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A Requiem for Voicelessness: Pakistanis and Muslims in the US [1]

Asma Barlas

I have been asked to address the situation of Pakistanis in the US at this historical juncture. However, it is difficult to do that without also speaking about Muslims in the US. But, a great deal of what is happening to Muslims reflects the attitudes and actions of those who are not Muslims. As such, a commentary on Pakistanis cannot help being a commentary on nonPakistanis as well.

At the outset, I should note that I view racism as part of a larger system of historically existing oppression whose quintessential expression was colonialism. In fact, I believe that contemporary racism mirrors and reproduces colonialist discourses and relationships. Accordingly, I draw upon some of the concepts and terminology of colonialism to speak about racism. My intent in doing this isn't to erase historical particularities, but to stress the universality of those modes of misrecognition in which racism is embedded.

Also, what I offer here is not a systematic analysis, but some reflections on civil liberties, the challenges I face as a Muslim-Pakistani-American in the present political milieu, and the psychology of racism, in particular, the mindset of the colonizer, which I address by way of a selective reading of Albert Memmi's work.[2]

The Mark of the Plural [3]

The assault on civil liberties in the wake of 9/11 has been stunning as much for its speed as for its content and its ever-widening scope. New laws—notably the hideously mis-named Patriot Act—have legalized racial profiling, surveillance, preemptive arrests and detentions, secret courts, and the denial of legal rights not only to those accused of terrorism, but also those suspected of harboring hostile intent toward the US.

Most of these measures target Muslim and Arab men. For instance, all men over 16 from several Muslim countries, including Pakistan, are now required to “be fingerprinted, photographed and interviewed” by the INS. Since the start of the program, “3,000 Pakistanis have fled to Canada and 1,100 have been deported;” as many as 50,000 are expected to return to Pakistan on their own “before it's all over.”[4]

A measure currently under debate would change citizenship laws so that not everyone born in the US will be entitled to citizenship any more while those who are citizens can have their citizenship revoked if they engage in activity considered hostile to the US (this provision isn't new, but it has rarely been used thus far). Meanwhile, at least one state is considering declaring antiwar protestors terrorists and incarcerating them for 25 years.

Disturbingly, there is talk of making these measures—which have been represented as provisional safeguards at a time of war—permanently into the law of the land, and given how quickly some of these laws have been adopted, this doesn't seem impossible.

I will leave it to the legal experts to discuss the impact of such laws on various groups, as well as on the constitutional framework within which citizens in electoral democracies exercise their rights. Instead, I want to focus on three other aspects.

First, as I noted, these measures basically are targeting Muslims and Arabs and while racial profiling is nothing new, it still begs the question of why it has been so easy to typecast Muslims and Arabs as terrorists, notwithstanding 9/11. I say “notwithstanding” because a tragedy, of whatever proportions, does not determine how one responds to it; nor are entire people always held culpable for the crimes of a few. Certainly, white people can claim uniquely individualized identities as a way of freeing themselves from the burdens of collective responsibility; thus Hitler remains Hitler and Timothy McVeigh Timothy McVeigh; neither becomes the essentialized essence of white folks.

But Muslims and Arabs and people of color cannot claim such individuality because they are always branded with the “mark of the plural,” as Memmi calls it. As he says,

The colonized is never characterized in an individual manner [but] . . . entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (‘They are this.’ ‘They are all the same.’). If a colonized servant does not come in one morning, the colonizer will not say that she is ill, or that she is cheating, or that she is tempted not to abide by an oppressive contract. . . . He will say, ‘You can’t count on them.’ . . . He refuses to consider personal, private occurrences in his maid’s life; that life in a specific sense does not interest him, and his maid does not exist as an individual.[5]

This could be an elegy for Muslims and Arabs in the US today, who are being held hostage for the acts of a tiny minority of extremists that they themselves decry. I don't want to underestimate the role of fear and paranoia in generating a suspicion of Muslims but, again, this does not explain why the fear and paranoia take the form they do, namely, the depersonalization and dehumanization of Muslims. To understand that, we need to understand the deeply racist nature of the fear and paranoia.

And this brings me to the second point. It isn't accidental that such a massive assault on civil liberties has taken the form of an attack on the familiar, but still unrecognizable, “Muslim Other,” to use a clichéd phrase that is still evocative of certain realities. The most obvious of these realities is that after more than 1,400 years, a majority of non-Muslim Westerners still don't know Muslims. Their humanity remains opaque like that of the colonized who “remains so mysterious after years of living with the colonizer.” As the colonizer insists (“‘They are unpredictable!’ ‘With them, you never know!’”)[6] And so it is with Muslims today, who are seen as unpredictable and unknowable.

That is why I believe that it is not just knowledge of 9/11, but also the lack of knowledge of Muslims and Arabs that has shaped the dominant US-American response to them. In fact, I believe it is the fear generated by an absence of recognition that explains most people's willingness to yield up rights that heretofore they had considered inalienable.

Such people view the problem of civil liberties as a trade-off in which they agree to give up some of their rights—or, at least, don't protest overmuch when those rights are taken away—in order to ensure that the dreaded (Muslim) Other has none.

The fact that such a situation can appear as a trade-off reveals the extent to which most US-Americans can't see any commonalities between themselves and Muslims or Arabs, and, of course, this also keeps them from seeing the connections between what is being done to Muslims today and what might happen to them tomorrow. After all, once a law is on the books, it can target everyone equally.

Lastly, I cannot help seeing the parallels between the assault on civil liberties at home and preemptive wars and killing of civilians, including women and children, abroad. In fact, the doctrine of hostile intent first seems to have been tried out abroad.

Last year, a soldier from Ithaca said in an interview that US troops in Afghanistan “were told there were no friendly forces ... If there was anybody there, they were the enemy. We were told specifically that if there were women and children to kill them.” Later on, seemingly in an attempt to take the edge off his bald statement, he wrote a letter to the paper clarifying that “we were made aware that the hostile forces of the Whaleback might include women and children. In that event, if those women and children showed hostile intent, we were ordered to kill them as hostile forces ... We were further informed that some of these children are trained starting at a very young age to be soldiers. Knowing this, we could not afford to just dismiss them as noncombatants.” [7] Yet, there was no public outcry against the doctrine of hostile intent or killing children because US soldiers can't “afford” to see them as noncombatants, whatever that means!

It is no secret that most US-Americans aren't interested in what their governments do abroad even though methods of repression and control that governments use abroad are eventually imported for the purpose of domesticating critics and “minorities” at home.

My own view is that it is largely a belief in their own particularism that keeps most US-Americans from realizing “what it means to be part of a larger world; in the US, as the song goes, ‘we are the world.’ And, when the world does intrude upon people's consciousnesses, it generally is in the form of wars, natural disasters, and tales of horrific destitution. Between the violence and the charity that such representations inspire, there is little room for cultivating relationships with others based in mutual recognition or understanding. In fact, the very scale of

US power has convinced its citizens that they don't need to know others since they can go it alone in everything. But one cannot live knowledgeable, ethically, or safely with people if one does not understand them or know in what ways one may be connected to or beholden to them. Ironically, then, US power renders Americans vulnerable to the world by estranging them from it."

This alienation results also from "a Manichean view of the universe in which a morally unique and uniquely moral US is juxtaposed to an evil and dangerous world mired in fanaticism, hatreds, and jealousies. To embrace such a view, however, is to do away with any notion of humility, and even with a sound view of morality since it is not given to a person, let alone to an entire people, to be only good." [8]

It is this view of themselves and others—this peculiar mode of self and Other recognition—that I believe explains the US-American response to 9/11 and Muslims and, therefore also the precarious situation of Muslims and Arabs in the US today.

On voicelessness

A few hours before the US invasion of Iraq, I wrote a short essay in which I say that trying not to despair and bracing myself emotionally for what is to come, I can't help wondering what it means to live in the world's largest democracy today. As someone who grew up in a country (Pakistan) that has been under the shadow of military rule for most of its life, I was made aware of the powerlessness of people's voices early on. After all, that is essentially what life in a dictatorship is about: the lack of a voice. And, yet, Pakistan's first military ruler, General Ayub Khan, was driven from office because several thousand people came out in the streets to protest his policies. Suddenly, people were willing to give voice to their anger, and their voices mattered.

Today, hundreds of millions of people all around the world, not just the US, have come out in the streets to denounce the Bush administration's policies on Iraq, as well as their own leaders who are backing him. But these voices of protest have produced not a single ripple of recognition from those hunkered down in their ideological bunkers in the White House. The genocidal massacre that is masquerading as a war is to go ahead anyway. Policies, Mr. Bush said, are not made by masses of people in the street. And, yet, it is in the name of giving voice to the Iraqi people that he is going to "liberate" Iraq!

Of course, the US invasion of Iraq has done much more than merely underscore people's voicelessness, but I keep struggling with this issue in part because I haven't had the right to speak freely, in a legal sense, for most of my life and I take it very seriously. However, now that I do have this right, I find that the right to speak does not ensure the right to be heard, that not all voices are equal and that voices of dissent and criticism can be silenced even in a democracy through legal sanctions or through the practice of shaming people by impugning their integrity in the media.

For criticizing US foreign policies that are unjust and are breeding anger and resistance on the part of many people and not just Muslims, I have been denounced as a bin Laden sympathizer and a voice that speaks “against us” in both the local and national press. Significantly, my critics have focused not on my arguments, but on the fact that I am a Muslim. Thus, a local critic advised his readers to start asking me why I hate America, a nice sleight of hand that allowed him to displace onto me all the rhetoric about evil Muslims generated by Mr. Bush’s “why do they hate us?” demagoguery. I call it demagoguery because “love and hate, good and evil, are never mutually exclusive and ... each of us is equally capable of both.” Similarly, US policies “may be good and bad and evoke both disapproval and approbation.” In fact, this duality defines my own experiences of the US.

I came to the US “after General Zia ul Haq sacked me from the foreign service for having criticized him. Brought to power with US help, Zia had deposed the first democratically elected prime minister of Pakistan, Z.A. Bhutto, and had him executed.

I was among the first women to have been inducted into the foreign service, and would have been an ambassador today, but, dismissed without a trial and fearing for my safety and that of my son’s, I fled Pakistan, leaving behind family, home, and friends.

But for the United States’ supporting Zia, my life would have been very different.

In the US I returned to graduate school, receiving political asylum during the course of my studies. My life initially was one of newfound poverty, loneliness, single motherhood, and racial hatred directed against my son and myself. Eventually, however, both he and I completed our education and began new careers and new relationships.

But for the United States’ giving me asylum, my life would have been very different.

Over the years, I have struggled to make sense of my two lives, lived and unlived, and of my relationship with the US. Clearly, on the one hand, I am a victim of its foreign policy that has brought military rulers like Zia to power in Pakistan. On the other hand, I am also a beneficiary of the US legal and educational systems.

This dual relationship I have with the US mirrors the duality of the US itself. This duality exists in the US’s reverence for freedom, democracy and human rights, and its denial and violation of such values when it comes to Muslims, the poor, women and peasants in the ‘Third World.’ It exists in my neighbor’s warning that people who criticize the United States should get out and in a friend’s offer of a haven in her home. It exists in the attitude of those who embrace my differentness—as a way to validate their own liberalism—even as they retreat into hurt at any sign of differences between us. It exists in ... my being told that, unlike Pakistan, the US is a ‘free’ country, and in my being labeled ‘anti-American’ when I use that freedom to decry war

and oppression.” [9]

I contend that encountering this duality means eventually mirroring it, and this sense of a split self has only been enhanced by the circumstances in which Muslims in the US live today: living in a democracy, we don't enjoy all the rights that come with it.

Memmi on colonialism

I have so far spoken about Muslims and as a Muslim and I want now to talk about some parallels between colonizers and those US-Americans who are enabling or countenancing the assault on civil liberties of Muslims and Arabs and also those who are perched on the sidelines, paralyzed by fear and uncertainty.

These parallels are suggested by Memmi's critique of French colonialism in Africa; for those who may not know, Memmi was a Tunisian Jew who wrote from the vantage point of both the colonizer and the colonized. As a Jew, he says he identified with the colonizer and yet, the reality of being an African in a colony ensured that he was part of the colonized.

I generally am not an advocate of quoting random passages from texts, but I thought it might not be inappropriate to do that today. I have purposely maintained Memmi's language, but as you are listening to these passages, you are free to substitute "racism" or "white privilege" or "US domination" every time you hear the word "colonialism."

“ It is true that discouraged citizens of free countries tell themselves that they have no voice in the nation's affairs, that their actions are useless, that their voice is not heard, and that the elections are fixed. Such people claim that the press and radio are in the hands of a few, that they cannot prevent war, or demand peace, or even obtain from their elected representatives that for which they were sent to parliament. However, they at least immediately recognize that they possess the right to do so; the potential if not the effective power; that they are deceived or weary, but not enslaved. They try to believe they are free men, momentarily vanquished by hoaxes or stunned by demagogy. Driven beyond the boiling point, they are seized by sudden anger, break their paper chains and upset the politicians' little calculations.Thinking it over, they may feel guilty for not revolting more often; after all, they are responsible for their own freedom and if, because of fatigue or weakness or skepticism, they do not use it, they deserve their punishment.[10]

Who can completely rid himself of bigotry in a country where everyone is tainted by it, including its victims?

Not to be the only one guilty can be reassuring, but it cannot absolve.

It is not without detriment that one is willing to live permanently with one's guilt. The

eulogizing of oneself and one's fellows, the repeated, even earnest, affirmation of the excellence of one's ways and institutions, one's cultural and technical superiority do not erase the fundamental condemnation which every colonialist carries in his heart.

For me, oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies...of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer.”[11]

1 This is a slightly amended version of a talk I gave at the forum on “Homeland Insecurity: Attack on Civil Liberties and Domestic Racism,” held at Cornell University on April 12, 2003. Parts if it have been published before. I am thankful to Mecke Nagel for wanting to publish it in a journal on feminist studies.

2 Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

3 Memmi, 85.

4 Traci Hukill, “A Safe Haven Turns Hostile,” *AlterNet*, March 26, 2003

5 Memmi, 85.

6 Memmi, 85.

7 Asma Barlas, “Hostile Intent: the elisions of war,” *Daily Times*, June 18, 2002.

8 “9/11, the Academy and Renewal,” talk given at Ithaca College, September 13, 2002.

9 Asma Barlas, “Reclaiming ‘the duality within ourselves,’” *Ithaca Journal*, February 22, 2002.

10 Memmi, 91-92.

11 *Ibid.*, 23; 9; 56; xvii