students to vote in favour of JNUSU resolutions, and to vote against any resolution which seemed to oppose the JNUSU/AISA-SFI's ultimatum.[2] Thus, only the Union's resolution for 'Chalo Badaun' was passed during the UGBM. But it was not implemented. After the UGBM, the momentum for protests in JNU was completely broken. The JNUSU leftists and their supporters moved on to other issues which needed their attention, however tokenistic that attention may be. In December, there was a march to Parliament, in which Asaduddin Owaisi and others Members of Parliament participated. But the JNU administration had more diktats up its sleeve.

The Vice-Chancellor M. Jagdeesh Kumar, who has time and again proved his pro-Modi stance, demonstrated the effectiveness of fascism in shielding the minions of BJP. In December 2016, the ABVP members who were found guilty by a much delayed proctorial inquiry, were given a mere hostel transfer by way of 'punishment'. At the same time, the VC capitalised upon the 'opportunities' provided by the attack on Najeeb to unleash a fascist onslaught upon the spaces of free speech and unconstrained protest cherished by JNU students. The admin-block which had been rechristened as 'Freedom Square/Azaadi Chowk' was declared out of bounds for student protests. The installation of iron grilles cordoned off the space which had been used by students to hold hunger strikes, to gherao the VC for his inaction on Najeeb's disappearance, and to put up alternate accommodation for students without hostels (this was called the 'Tents at Freedom Square' initiative by students). But despite the all-out fascist attack upon the democratic space for students, the Union continued to be undecided upon any active measures to be taken to fight the fascist muscle-flexing of Jagdeesh Kumar. Even the JNU teachers' association (JNUTA) was unable to issue any concrete statement in defence of Najeeb. Apart from a single 'human chain' protest outside the VC's residence, the JNUTA did not organise any protest for Najeeb.

How do we place the 'Justice for Najeeb' protests in the context of student movements in JNU? JNU is currently facing an all-out fascist conspiracy to saffronise higher education. In other words, there is a Hindutva agenda to introduce yoga into the curriculum, to reduce

the deprivation points enjoyed by women and students from backward regions, to take over recruitment procedures in order to ensure that only pro-establishment professors get appointed as faculty members. By implementing the UGC Gazette of 5th May 2016, sweeping changes have been made to alter the admission and supervisor allotment policies. There has also been a massive reduction in the seats available for M.Phil and PhD. This implies a drastic curtailment of the opportunities for students from marginalised backgrounds, and an unprecedented curb upon the research potential of students. Students in JNU have been resisting these untrammelled attempts at turning JNU into a Hindutva fiefdom. There have been stringent demands to reduce the viva-voce marks in the entrance test which in its extant form is highly discriminatory to marginalised students, to implement deprivation points for Muslim students to improve their abysmal under-representation in JNU, and to fulfill the reserved category seats in teaching posts. All these demands spring from objectives of social inclusion and democratisation of university campuses. But the question of 'Justice for Najeeb' is focused on a more fundamental demand: making university campuses safe for the life, liberty and dignity of personhood of minority students in campuses. An enforced disappearance of a student from a campus makes explicit the deepest vulnerability of those students who share the identity of the disappeared student. It forecloses the aspirations of students like Najeeb to enroll in universities like JNU. The question of securing social justice and inclusion no longer then stands as one of demanding affirmative action from a tentatively welfare state; instead, justice becomes a much more difficult quest for protecting bare life from an implicitly genocidal state. This is testified by the fact that Fatima Nafees, Najeeb's mother, has insisted in several protest meetings that if her son were to come back, she will take him back to his hometown Badaun and not let him remain a student in JNU.

Be that as it may, in 2017, the locus of protests for Najeeb has shifted from the JNU campus. In January, there was a protest demonstration outside the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). In February, in view of the upcoming State Assembly Elections of Uttar Pradesh (where Najeeb's hometown Badaun is located), a number of protests were held, such as the Insaaf rally in Badaun and Lucknow. But these also had their consequences. An FIR was filed against Najeeb's mother for undertaking the Insaaf rally. Najeeb's relatives in Badaun were also harassed by the Delhi police one night. This relentless space of persecution and harassment faced by Najeeb's family members highlights the vulnerability and precariousness of people belonging to minority identities, wherein they have to rely on the protection of the same agents of the state which unleash violence on them. As Judith Butler writes, 'Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state

violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection. In other words, they appeal to the state for protection, but the state is precisely that from which they require protection. To be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection from violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another.’[3]

In October 2017, with the lapsing of an entire year since Najeeb’s disappearance, protests were held outside the headquarters of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The legal case to find Najeeb had been shifted to the CBI in August 2017. But the status of the investigation showed negligible results. The investigation has been shifted to and from several departments. The Delhi Police, the Crime Branch, the Special Investigation Team appointed by the Home Ministry have all passed the buck. Thus, some citizen activists and a small group of JNU activists staged an all-night protest in front of the CBI on 14th October in order to urge the CBI to bring some credibility and transparency in its work.

The last hearing at the Delhi High Court was held on the October 16th, during which the High Court severely reprimanded the CBI lawyer for not filing the details of Najeeb’s disappearance after the assault on him, for changing its lawyer in every hearing instead of ensuring that the DIG himself attends the court proceedings, and for its very shoddy investigation. The next hearing is on 14th November 2017.

Meanwhile, the JNU administration has taken notice of the fact that Najeeb has not registered for the monsoon semester of July-December 2017, and has therefore asked Najeeb to vacate the Mahi hostel room where he used to stay. This is the second time that a ‘Vacate Hostel’ notice has been given to Najeeb (the first time was the very night when he was assaulted by ABVP members). This is how the admin remembers Najeeb: only as an unregistered student. The other facts about his absence are not known to the administration anymore.

The chequered quest of justice for Najeeb shows that though collective violence such as that unleashed on Najeeb is always frenzied, even though it may be driven by meticulous planning and surveillance and controversies with forgone conclusions. But collective protest is always channelised: through carefully chosen vanguards, bureaucratised methods of deliberation, and moderated avenues of criticism. This is the fallacy of democracy, in universities and beyond. The hallmark of any institute, any cognitive whole that aspires to

call itself democratic, is the extent to which it goes to stand with its weakest, most defenceless individual. In this regard, JNU has failed Najeeb.

Being Muslim

In February, I attended the Madhyamam Literature Festival held in Calicut. I had been invited as a speaker on a panel to discuss student activism in universities. After I had delivered my talk, a student from Farook College, Calicut, came up to me. She asked me if there is any news of Najeeb. She said it seems like a fantasy to her, that nobody has seen him anywhere, nobody has recovered a trace of him. Where has he been hidden, that nobody in a country of millions can find him? She said that she wanted to study in JNU but Najeeb's disappearance has scared her. "What if the same thing happens to me? Nobody will protest for more than two months, people will forget." Grief and fear trembled in her voice, and I had no assurances to give her. I did not wish to rattle off a list of protest events to her, because her hunch was right: we have indeed forgotten Najeeb. How many young Muslim women like Fayiza have dampened their ambitions of studying in JNU, of moving to newer avenues for study, of leaving behind small towns for the sake of learning?

Two other Muslim women, Fatima Nafees, Najeeb's mother and Sadaf Irshad Najeeb's sister gave grim reminders at protest meetings about Najeeb's identity as a Muslim. At the protest called by Students Islamic Organisation of India (SIO) at MHRD in January, Fatima Nafees had asked, "Kya mein Hindustani nahi hun? Kya mera beta hindustani nahi hai? Mujhe awaaz uthane ka haq nahi hai? Modi jo apne aap ko UP ka beta kehta hai, kyun nahi Najeeb ko dhoond raha hai?" (Am I not an Indian? Is my son not an Indian? Do I not have a right to raise my voice? Modi calls himself as the son of Uttar Pradesh, but then why does he not find Najeeb?) At the protest outside CBI headquarters in October 2017, Sadaf Irshad remarked that a year has passed since the disappearance of Najeeb. Is this how the authorities would respond if there were a terror attack? If that were the case, the authorities would swing into action and many innocent Muslims will be picked and false charges will be slapped upon them. But in the case of Najeeb, all investigation agencies have shown nothing but silence and inefficiency.

But despite Fatima Nafees' stringent activism and unparalleled courage to of speaking truth to power, the JNUSU and the left parties forming it have been complicit in making a sorry and helpless spectacle of Fatima Nafees's tears and portraying her as a victim. In October 2016, as Shashi Tharoor, Mani Shankar Aiyar and other politicians visited JNU to make speech acts of solidarity, they all invoked the grieving image of Fatima Nafees. As a nation,

we love the image of the grieving mother; it awakens the patriarchal messiah in us. But if we need a grieving mother's tears to stir our conscience into spirited struggle, we might as well cast aside our masks of activism and withdraw into submissive silence. Fatima Nafees has been nothing short of a warrior in action. On 16th October 2017, when there was a protest outside the High Court, Fatima Nafees was dragged and manhandled by the Delhi police yet again. But there are also images of her resisting this police brutality. There is an image which shows her holding on resolutely to a small pillar on the pavement by the road in order to prevent the police from pulling her away and pushing her into a police van. Fatima Nafees is never hesitant in calling out the police atrocities directed at her or at those around her. But most progressive activists tend to imagine Fatima Nafees as a victim. A victim arouses a very indulgent feeling of a saviour and dependency. A victim is infantilised and patronised, taxonomised and theorised. But an assertive resister casts aside victimhood and sets forth her own discourse. Such a resister elicits solidarity on her own terms. Fatima Nafees is the embodiment of what Muslims should aspire to be: personifying resistance despite relentless victimisation.

In all the protests that have been organised outside JNU, the number of Muslim citizens have outnumbered other individuals present at the site of the protest. At the CBI headquarters in October 2017, there were many Muslims who had come to thwart the omnipotence of the state as embellished by the towering facade of the CBI. There was a very old man with a beard and a cap, and also a small nine-year old child called Yasa. Both were both agitating against the disappearance of Najeeb. They are examples of what leftists mock as identity politics. If someone who belongs to a particular community has been forcibly disappeared, has suffered oppression and assault, it is but natural that other people from that community will come out to protest, as a mark of shared vulnerability and solidarity through identification.

But JNU continues to house anti-Muslim elements in its midst. In November 2016, posters for Najeeb were pasted everywhere on campus. But in Periyar Hostel, the Associate Dean of the Students JNU had pasted a poster for 'Swachh pakhwada' or 'clean campus' right on top of a poster for Najeeb. Needless to say, the observance of the 'Swachh pakhwada' fortnight was inspired from the Swachh Bharat campaign. The image of a clean India goes hand in hand with an India from which Muslims have been cleansed. This is what Zygmunt Bauman has called the 'gardener state': the state which perpetrates a genocide in order to exterminate undesirable elements and design a better, cleaner populace, just like a gardener prunes and removes weeds from a garden. During Diwali in October 2017, another incident occurred in Mahi-Mandavi hostel (where Najeeb used to live and where

he was attacked), showing the extent of anti-Muslim propaganda that can occur even during a festival. There was a sheet of paper that was pasted at the entrance of Mahi-Mandavi hostel. It was put up so that everyone can write Diwali greetings on it. But apart from that, threats and taunts about “Bring Back Najeeb” were written (“Bring back Najeeb- nahi layenge, kya ukhad loge- lana padega- kaat denge” (Bring back Najeeb – no, we won’t, what will you do? You will have to bring him– we will cut you)). This graffiti was later covered up by another sheet of paper on which the words “Jai Jai Hindu” were written. There are so many acts of routine violence and intimidation in JNU, behind the fame and glory of this leftist and progressive campus.

What does it mean to be a Muslim activist in such an environment? During the protests in JNU against Najeeb’s disappearance, when Muslim students argued that Najeeb’s vulnerability qua Muslim student must be recognised, some leftist individuals from SFI alleged that Muslim students who propound their ‘identity politics’ are Islamists whose ideology of political Islam intends to establish an Islamic state in India. Such statements hark to an ever present nationalist anxiety about Muslims, that they are not Indian enough, that they constitute ‘the minority that had fought for, or wanted, Pakistan, and they now had not only to choose where they belonged, but also to demonstrate the sincerity of their choice: they had to prove that they were loyal to India and, hence, worthy of Indian citizenship.’[4] Muslim in JNU have also been called jihadis by secular leftists. These labels are reminiscent of the Islamophobic vocabulary of the War on Terror and makes one wonder at the bankruptcy of mainstream leftist imagination of politics in India. These labels are attached to Muslim students to deprive them of any moral courage to protest for justice, to alienate them from spaces of protest which are imagined as quintessentially secular in the leftist paradigm. Therefore, leftists assume that Muslim students need to be corrected and secularised before they can be admitted as equal participants in the field of protest. As Jasbir Puar writes in her essay, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots’, ‘a certain grid of civilizational progress organized by such keywords as “democracy,” “freedom,” and “humanity” have come to superintend the figure of the monster... Today, we find the two figures of the monster and the person to be corrected in some ways converging in the discourse of the terrorist-monster. Which is to say that the terrorist has become both a monster to be quarantined and an individual to be corrected.’[5] Thus there is also a framing of Muslim students who claim identification with Najeeb and assert the protection of Muslim-ness or minority identity as a legitimate political discourse. Their dissidence with mainstream leftist discourse is termed as a unity-breaker. One wonders if there are parallels between the unity extolled by the mainstream left and the national consolidation of Hindus by Hindutva. Ultimately, both are variants of

nationalism — secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism, and the Muslim has place in neither.

What then is to be done in this scenario, where to be a Muslim activist implies that we make ourselves vulnerable to all shades of Islamophobia — red and saffron? We must cease to be apologetic about our identity, and not defer to secular disciplining of Muslim bodies.

Shehr-e-mazloom: In the city of the oppressed

In February 2017, I spent a night at Najeeb's house in Badaun. The Insaaf rally was over, and I had stayed back, talking to Najeeb's sister Shifa, after the other protesters had left. By the time I decided to leave, it was already too late. Najeeb's parents persuaded me to stay back. So I got the chance to be a part of Najeeb's family for a short while. Inside the house, the din of the protest meetings was over. The flamboyance of pretentious politicians was absent. There were a number of relatives and neighbours who came, but they too left. When I was alone with Najeeb's family, I felt like an intruder in their moment of grief/hope. But they did not make me feel like one. As I sat and listened to Shifa, Najeeb's sister telling me about how Najeeb used to teach her and lend her his books, and how she has lost the urge to study after his disappearance, I realised that solidarity is not always shown in the panoply of protest meetings and speeches, but also in listening to the lonely silence of a grieving household.

The next morning, as I made my way back to Bareilly and then Lucknow, Fatima Nafees (who is called 'Ammi' by many students in JNU) gave me some bananas so that I have something to eat on the train. Hers are acts of care and concern, which are sorely missing from all the modes of student protests in JNU. 'The struggle for Justice for Najeeb' exists only in the form of scattered, half-hearted protests now. But the stupendous courage of Fatima, that name of the Prophet's daughter, is all-enduring. That is the source of inspiration, when the self has been brow-beaten by mundane politics and looks for manna. Surely, the power of an ethical and spiritual motivation in politics is undeniable. Even though the ethical may be impossible to adumbrate, the search for it is worthwhile and valuable.

Heba Ahmed

Translation by author ↑

AISA and SFI are student wings of the CPI(ML-Liberation) and the CPI(M) respectively. These two parties formed the JNU Students' Union in 2016. They came together in an alliance of progressive left unity in the elections held on September 9, 2016. AISA, SFI and another 'independent' left organisation, DSF have formed the JNUSU in 2017. ↑

Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*, (London: Verso Books, 2009), 25-26 ↑

p. 610-11, Gyanendra Pandey, 'Can a Muslim be an Indian?', Source: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 608-629 Published by: Cambridge University Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/179423> ↑

p. 120-1, Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, 'The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots', *Social Text* 72, Vol. 20, No. 3, Fall 2002. Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press. ↑

Why ‘Anti-Sharia’ Protestors in Los Angeles are Concerned about Muslim Women

KHANUM SHAIKH

On a sunny Los Angeles afternoon in June of 2017, I was driving to the airport to pick up my cousin who was coming to visit me from Canada for the very first time. As I approached the international terminal I heard loud music interspersed with bursts of chanting and cheering – something that sounded like a protest. Having recently been hit by Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban, Los Angelinos of many races and faiths had taken defiantly to the streets against his punitive ban, and had flooded the international terminal at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in protest. Like many protests in Los Angeles that have followed Trump’s election, this protest was beautiful in demonstrating a multiculturalism grounded in justice for all and a vision of America that rejects divisive tactics of the state that single out one group as a ‘problem.’ As I circled around the bustling airport on that June afternoon, I called my sister to ask if she could check the news to see if there was a new Trump policy that may have sparked further protests. After a moment of pause she said “Oh no, I heard on the news that today there are going to be anti-Sharia protests in 28 cities across the country. I hope that isn’t what this noise is about.”

I parked my car, made it to the terminal, and came face to face with a scene that I have never, in my 27 years in the U.S., encountered. A crowd of about 40 white men and women, holding up images of Muslim women in burqas, signs denouncing the Prophet Muhammad, banners listing ‘punishments under Sharia,’ and other messaging that somehow tied together human/women’s rights, the American flag, Donald Trump, Sharia and covered Muslim women – all interspersed through the space where travellers exit the international terminal and step out into L.A. Some individuals sang and danced to Tupac Shakur’s song “California” while wearing Donald Trump masks. Many snapped photos of those who stopped to read the signs to create an air of intimidation. Shocked by the transformation of a beloved space where one sees people from the whole world come and go into a space of

thick and painful Islamophobia, I snapped a few photos back, read a few signs in disgust, and began to worry about my cousin walking out into this mess with her head scarf. While I can pass as Indian or Mexican, I worried that she could very well become a target of this display of white supremacist rage that had strangely infiltrated Los Angeles, a city that is majority non-white.

Once my cousin landed we found ourselves face to face with a very white and blonde woman, yelling at us to go back home, making hand gestures to demonstrate an aeroplane flying away while showing an image of a veiled woman with bold letters declaring that “Sharia kills women” in our faces. Another woman sat in silence holding a poster board entitled ‘crimes under Sharia’ with supposedly corresponding punishments for certain crimes.’ So, for example, the punishment for adultery under Sharia was listed as death by stoning,’ for homosexuality also ‘death by stoning,’ and for the crime of ‘fighting against Muslim jihadists,’ as ‘death by beheading’ – just to mention a few on the long list.

Needless to say I was deeply disturbed because of how decontextualised these images and signs were, in how they collapsed all Sharia law into the most extreme manifestations of its applications, in how they standardise all Muslim societies, interpretive practices, and histories through which Sharia came into being. They deliberately seal sharia as uniform, and then cast it as barbaric and incompatible with Western norms. Variation within schools of jurisprudence, state formations, and the implementation of what are considered ‘crimes’ do not exist at all in such readings. As a feminist of Muslim origin myself, I was also struck by how these protesters and their signs erase the rigorous scholarship of Muslim feminists, progressive scholars, activists, ulema and Muslims in general who critique religion praxis from within. In my own work and life I have been tremendously inspired by the works of feminist scholars such as Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Zib Mir Hosseini, etc. many of whom have spent their life’s work excavating how patriarchy and power has consolidated in the applications of Islam, and the very real violence these interpretations sanction against those who do not conform to the status quo.

But all of this is taking place within a U.S. that has witnessed a pronounced rise in the Islamophobia movement, which has now evolved into “into a well financed, organised and strategic national movement with a grassroots and legislative agenda....”[1] According to a recent report from the Haas Institute, in 2010 David Yerushalmi, a lawyer active in the Israeli settler movement, co-authored a report claiming that Muslims were trying to impose Sharia Law in American criminal courts. He drafted the American Laws for American Courts legislation, which is a model anti-Sharia legislation. The report notes that “from

2010 to 2016, 194 anti-Sharia bills have been introduced in 39 states, of which 18 have been enacted into law.”[2] Obviously, it isn’t possible to impose Sharia Law on American criminal courts under the Constitution but the successful mobilisation of this campaign thrives on an unfounded fear that Sharia is creeping into U.S. courts. And the effects of these anti-Shari bills and the movement that surrounds it go beyond the legal arena. The inflammatory images and information displayed in anti-Sharia protests like the one I ran into, fan a climate of fear and intolerance toward Muslims that then justify the very real violence perpetrated against them.

What I do know quite clearly is that this is not a movement committed to human rights concerns, Muslim or non-Muslim women’s emancipation, racial or sexual equality. Instead, it denounces violence enacted by some Muslims to legitimise other forms of violence – also against Muslims. If white supremacists were actually invested in combatting sexism against Muslim women, then maybe they would think about forging alliances with Muslim feminists who have been opposing misogyny in their communities, but also oppose racial and imperial violations of a the basic right to personhood, dignity, and life, and with those who critique U.S. interventionism that has historically strengthened militarised Islamist states that enforce the most anti-women laws and policies. Instead these protesters lift up misogyny from Islamic cultures to boost white supremacist nationalist identity and cultural superiority, and to justify the fear of some sort of Muslim invasion. If these protesters were so interested in protecting women and women’s rights then rather than wearing Trump masks and dancing, they would be enraged by his public displays of misogyny, the derogatory remarks he has made toward women, the culture of sexual assault that he himself has normalised through his behavior and comments, and the cuts in funding for the rights of women, racial, and sexual minorities in the U.S.

Being amidst these protests at LAX saturated with disturbing visual and aural assaults manipulating the language of rights and equality in the service of white supremacy was quite disturbing. Here we were, two highly independent Muslim women (one a gender studies professor and the other a professor of computer science) who grew up battling patriarchy within a Pakistan that went through a very regressive era of Islamisation under Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s, suddenly surrounded by white men and women (mostly wearing short shorts and tank tops) telling us about the violent oppression of women in Islam. In that interface, I felt rage that electrified this woman’s bright blue eyes, sensing deeply that the police presence might have been our only protection from the impulse toward violence lurking beneath these contemporary forms of Islamophobia that have become so common in the U.S. today.

Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. “Legalising Othering: The United States of Islamophobia.” A Research Report by Elsheik, Basima Sisemore, Natalia Ramirez Lee. September 2017, Institute, pg. 10. ↑
Ibid, pg. 8.. ↑

Rohithvemula, Muslim Question and the Limit of Democracy

MUHAMMED SHAH S

This is an attempt to articulate the political/personal struggle that I had endured as a Muslim student during the period of students' agitation following the sacrificial death of RohithVemula. The whole episode being stitched with my political experience as a student has made immense impact on my take on contemporary democracy vis a vis the Muslim question.

The 1968's historical students' upsurge in France led intellectuals like Sylvain Lazarus and Alan Badiou to a kind of departure from the conventional fabric of politics which was deeply steeped into the notion of democracy and parliamentarianism in west. Bearing witness to the upsurge of new questions towards democracy this event also pushed them to reconfigure the predicates of political that are mostly centered on the conventional categories such as class. In India, movements like Mandal and anti-Mandal had functioned in the same way as to replace the conventional political referents such as class and nation with caste and community. Events following the death of RohithVemulawas widely considered an explosive culmination of this particular trajectory in India. However Rohith does not only represent the democratic force of caste, but also the existential depth of an oppressed; a Dalit that has the capacity to outthink the same political democracy. My point of contention is: Is Rohith in fact marking the evolution of democracy or the blind-spot that is inherent to it? To me Rohith is simultaneously a negation as well as affirmation, or rather, an affirmation through negation. A negation of life which gave rise to the speech, language and canvas to the imagination of a larger outcaste community. I am not ready to add up this affirmation, which is emanating from a radical negation, to the linear evolution of democratic politics in India. I would rather take it as a creation of a language which is not obsessed with any object; be it an objective form of politics or that of community. For

I believe, the language Rohith provided in fact is existential, to which an oppressed from any sect can participate, articulate with and breathe in.

Rohith's 'event' has an often unacknowledged root to the un-divorceable episodes of Muslim students surprising in the campus. It is not just that Rohith stood with those who were offering final prayer to Yakoob Memon, but also it is something that frequently acquires a nature of inexorable yet spasmodic affect to the subsequent movement which had shaken the foundation of mainstream democratic discourse. This affect, created by Muslim presence, is actually more close to the existential cut -from democracy- that Rohith created, than to the democratic evolution which is widely celebrated and credited to the account of his death. In my reading maybe that is the only radical point a Muslim can go with a Dalit as long as the discourse of democracy is not yet ready to accommodate this 'going with'. Also, this is the only aspect which is radical enough to the extent of turning the mainstream discourse of democracy upside down which is where I find the theorization of Lazarus quiet pertinent.

Sylvain Lazarus, who made tremendous influence on Alain Badiou, offers a distinctive and fresher theoretical account of politics which is deeply informed by the 1968 event. His particular postulation of politics anchors around the denial of any (antagonistic) relations based on object of any form. He sets politics free from its antagonism towards state, or particular class etc and tries to articulate it as a thought outside political philosophy. Though this piece doesn't allow me to further penetrate into his project of re-enacting politics as a thought with no objective relations (his development is interesting to me for its separation from Schmittian tradition), I find myself drawn to employing this particular concept: a politics without an object, in articulating the affect created by Muslim presence in the campus. However, I believe that mainstream democracy and its newfangled inclusion of caste discourse, has reached a critical stake by the convulsion of this affect. As an affect, Muslim presence is in the critical requirement to express itself outside of any objective forms or relations such as that of the State. Subjectivity as rightly theorized by Lazarus assumes to be the source of this affect which harshly transgresses any relations to objects. To me this non-categorical affect prompts us to rethink even the idea of politics from a broader ethical ambit. Rohith in fact procures such a non-objective universality of ethics in his first letter to the world.

Rohith's event which has deeper implications about the existence of Muslim presence in the country provides another crucial instance of how the whole mechanism of state and democracy has been antagonized against the figure of Islam/Muslim.

Let me elaborate, with the instance of our arrest following the agitations in HCU demanding justice for Rohith. On March 21, 2016 we were taken by Miyapur Police allegedly for vandalizing the Vice Chancellor Mr. Appa Rao Podile's campus residence. During the 40 minutes of notorious police violence unleashed upon us, fifteen students, one teacher and a documentary activist in the police van, we all were designated as Muslims which is a potential threat to them. Recurrent punches on our faces were packed with the trepidation against the abstract Muslim ghost incarnated in our bodies. My faith, supposed to give me confidence in such moments, was often crushed down by the reverberating threat of "we will kill you in an 'encounter'". Warangal, a place where five former SIMI members were killed in a fake encounter starts to haunt me with the real fear of death. We were not even allowed to scream in pain, but only to be silent and passive recipients of the torture. Each moment was counted as each knock over the body. So, time was corporal in its surreal sense. We kept on counting till the van reached the station. It was not a particular Muslim man in the van who provoked them, but the pervasive Muslimness which they found inscribed in our being that was worthy of further torture.

Every form of belonging, identification and affirmation was unified to this Muslimness and triggered them to act, brutalize every inch of our body. It was a great relief comparatively, once we reached the station as the physical torture was replaced with a 'police trial'. One of my fellow 'Muslim' wanted to open my bag to put his cigarette safe. It was my bad luck that a police man 'found out' my research reference book in my bag on Islamism, authored by a Pakistani-Western scholar Humeira Iqtidar. This rejuvenated intensity-of Muslimness-added up to their rage that triggered a new round of assault on me inside the station.

Later we were remanded to Cherlappally one of the highest security-central jails in the country, where we spent eight days in the camaraderie of much older Muslim under-trial prisoners. Most of them were implicated in various terror charges. It can be called an epiphany of sorts to observe their being Muslim. They were offering Namaz in time and regular in religious practices. Bizarrely, I felt only jail can safely facilitate it. There was nothing to worry about, nothing to conceal, nothing to be anxious about in prison. A disconnected belonging, an existential freeness and an order without time; life in prison showed me another kind of breathing. A different format of living that I fail to interpret. In retrospect, I realize none of us ever articulated these prison stories after we were released, maybe because of the existential unease it caused.

I, as a Muslim, continue to be bothered by the limit of the discourse that we had built up during this episode. To be precise, there is still a haunting absence of any acknowledgement from leftist organizations, as well as Ambedkarite organizations towards any kind of Islamic discourse in the campus. A Muslim, apart from being a leftist or Ambedkarite, still remains unimaginable in a normative political spectrum. This unrecognized existence of 'Another Muslim' (unacknowledged by left and ambedkarites) can be spotted as an integral part of the events leading to Rohith's death as well as the concomitant events. Subsequently, whether an academic talk or a public protest, if conducted by Muslim students, surveillance of state and administration has been essential. This surveillance often comes with the massive demonization of Muslim students' groups from the part of left political groups in the campus. State machineries as well as normative democratic practices equally look at any form of Muslim grouping in the campus, as a threat. Apart from the Muslim story of democracy that is existing, Rohith incident also inspired me to think about Democracy in the light of growing incidents of lynching Muslims and Dalits across the country. If we push the discourse on democracy a little further to the existential side of those who are being killed and thrown to eternal sufferings, it would be more convincing that the province of democracy has a very limited focus. That is, the province of democracy is always the province of those who can utter/make speech. Is not Identity an art of utterance or the speech of self? In that sense, what kind of speech possibility does democracy allow to the real wretched except for mainstream civil society discourse? I find this lacunae deeply troubling. How do they register their self, which is deeply negated in the larger civil society language or democratic discourse? This lack of language, impossibility of utterance in the dominant-language offered by democracy could be a blind spot that Rohith's words and actions tried to address, I believe. It's in this sense that I say Rohith's letter in fact offers another possibility of utterance, for the existential break of a larger mass who live in vulnerability in their daily life. Secondly, as long as this existential antagonism (antagonism without object as theorized by Lazarus) which is generated by the Muslim grouping in the campus can't register itself in the –dominant- language of democracy (antagonism and fashioning around object), I consider Rohith's language as an existential possibility for them/those who lost the right to utter/right of speech/unqualified to share, worry, form themselves within the dominant democratic language.

And before I conclude this rumination, I will narrate here one more story to supplement this argument. We met an old Muslim man in the prison. He doesn't know what was the exact crime registered against him. He was not convicted, but under trial. Later on he learnt that his crime was that he allegedly transported some eight thousand rupees to Pakistan. Allegations against him of having link with Pakistani terror outfits left his advocate/

relative to him helpless, resulting in the abandonment of the case and the man. Now, this abandoned man is in prison without knowing how long he will have to spend there. He even didn't know about this crime till a point of time. He has no discursive means to convince his innocence nor any physical possibility. Once you are accused of having terror-link, you will hardly find any juridical-political-democratic possibility even to make your claim/position regarding the allegation. This in fact marks the serious dislodgement of Muslim subject from the democratic discourse for its very incommensurability to any structure of language/discourse. This incommensurability has been very well exposed during the whole episode of Hyderabad students' politics around and after the sacrificial death of Rohith Vemula. Life breaking affirmation of Rohith's death is in fact important to me as a Muslim, for its probability to seek the different narratives outside the dominant democratic conventional language.

The text of the Lecture that Parveena Ahanger of Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (Apdp) Delivered at the 2017 Rafto Conference at Bergen, Norway.

PARVEENA AHANGER

To, the Rafto Foundation, Sisters & Brothers, Friends, and the International Human Rights Community, Assalamu Alaikkum,

My heartfelt thanks to the Rafto Foundation for co-awarding me the 2017 Rafto Human Rights Prize with ParvezImroz, the co-founder of The Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons with me.

It is an honour to receive this prize. I am very happy today as this prize will provide an opportunity to us to highlight APDP's and Kashmir's struggle for justice. The struggle which has become a spectacle for the world, but a reckless misery for the people of Kashmir I am also full of grief today because I remember my son and all the dear ones who have been disappeared, detained, tortured, blinded and killed by the state forces or the state-backed militia. In Koshur we say, mei cha daghlalnawaan. I am cradling this pain – as a mother.

My journey as a human rights activist began with the abduction and consequent disappearance of my son Javed Ahmed Ahanger on August 18, 1990. This journey is almost as old as the Rafto Prize. Enforced disappearance means that the state takes away our loved ones, but also does not let us know where they are or what has happened to them. This is torture for the families who search for their loved ones. Enforced disappearance means that our loved ones are victims and so are we, their families. It is a crime against

humanity in international law. In Kashmir, there are currently over 8,000 cases of enforced disappearances.

The story of my son, me, my family and APDP as victims of enforced disappearances is linked to the older story of Kashmir's relationship with India. Kashmir, a princely state, was given a promise of a referendum to be held under the supervision of the United Nations in 1948, to decide whether to join India or Pakistan. That promise is yet to be fulfilled. We had armed insurgency in Kashmir since the 1990s. In 1990, India put in place AFSPA, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act to crush the dissent. This act gives immunity to the armed forces. They put innocents in indefinite detention, and subject them to enforced disappearance they torture us, they kill us without accountability or justice. They get away with these crimes against humanity and war crimes. To this date, there are over 70,000 people who have been killed and over 6000 mass graves. Thousands are in indefinite detention. And there are many cases of rape and torture; rape has been used as a systemic and systematic weapon by the state to crush dissent.

India signed the UN Human Rights International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2007. But it has not ratified this obligation. India does not regard and uphold its own signature. Because this signature means that India should not act against the Convention for Protection from Enforced Disappearance. It is the Indian state's international obligation to be accountable to us victims of enforced disappearance when they have disappeared our loved ones. We Kashmiris are victims of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives endless powers of oppression, and subjugation to the military might.

In the beginning, I searched for my son everywhere. I went mad with grief. But then I began to see others who were also searching for their loved ones, their sons, their husbands, their brothers, their fathers. Along with the family members of the victims of enforced disappearance, Parvez Imroz, and I co-founded APDP.

I went through India's judicial system to find Javed. But the Indian government, by implementing the AFSPA has made it necessary to get the centre governments approval for investigation and prosecution. I believed then as I believe now, that it is only through collective struggle that we can find our loved ones. The Rafto Foundation gave me strength, by recognising APDP's collective struggle. With this recognition, I hope the international human rights community is more aware of the human rights violations in Kashmir –

enforced disappearances, rape of women, torture, extra-judicial killings, and the daily injustices we face.

The women and men who are part of the APDP come to Srinagar from many parts of Kashmir, on the 10th of every month. We sit in Pratap Park, in Srinagar, to protest, to keep our memories alive. The process has been going on for decades now, but the arrogance of Indian state is unmoved off. We share our tears and our grief at the absence of our loved ones. We demand that India ratify the protocol against enforced disappearances. We demand that India let us know where our loved ones are or what has happened to them. We demand justice. We usually say – yay tamashanahihai – yay matamsahihai. This is not a spectacle, our mourning is for real.

For us, the disappearances of our sons or husbands or brothers or fathers are wounds without blood. For us, enforced disappearance means the daily torture of not knowing where our children or husbands or brothers are. There are no graves to which we can go to mourn. For us, our love for our lapatabachche, our loved ones, means the search for justice from the courts of India. The State Human Rights Commission set up by the state acknowledges enforced disappearance cases in Kashmir, but they are unable to prosecute without sanction from the Indian government. We have not found justice in the courts of India. All the commissions of enquiry and justice delivery mechanisms end up nowhere.

Families of the victims of enforced disappearance suffer from health issues they suffer from mental trauma and face the struggle to live every day. To have a death in a family and to reconcile with it is easy as compared to live with a trauma of hope with persistent hopelessness, thus giving birth to a multitude of problems ranging from mental health disorders to others. Many of the bread earners of families have been disappeared or tortured. Through a UN medical grant, APDP has been helping victim-families and half-widows to get back on their feet. We are also involved in legal counselling for victim-families. We document legal cases of enforced disappearances and torture. More recently, we are documenting the stories of victims of pellet injuries. We do not simply document the legal case, we also record the stories of family members and witnesses. As a victim of enforced disappearance, I know the importance of recording the family stories, because we are witnesses. And memories fade. In many cases, we know who has taken our family members. But we also know that these cases will not find justice in India's legal system. Our cases have been blocked because the Indian government protects the perpetrators. In Kashmir, we are not given the justice that law can give. But our documentation helps in making sure the perpetrators know that we are keeping a record of their atrocities. The

perpetrators know that we are witnesses of their oppression so that these documents would be produced in the war crime tribunals that, we hope, would be held in future.

The Indian state continues to suppress the people of Kashmir, intensifying over the years. The year of 2016 witnessed a mass uprising and an unprecedented use of force by the state to crush it. After the killing of Burhan Wani, state forces killed about 150 civilians. These were extra-judicial executions. More than 15,000 persons were injured by pellet guns. These pellet guns partially or completely blinded more than a 1000 civilians. Doctors, paramedical workers, ambulance drivers and ambulances were attacked. Some of these were children as young as four years old. Non-violent protests marches, mourning at funerals, and prayers, are still met with violence since then. Internet bans and newspaper censorship attacks on journalists and photojournalists are also continuing. In Kashmir, we are living in a daily war. The state forces target not only against militants or stone-pelters, but also civilians – children, teenagers, and mothers, and fathers.

But our strength to fight against this zulm, these injustices, comes from our mourning and grief; it comes from our love for our children, our parents, our brothers and sisters, our communities. Our strength to continue to fight these injustices comes from the students or activists in Kashmir, from India or abroad who visit us, who listen to our stories, who begin to understand the kinds of injustices we are facing. Books and documentary films have been produced about our struggle. By giving us this Rafto Award, you are helping us to bring into international attention, in Europe and around the world to our struggle for justice.

My struggle began with searching for my son. I was illiterate and a woman living in a militarised zone. I had not stepped far from my house. The search for my son has led me far and wide. It has led me to others who were also searching for their children, their husbands, their fathers, their brothers. I now travel with APDP members across Kashmir not only in search for the enforced disappeared, but to listen to, document, and witness stories of family members killed in extra-judicial encounters, torture, and rape. I know that this is also a struggle for many mothers like myself around the world. Some of these mothers include the Mudur de Plaza de Mayo from Argentina, mothers in the Philippines, mothers in Sri-Lanka. I accept this award in the name of all these mothers as I accept it for the families and mothers of Kashmir. I am known as the ‘iron’ lady of Kashmir. And I say to you all – that all these mothers are iron ladies – we have been fighting for our children – and we will fight from beyond the grave. One of our APDP members, Mughal Masi, died waiting for her son after 20 years of waiting. But we carry on her struggle. We carry on this struggle by marking sitting in Pratap Park Srinagar every month, letting everyone know

that our memories of our children or husbands, or fathers or brothers being taken away will not be erased. For us, our family members who have been taken away are our life. Our memories are the wound of injustice. Our memories are our resistance. This daily resistance is our life.

The international community needs to recognize not only the human rights violations in Kashmir, but also our struggle for justice, and our struggle for freedom. The Indian state needs to be held accountable for those who have gone missing, those who have been disappeared, those who have been raped, those who have been and are being blinded, injured and tortured, those who have been executed extra-judicially.

Our dear ones come to us in our dreams and urge us not to forget them. I ask everyone present here on this occasion – my sisters, my brothers, my friends – join us in our struggle for justice. Please tell our story of human rights violations and the story of Kashmir to the world. We welcome international human rights lawyers who can help us legally. We welcome journalists who can write about Kashmir in the international media. We welcome academics who can research what is happening to us in Kashmir. We welcome students who can work with us as interns. There is a lot of work to do. I have been fighting for 27 years. Fight with me in whatever way you can. Kashmir is beautiful, but it is full of pain and grief. With this pain and grief in our hearts, we fight for justice.

I will quote now from a Kashmiri poet, Uzma Falak who writes about us – about women who protest the injustices to their loved ones:

We know the pain of erasure.

We, the poets of persistence.

We, who outran our destiny,

We, who cradle the ache of an unsung longing,
a lingering history.

We, who bear the burden of outliving our children.

We, who survived a genocide of colours,
a massacre of language.

We, who enwomb within us evanescence.

We, who have tricked forgetting.

We, within whom, flows a dark river of impossible love.

We, the wandering minstrels of hope.

We the balladeers of dawn.

We the elegists of night.

We the bards of loss.

We hear you. Do you?

To the Rafto Foundation I say once more, thank you for this honour, thank you for recognising our passionate struggle to find justice.

Parveena Ahanger is the Founder and Chairperson of Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) in Indian Administered Kashmir. She had started this organisation in 1995 to provide support and mobilize family members of missing persons due to enforced disappearances to put pressure on the India's government to investigate the estimated 8-10,000 cases of involuntary and enforced disappearances in Kashmir. Parveena is also referred to as the "Iron lady of Kashmir". Her efforts attained global recognition on 10 July 2005 when she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.