Feminist Dissent

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We welcome you to the inaugural issue of *Feminist Dissent*. For many of us, it is the fruition of a long journey of struggle and dissent against fundamentalism and racism in a new global capitalist order where gender is increasingly instrumentalised to sustain power. But more importantly, *Feminist Dissent* is a new beginning. We hope you will join us as readers, contributors and interlocutors, both supporting and challenging us to create a genuine space of analysis and dissent.

We believe that the consolidation of religious fundamentalism globally is occurring at the same time as there is increasing control of borders and migration, organized along gender, race and class lines. This is happening at a time of renewed worldwide financial crisis. This contemporary confluence of a new series of crises has exposed a deep chasm in academic and activist thinking about gender and race as deeply articulated and intersectional. It is in this chasm, this constitutive contradiction that is shaping politics on the ground and work in academia today, that *Feminist Dissent* seeks to intervene in and challenge. Our hope is that *Feminist Dissent* will offer new modes of critique and analyses of the contemporary conjuncture, and particularly shed light on the multi-faceted connections between gender and fundamentalism.

For us, "feminist dissent" also means dissenting from each other and showcasing genuine nuanced debate, including disagreement, in the journal in a way that is missing from the current polarised nature of discussion around these issues. So although we share commonalities in our positions, those involved in the editorial collective come with a variety of perspectives. We understand and recognise these are complex issues. We believe it is important to find new ways of speaking with each other, including with those with whom we do not necessarily agree, and be open to shifting approaches and positions.

This first issue is an introduction, a flavour of things to come, of the sorts of pieces that we would like to publish and the diverse formats – written, audio, visual – that the journal will utilise. In this issue, we feature two long articles, poetry, fiction, art works and four shorter, more experiential, pieces. Of those longer essays, the essay "Why Feminist Dissent" by Varma, Dhaliwal and Nagarajan sets out the historical and political context within which our understanding of dissent and our focus on gender and fundamentalism has emerged. We elaborate on a definition of fundamentalism and lay out an argument for taking on the challenges to dissent that we currently face. Alison Assiter's piece "Why Universalism" underscores the importance of universalism and a human rights framework and charts a challenge to cultural and religious relativism and religious identity politics. These are themes that we anticipate will reverberate throughout future issues of this journal. Subsequent issues will look in more depth at the analytical importance of the categories

"fundamentalism" and "secularism", at fundamentalism in the state, at postsecularism, at the impact of fundamentalism on sexualized minorities, at the Prevent agenda and at religion in the sphere of education.

The longer essays in this issue are interspersed with poetic interventions by Akhil Katyal and Rahila Gupta, about the Hindu Right and the Islamic Right respectively. We are grateful to Jackie Kay for being able to republish a chapter of her book *Red Dust Road* in which she recounts the first meeting with her Evangelical Christian birth father. These creative interludes are folded in alongside four short essays that reflect our commitment to bringing through personal political accounts of people's struggles with fundamentalism and tensions with religious agendas within both left and right wing political spaces, across state and civil society. In this first issue, Kindy Sandhu speaks about "the faith agenda" in the UK by narrating her personal experience of being asked to represent Sikh women at a police consultative forum that largely comprised male religious leaders; Mubarak Bala writes about his personal journey from Islamist to free thinker while growing up in northern Nigeria; Yasmin Rehman reflects on the narrowing of cultural spaces and the rise of fundamentalist attacks on music and dance within the diasporic Pakistani community; and Stephen Cowden presents his critical reflections on a panel at the last Historical Materialism conference which defended Islamic Right formations and criticized secular feminist organisations. This is followed by Shakila Maan's interview with Yousif Naser whose provocative paintings about the Iraq War are an important visual structure for the

articles within this issue. Finally, the Reviews section covers the book *Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity*; and the films *Spotlight* and *The World Before Her*.

literally not have been possible without the generous support of Yvonne Budden, the Head of Scholarly Communications, at the University of Warwick Library, and we are very grateful to her.

We hope you enjoy this issue, and will come back for more.

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Why Feminist Dissent?

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Abstract

This essay lays out the historical and intellectual lineage of the idea behind the journal Feminist Dissent. As the "Rushdie Affair" was both the backdrop and the catalyst for a group such as Women Against Fundamentalism, the current conjuncture characterized by an exponential expansion of fundamentalism, neo-liberal austerity, rollback of the rights of women and sexual minorities, and racist control of borders and migration has necessitated a different kind of analysis, one that is absent from academic and popular discourse at the moment. This essay is an attempt to propose a new way of looking at the intersection of gender and fundamentalism, and underscores the importance of highlighting dissent as a crucial feminist strategy.

Keywords: fundamentalism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism, dissent, "war on terror", feminism

Feminist Dissent's intellectual genesis lies in the activist and theoretical work produced by the group Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF), a feminist anti-racist and anti-fundamentalist group that was established in London in 1989, as well as in the political, journalistic, creative and academic work pursued by individual members of our editorial collective, only some of whom have been

directly involved with WAF. WAF was formed in the wake of what has come to be known as "the Rushdie affair", in which following the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, there emerged a transnational consolidation of religious fundamentalist forces from India to Bangladesh, from Britain to Iran and elsewhere. The *fatwa* issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini against Rushdie in February 1989 seeking the author's death for the crime of blasphemy had been preceded by a ban of the book in India as it was perceived to be offending the faith of its Muslim minorities, and by demonstrations in Bradford, London and elsewhere in the UK. The book was publicly burnt and demands of death for Rushdie were made vociferously in retaliation for what was perceived as an insult to Muslims everywhere.

In defence of Rushdie's right to write, members of WAF asserted their own right to speak for themselves, to gender equality within communities, to diversity in religious practice and interpretation, to syncretism over purity, and to the right to question religious authority. For the Rushdie affair had brought to the fore an array of so-called community leaders, almost all male and many with dubious pasts in the Indian subcontinent, who used the moment to carve out a radical presence within the public sphere in Britain. They posed as representatives of minority immigrant communities, Britain's racialised others who were under attack in Thatcher's Britain. Indeed, some of the mainstream media coverage of the anti-Rushdie demonstrations portrayed the protestors as barbaric while some others likened them to Nazis, even as the National Front launched its own racist and xenophobic attacks on Asian communities.[1]

As South Asian fundamentalist community leaders came to dominate the public terrain and accrued legitimacy as 'representatives' of their communities,

feminist activists saw a different power situation emerging, caught as they were between British racism and their own communities' social conservatism and growing fundamentalism. Many of the male voices to emerge in the wake of the Rushdie affair belonged to those who practiced profound gender conservatism, and whose idea of a pure culture and religion untarnished by the so-called 'West' while living in it was centrally organized around the idea of women as bearers of tradition. Those women who did not conform to their conservative vision were ostracized, demonised, and even killed. Moreover, these dominant voices, that also included second-generation Asian men who had participated in anti-racist movements, left no space to question or to dissent from the sexual norms and mores that governed these right-wing religious political mobilisations that were now curiously coalescing with seemingly progressive anti-racist positions, united in their understanding of women as objects of protection.

The founding of WAF was premised on the understanding that the form of gender politics that was laid bare during the Rushdie affair was not unique to Muslim communities, and that WAF's work had to focus on fundamentalism as a rising powerful force within all religions.[2] For at the same time, a similar consolidation of fundamentalist tendencies was gaining ground globally. In the United States of America, a resurgent Christian fundamentalism focused attention on the teaching of evolution in schools and consolidated its assault on gay and lesbian movements, women's right to abortion, and other issues that were becoming central to the 'culture wars' of the '80s and '90s, with the close association of the Christian Coalition, Moral Majority and other groups with the Republican Party. The Christian right was also perpetrating attacks on reproductive rights in Ireland and elsewhere, while Hindu fundamentalism's rise led to its social and political consolidation in India from the late 1980s via the

propagation of a vision of retrograde womanhood in the service of Hindu nationalism. There the renewed popularisation of the image of 'bharat mata', or the Indian nation as woman, led to a reinforcement of the idea that Hindu women need to be protected from rapacious Muslim 'outsiders' (Sarkar, 2001; Mazumdar, 1992). The Hindu supremacist mobilization that took place from the late 1980s onwards for the first saw time included substantial participation by Hindu women as activists for the cause of the Hindu nation (Sarkar and Butalia, 1993).

Thus, WAF defined religious fundamentalism as a modern political movement and ideology seeking to consolidate power either within or in opposition to the state. In this, WAF made a crucial distinction between religious fundamentalism and religious observance, which it saw as a matter of personal choice. From its perspective, individuals have every right to follow any religious faith of their choice, or not to have faith at all, as long as their faith does not impinge on a gender just public space. On this view, it is secularism that offers the strongest guarantee of equality, of justice, and of equal access to the public, while leaving space for individual religious belief and unbelief.

Two and a half decades later...

Two and a half decades after WAF was first formed, we launch *Feminist Dissent*. The publication of the journal comes at a time when fundamentalism has spread its tentacles even deeper into our social and political lives and spaces. The impact of fundamentalism is being felt at a scale and in areas not previously known, such as the rise in Buddhist militancy in Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand.[3] In fact, what

has been marked in recent decades has been the coming together and networking of cross-border and transnational religious, including fundamentalist, forces. The Sri Lankan Bodu Bala Sena's visit to Thailand and Burma in March 2014 to discuss strategy towards Muslim minorities, the Nigerian super churches' expansion into Sierra Leone having used the outbreak of Ebola as an entry point, and the sharing of tactics, inspiration, training and weapons between Islamist groups and the influence of Christian fundamentalist networks in African countries is indicative that fundamentalism is well on the rise globally. The ongoing murders of atheists and rationalists in Bangladesh, and the spectacular terror attack on an upscale restaurant in the country's capital city Dhaka on 1st July 2016 in which about twenty six people were brutally killed, seem to be the handiwork of both local and transnational Islamist organisations, such as the terror outfit Aquis, the South-Asia Al-Qaeda affiliate, based in Pakistan (Ahmed, 2016).

On a different ideological and political level, the Vatican exploits its status as a state to influence issues concerning women's rights and the rights of sexual minorities. It works through local, national and transnational agents, both through the state and through civil society. We saw at CEDAW (the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) the Vatican's ability to work in alliances when need be, especially when it came to curtailing reproductive rights.[4] Our argument is against the view then that fundamentalists are just mavericks, alienated from society, and general misfits. The case of how the Vatican furthers a fundamentalist agenda directly antithetical to women's rights shows how fundamentalists clearly work in and through alliances. At the treaty level,

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the Vatican, together with some Catholic majority countries such as Poland and Ireland, pushed for (but failed) to get language around God, Jesus Christ or Europe's 'Christian heritage' in the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (2004). The Vatican also joined with a core group of Islamic states to oppose the proposals of the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice during the treaty negotiations leading to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1999) (Beldont and Martinez, 1999). After all, few delegations were willing to expend political capital on this issue and it is unlikely there would have been any integration of a gender perspective in the Rome Statute at all without the actions of the Women's Caucus.

This alliance building is most notable in recent struggles over the Commission on the Status of Women. Set up to review and push for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace (1995) and advance women's rights, in 2012, delegates could not even agree on a final communiqué as a result of a cross regional alliance including the Vatican, Iran, Syria and Russia which is not only blocking progress but making it difficult to even cling on to the gains so far. Sticking points include mention of women's sexual and reproductive rights, femicide, intimate partner violence, violence against women human rights defenders, violence against women based on sexual orientation or gender identity and early and forced marriage. Indeed, proposals for a conference twenty years on from the 1995 Fourth World Conference in Beijing met strenuous opposition from women's rights groups and supportive governments precisely because of the likelihood of it leading to a rollback rather than progression in agreements on women's rights at the international stage. Other recent developments – such as convictions of women for procuring their own abortions in countries including Argentina, Northern Ireland and Papua New

Guinea - have been the result of an alignment of fundamentalist mobilisations and nation states.

As shown by the most recent Freedom of Thought Report (IHEU, 2015), the freedom to dissent from religion and faith altogether seems to be shrinking in many contexts, whether this is as a result of fear of conviction for apostasy, death threats and assassinations by non-state actors, or societal pressure to be religious. So the numbers fleeing persecution because of religion, belief or non-belief are increasing while borders are closing and international obligations towards refugees and asylum seekers are, in practice, being rescinded.[5]

Many states have taken approaches in respect to fundamentalist groups that are disproportionately militarised, violate human rights and fall discriminatorily on one community.[6] The discourse in European states around refugees and migrants within or at their borders is laced with fears of infiltration by ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah (commonly known as Islamic State) fighters and of 'being swamped' by large numbers of Muslims, to the extent that some politicians in "Fortress Europe" have resorted to exploiting the threatening idea of "Eurabia", the image of a Europe swamped by "Arab" migrants (Ferguson, 2004). The recent victory of the Brexit referendum in the UK has further exacerbated anti-immigrant sentiment and has unleashed racism and xenophobia on a large scale (Khaleeli, 2016).

Disturbing alliances

The consolidation of fundamentalism globally at the same time as there is increasing control of borders and migration, often along race and class lines, and

of a worldwide financial crisis that spurred a wave of austerity measures across the globe, has exposed a deep chasm in progressives' thinking about gender and race, together, as deeply articulated and intersectional, blurring the lines between anti-imperialism and a defence of minority authoritarianism (Tax, 2013). Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval-Davis (2013) describe the 'contradictory pressures' that WAF historically faced, and that anti-fundamentalist and anti-racist feminists everywhere have to confront today. They write: 'on the one hand (it/they) is/are faced with a growing majoritarian politics of belonging that is exclusionary and often anti-Muslim, and draws on either civilizational or Christian fundamentalist discourses. On the other hand, it is confronted by an undercutting of secular and other emancipatory movements by fundamentalist absolutist and authoritarian political projects in all religions. What's more, these latter projects are also connected to a growing identity politics among some minorities (especially but not only Muslims) that often utilize human rights and anti-imperialist discourses. All of this is taking place within a local and global crisis of neoliberal political economy and a securitarian "war on terrorism"' (8).

In taking such a complex stand, feminists struggling for secular public spaces have often been accused of fuelling racism and imperialism, and of being 'western', deracinated secularists (Oza, 2011; Kumar, 2014). These are accusations that continue to be levelled against activists, particularly women, who fight against fundamentalism and for the realisation of rights. Indeed, the voices of activists fighting against fundamentalist forces and state actions, often at the same time, continue to be marginalised from public discussion. Debate, particularly around violent extremism, often follows simplistic lines of being for human rights/ against racist policies, practices and discourse *or* for security and protection of civilians. This journal aims to redress this imbalance, providing

space for discussion of gender and fundamentalism, including competing viewpoints, and highlighting the voices of activists and showcasing new research initiatives.

Such attacks on secular feminists underscore a profoundly disturbing emergence of contradictory alliances of politics and principles. For many on the Left, particularly in the global North, religious fundamentalists seem to be prosecuting a heroic anti-imperial struggle against the imperialist power of countries such as the US, UK and France. Further faced with unprecedented cuts in the social budget and a brutally enforced austerity regime on the domestic front, many in the Left have come to see religious fundamentalism as the lone force in the world that seems to be able to challenge the unilateral power of the imperial countries.[7] For their part, fundamentalists have tended to exploit anti-imperialist traditions to present themselves as radical anti-Western anti-imperialists. Groups like Stop the War Coalition and the Respect Party in the UK have allied with fundamentalists to forge what they see as an anti-racist and anti-imperialist agenda. What we want to underscore is that in doing so, a critique of fundamentalism and authoritarian communal and patriarchal practices, including and particularly of non-state actors, has been neglected in the name of culture, tradition and 'respect' for difference.

The unprecedented and catastrophic series of events, known as the 'war on terror', unleashed by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in September 11, 2001 was followed by a US and UK-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, a political, military and economic move that drastically altered pre-existing international relations across the board and unleashed an unprecedented escalation of jihadi violence. For a vast majority of the international Left, the war

on Iraq and Afghanistan was a form of "new imperialism" (Harvey, 2003), a new stage of the expropriation of the world's resources via military might, while the dramatic rise of violent extremism was a form of 'blowback'.[8] The rhetoric of human rights and the fight against terrorism, for the Left, was a fig leaf for the West's neo-colonial greed.

Since the US-UK led invasion of Iraq and the 'war on terror', there has been a significant resurgence of interest in the power of western states. Academic responses to these issues have, on the whole, tended to highlight the instrumentalisation of rights-based frameworks, the hypocrisy of nation states, and a critique of the civilizational, imperialist and racist presumptions at the heart of these developments. However, it is curious that little has been said by anti-racist and feminist academics on fundamentalism. Prominent feminist theorists seem to have been significantly moved by the 'war on terror', but they have turned away from secularism and validated religious political formations. They seem more fascinated by women's participation in religious political mobilisations and immersion in religious identity politics than the impact of fundamentalism on women and sexual minorities (see, for instance, Aune et al, 2008; Brown, 2008; Butler, 2008; Braidotti, 2008; Bracke, 2008; Contractor, 2012; Fadil, 2011; Mahmood, 2005; Razack, 2005). Indeed we are still very far from Karima Bennoune's (2008) carefully framed argument that we need a simultaneous critique of state torture and a much needed left, anti-racist, feminist and civil liberties critique of the perpetrators of terror.

Another problematic that is not that dissimilar to the Bush-Blair years and that has proved divisive among the international Left is the role of international intervention (Achcar, 2015; Prashad, 2016).[9] Within days of the Paris attacks of

November 2015, France began bombing Syria while Europe tightened its borders against Syrians, many of whom are fleeing the death game between religious absolutist Islamic State militants and an authoritarian Assad regime. A repetitive polarization in the debate between a focus on the duplicitous politicians involved in war mongering and the left critique of any form of state intervention has highlighted the sorts of limited vision and political possibility that has been the source of frustration for the members of *Feminist Dissent* editorial collective.

A simplistic anti-imperialist argument that shifts the attention away from a systematic analysis of fundamentalist movements to an emphasis on the role that western governments have played in exacerbating Islamist recruitment or financial support needs to be nuanced. The material reality of racism does mean that one has to simultaneously fight for the right to talk about Islamism and also highlight the racist rhetoric of 'fortress Europe'. The "race card" and the question of international intervention align within the recurring recourse to patriotic and nationalist discourses that place pressure to declare one's allegiance to the nation state without any sense that so called "British" values or "French" values are not the preserve of nation states or of nationalist projects. The idea of 'another Europe' suggests that these must be values linked to human rights frameworks, and anti-discrimination values that have been fought for and shaped by an array of civil society mobilisations and actors across the global South and equally by minorities in Britain and across Europe.

In part this retreat from criticism of religious fundamentalism is the consequence of what Chetan Bhatt (1999) has referred to as the 'cultural episteme' and is a reproduction of an earlier tendency to treat the ethnic minority subject as particularly fragile and as victim. The proliferation of academic and

journalistic work on 'Islamophobia' as the leading issue of our times, and published by leading leftwing presses such as Haymarket and Verso, provides instances of this (Kumar, 2012; Kundnani, 2015). Muslim men and women challenging fundamentalism are placed in the double bind of being burdened by right wing assimilationist pressures to challenge fundamentalism within their communities and a simultaneous criticism by left wing forces for pandering to state agendas and imperialism when they do so.

The Culture Wars

The Left liberal defence of culture, religion and tradition, seen especially in its ambivalent response to attacks on freedom of expression in favour of a politics of hurt sentiments of religious minorities, as exemplified most recently in the responses to the Charlie Hebdo murders but going as far back as the Rushdie affair, has of course been conversely matched by the resurgent 'clash of civilisations' thesis popularised by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996) and the rhetoric and policies of politicians of the West who feed into and propagate the language of 'Western ideals and values' as universal values that are fundamentally at odds with Muslim culture. In fact, the then US President George Bush used distinctively Christian imagery to characterise the invasion of Afghanistan as a 'crusade' and that he was on a God-given mission to save the world.[10] Thus the so-called 'war on terror' was deemed to be the outcome of an irreconcilable clash of civilisations, in which the West's superior material and ideological position would eventually vanquish the barbaric and backward people that the invasions were targeting. It exploited the image of the helpless Afghan women needing protection, as well as contrasted the

bureaucratised, sanitised and protective forms of masculinity of the international technocrats and military forces with the brutal, repressive and 'barbaric' masculinity of Taliban fighters.

The protection of human rights, particularly those of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (lgbti) people has also been used in political rhetoric justifying actions ranging from military invasions to increased surveillance on communities. The ways in which the empowered, female (Jewish) Israeli soldier is used as a counterpart to the helpless, veiled (Muslim) Palestinian woman or the phenomenon of 'pink washing' are also different manifestations of this instrumentalisation of human rights discourses. There is of course often justified scepticism as to whether concern for human rights is really the reason for military or diplomatic intervention, with sceptics highlighting human rights violations committed by countries such as the UK and USA themselves, and pointing to the inconsistency in their treatment of different countries (see Prashad, cited above).

In many cases, these dynamics are exacerbated by the fact that the list of invasions of countries of the Middle East, Africa and Asia by Western powers seems ever-expanding, or as policies such as economic sanctions have been levied by the international community on supposedly rogue regimes that then wreak havoc on their own populations. The US-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan had a devastating impact on the region, one that is still reverberating with ongoing consequences in terms of the numbers of deaths, disability, loss of livelihoods, destruction of economic development and the erosion of human rights. The recent release of the Chilcot Report/Iraq Inquiry in July 2016 passed a damning verdict on the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to attack

Iraq by deliberately exaggerating the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.[11]

It is also symptomatic of global power politics that the withholding of aid or military arms and other assistance because of concerns regarding human rights violations are often spun by conservative anti-imperialists as punishment for holding on to 'traditional values' and part of a Western agenda to 'make everyone like them.' This is exemplified in the visit of Barack Obama, President of the USA, to Senegal in 2013. Against a backdrop of increasingly contentious and polarised global debates on the human rights of lgbti people and US foreign policy, President Macky Sall of Senegal, in a move hailed by the national media, talked about the need for countries to not impose their values on others. He said: 'We don't ask Europeans to be polygamists. We like polygamy in our country but we can't impose it in yours' (Nossiter, 2013).

Such a solidification, reification and narrowing of culture and tradition as that unleashed by religious fundamentalism of all hues has to be juxtaposed with the influence of religious norms from the 'outside', as fundamentalist movements become increasingly transnational. So for example in northern Nigeria, while the culture of sexual relationships between unmarried couples was widespread and tolerated, the implementation of sharia law across northern states from 2000 onwards has sought to constrain and re-shape gender relations and matters of sexuality. Many of the earlier customs are now seen as transgressive, with charges of *zina* (criminalising sex outside marriage) being levelled at so-called perpetrators as women's sexuality is increasingly viewed as a source of immorality (Pereira, 2005). These social shifts are linked to the radicalisation of northern Nigerian Islam through its contact with zealous and fundamentalist

Islamic sects in other parts of the world from the 1970s onwards, leading to more puritanical and stricter interpretations that had previously been played down (Best, 2001).

UK Context

In the UK context – the place where *Feminist Dissent* is founded and based– many contemporary themes, paradoxes and positions still chime with the key moments of WAF's formative years. The problems and paradoxes that were identified by WAF women within the context of an assimilationist Thatcherite government at home and resurgent religious political mobilisations across the globe were exacerbated by a New Labour government for whom religious organisations were a critical part of governance. Post 9/11 in particular, religious groups and religious identities became an important aspect of civil society mobilisations and counter narratives.

Thus, this twenty-first century is marked by what many of those involved with the Editorial Collective have referred to as 'multifaithism', a new religious settlement between states and populations. A multiculturalist practice based on the undemocratic negotiations of the state with an unelected layer of "community leaders" (often religious men) has bolstered the power of ethnic minority religious leaderships in the UK over a number of decades. The multiculturalist settlement slid into multifaithism whereby religion became the primary signifier of difference and therefore of the state's invocation of strategies for diversity management (Dhaliwal and Yuval Davis, 2013).

Multifaithism has had the effect of extending, privileging and institutionalising religion in relation to state relations with individuals, communities and civil society. This institutionalisation of religion within both politics and public policy that began with the election of New Labour in 1997 persisted in their experiment with religious communitarianism even though it contradicted the party's own social democratic commitment to equality and non-discrimination, and even though religious communitarianism directly contradicted Labour's post-2001 drive on community cohesion and preventing violent extremism. The growing significance of religion for government and for civil society was continued under first the Conservative- Liberal Democrat Coalition and then the Conservative Party. These tendencies are also reflected in the trajectories and contemporary contexts of other countries, especially those with colonial histories.

In the UK, there has never been a full separation of religion and state, and citizenship demands have been vented in the form of parity demands by minority religious groups as far back as the 1960s. Demands for the recognition of religious accommodation have also been fuelled by the legislative recognition of some religions as 'ethnic groups' – notably Sikhs and Jews under the Race Relations Act 1976. Prominent liberal political theorists such as Tariq Modood and Bhikhu Parekh continue to align with leaders of fundamentalist bodies (such as Iqbal Sacranie of the Jamaat-e-Islami led Muslim Council of Britain) to campaign through public inquiries like the Woolf Commission for the recognition of religion as a public good and a role for religion in public life. At the same time, sociology of religion scholars, the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association are suggesting that religious identification and practice are on the decline while the view that religion should not play a significant role in the public

sphere – in welfare services, political life and the state – is gathering pace (Brown, 2016; Voas and Crockett, 2005; Voas, 2013; Woodhead, 2016). Such a contradiction poses significant questions for this journal on why religion is nonetheless an increasing aspect of the structure of modern political and public life and of state governance. There also seems to be significant confusion about the definition and practice of what is referred to as 'secular' and 'secularism' and a frequent conflation of secular with the term 'atheist'. This has been apparent at our own seminar series where speakers have relied on diverse understandings of secularism.[12] *Feminist Dissent* will grapple with these tensions and debates about what constitutes secularism and what specifically this means for gender norms and relations, sexuality, the ability to secure women's and girls' rights, for the feminist subject, and for developments in feminist theory.

What we have also seen emerge quite centrally are the majoritarian dimensions of electoral politics, as in Egypt and India, among other countries. Indeed, both Tony Blair and David Cameron have relied on support from religious networks for the reinvention of their respective political parties. For Blair these religious networks were concentrated on minority religious groups (Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims) while for Cameron and the more extremist wing of the Tory Party, Christian Evangelical networks have been an additional source of political opportunity (Brown, 2010; Cook, 2010; Doward, 2010). Many of these religious networks contain fundamentalist lobbies with very specific demands: under Blair a central focus was the push for central state funding for ethnic minority religious schools and the proliferation of particular versions of their religions through consultative mechanisms; under Cameron, a pro-life and anti-reproductive rights lobby gained a voice at the centre of government. While the Conservative Party's austerity agenda has led to a significant reduction in the number of specialist

feminist services, Christian fundamentalism has been pushing through all manner of government spaces to validate a new wave of groups that are seemingly innocuous counselling and welfare organisations but are funded by US Christian fundamentalist networks pushing an anti-abortion agenda (Imkaan, 2016; Manjoo, 2015; Walby, 2012). Christian fundamentalists have also been quick to mobilise to gain political power in post-Brexit Britain as can be seen in the rise of Andrea Leadsom - the main Tory party challenger to Teresa May--who is part of a group called Christians in Parliament and organise Bible Study Groups.

Another recurring factor has been the widespread understanding of religion and religious institutions as essential sources of morality and as a form of social glue. This is in spite of increased information about diversity and dissent within religions, critique of religious morality, and the significant media attention to religious terrorism around the globe, from ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Christians by Hindu Right forces in India to the transnational Islamist terror networks right through to the bombing of abortion clinics by the Christian Right in the US. Moreover, this sense of religions as cohesive in a context of heightened panic about the 'breakdown of society' is closely tied to and strengthened by yet another, and potentially most important, factor since the turn of the century – the realisation that state engagement with religious organisations can facilitate (rather than impede or challenge) the proliferation of neo-liberalism because, through shared political interests, relations between state and religious organisations can actually extend the influence of the state and particularly its soft policing function while simultaneously helping to contain or reduce its pastoral and welfare obligations. This insight began with Tony Blair's reinvention of communitarianism towards neo-liberal ends (Rose, 2001) and has continued with Cameron's Big Society. The notion of Big Society has manipulated the

language of left politics to discursively embellish a return to voluntarism and the retraction of the state by getting "community" to "voluntarily" mop up the fallout of a neo-liberal retraction of the state in exchange for de-regulation (Coote, 2010). Religious organisations have been quick to jockey for attention under the Big Society agenda and to make pro-active use of the extension of free schools and other state policies.[13]

Very few academics have critiqued this process despite a burgeoning 'faiths literature' in the UK. Even fewer have really grappled with the way that fundamentalist organisations have worked through these spaces in order to gain legitimacy and institute new gendered norms. The UK faiths literature is largely a functionalist argument about the capacity and positive impact of religious partners in civil society initiatives. Moreover, it projects religious groups as important carriers of social capital and providers of welfare support, and also projects religion as 'cohesive', and 'faith communities' as central players in tackling 'radicalisation' (for instance Beaumont, 2009; Blond, 2010; Bretherton, 2010; Chapman 2012, Dinham, Furbey & Lowndes 2009, Dinham, 2009; Dinham et al, 2006; Farnell, 2001; Glasman 2008 and 2010; Jawad, 2012 to name just a few). Any critical tendencies within this expansive body of knowledge are limited to accusations that the state is instrumentalising religious belief for its own gains. Very little has been said about the specific implications for women, for sexual and racialized minorities of the new multifaithism and /or the ways in which fundamentalist projects have made proactive use of these multiple spaces.[14]

Most recently, reactions to the government's Prevent agenda have oscillated between left / anti-racist critiques that focus on the power of the state and its securitarian agenda that not only extends the authoritarian arm of the state but

also mobilises concerns about terrorism towards anti-immigration policies and racist sentiments [see Kundnani, 2007; McGhee, 2010] at the cost of discussing and debating fundamentalist recruitment within the UK. Critical questions remain unanswered about the role of intelligence when the extended reach of the state is not able to prevent attacks like the one in London on 7/7, in Paris in 2015 and in Brussels in 2016, from taking place. Whose role is it to keep people safe if it isn't the role of the state, and if it is the role of the state then what does a state-supported anti-fundamentalist agenda look like?

On the same day as the Paris attacks in November 2015, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had played a controversial role in the Gujarat riots of 2002 in which over 2,000 Mulsims were killed under his watch as Chief Minister of the state, and who had been denied a visa by the UK until then, was greeted by large crowds at a packed Wembley Stadium event organized and financed by Indians living in the UK, including a number of elected Labour party politicians of Indian origin. The previous day, Modi had been subjected to a large demonstration during his visit to Downing Street. Those two days raised a number of questions that highlight some of the issues with which this journal seeks to contend. The Wembley event reflected popular appeal for a fundamentalist political project, its entanglements with nationalist sentiment and diaspora politics. The diverse organisations represented at the anti-Modi rally reflected the diverse interests that may, at various points, oppose fundamentalist politics, including other fundamentalists. But the way in which Sikh fundamentalists utilized these spaces in particular, standing both inside state discussions with Modi and on the frontline of the anti-Modi demonstration reflects both the diverse character of fundamentalist political projects and their sophisticated utilization of a range of different spaces. Moreover, the presence

of Sikh fundamentalists at the anti-Modi rally raised a number of additional concerns about political alliances and re-emphasised the concern about diasporic financing for fundamentalist politics in South Asia. The fact that media attention to Modi's visit was usurped by a terrorist attack in Paris, which Modi himself utilized to lay claim to a language of universal opposition to terrorism, throws together a huge number of questions about the links between fundamentalism and violence, the location of power, the language of fundamentalism and anti-fundamentalism, as well as the ongoing utility of anti-Muslim racism, anti-immigrant sentiment and nationalism.

Why Feminist Dissent?

We believe that the task of *Feminist Dissent* is now more challenging than ever. Current events and trends that have been shaped and driven by shifts in religion, political identities and geopolitics over the past decades globally signal a sea-change from the earlier period of decolonization in Africa and Asia when a vision committed to a secular, socialist and internationalist global society was articulated, as in the concept of tricontinentalism, or in the anti-racist counter-culture energies of the 1960s and 1970s. In academia, postcolonial and postmodernist strands of critical inquiry and the dominance of cultural relativism whose critique of the Enlightenment as a racist and imperialist project, and a concomitant valorisation of the popular and the subaltern has led, ironically, to a retreat from a critique of religious fundamentalism and patriarchy. While we take on board the insights gained from materialist postcolonial theory that the 18th century Enlightenment was indeed instrumentalised in the hands of slave-owners and colonisers to justify European superiority, we draw inspiration from anti-

colonial struggles that were fought by peoples throughout Asia and Africa in order to wrest concepts of freedom, liberty, rule of law, rights, secularism, etc. from the 'West'.

Thus, twenty-five years since the Rushdie Affair, the situation seems both more complex yet also more straightforward. Firstly, the interrelation between gender and fundamentalism needs to be viewed in the context of societal and global shifts over the last two and a half decades that include the retreat of the state globally from the social sector, growing atomisation caused by migration to cities and displacement from the countryside, as well as the constant state of war over terror and resources. Indeed, the failure of the state to provide social security has contributed to the increasing importance of non-state actors, including those organised around faith lines, to fill the gap within social well being. Meanwhile, women often join religious extremist forces for similar reasons as men, as well as a way to gain some power, freedom and access to religious knowledge denied to them by more mainstream religious and cultural mores (Ladbury, 2015).[15] There is also an ironic link to situations where, for example, the abductions in northern Nigeria in recent years bear more similarity to abductions by the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel and cult group operating in northern Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, than to other violent fundamentalist movements motivated by Islam. Furthermore, religion, along with other identity markers such as ethnicity and occupational groups, has been instrumentalised in conflict to mobilise communities to 'their' cause. Indeed, these factors have been playing an increasingly greater role in conflicts and violence than before, linked to shifts in the politicisation of these identities and with the complicity and encouragement of state and non-state actors. Forms of Islamic fundamentalism

have become almost synonymous with fundamentalism itself for many politicians and commentators. Yet entire Muslim communities are implicated in this and such a narrative fails to see the commonalities with other forms of religious fundamentalism, often not framed as fundamentalism or seen as essentially different. It also fails to take a global perspective.

We find that in contrast to dominant academic and international NGO-driven work, progressive movements on the ground often have stronger analyses of fundamentalism, and seek to combat its influence and impact, as well as seek to highlight progressive interpretations of religion and engender changes in religious, state and cultural institutions (Zia, 2011). After all, feminist activists, whether in India or Nigeria or Turkey, or in Latin American countries, in their activism have historically embraced ideas of freedom, secularism and rights and have a much more nuanced understanding and navigation of the terrain of colonialism, racism and rights than often seen in the West. They ask the question: are we to cede all of these ideas to Western imperialism? We argue that the history of anti-colonial struggles in fact has been precisely that—to wrench these concepts from their European moorings and to re-signify them for anti-colonialist and progressive aims. As such, a key aim of *Feminist Dissent* is to query the gap between academic and activist work, and to ask crucial questions about why such a gap exists.

We call it *Feminist Dissent* because as feminists we dissent both from the fundamentalist and neo-liberal political forces seeking to control our worlds today, but also from large strands within dominant theory and activism, especially as institutionalised in the Western academy, that have not provided consistent secular and progressive responses to ongoing global economic and

political crises that include a resurgent fundamentalism and attacks on a secular feminist public sphere.

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Chitra Nagarajan is an activist who has worked to promote and protect human rights, particularly those of women, in China, the United Kingdom, the United States and west Africa. She currently works to build peace in Nigeria. She writes a blog based on her work and activism.

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Notes

[1] For an account, twenty years later, of the Rushdie affair and WAF's founding, see Rahila Gupta (2016). See also Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval-Davis (2013). In it, many of the founders of WAF reflect on the moment of WAF's founding and its relevance twenty-five years later.

[2] For an excellent collection of essays on the resurgence of religious-based identity movements and its impact on gender issues, see Valentine Moghdam (1994).

[3] The killing and displacement of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Burma/Myanmar, as well as the attacks against Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka, are believed to be carried out by the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force). It has also demanded laws to protect Buddhism and its declaration as a state religion in Thailand.

[4] See *WAF Journal* No. 7, 1995, which had a specific focus on reproductive rights at the Beijing Conference. See http://womenagainstfundamentalism.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/waf7.pdf

[5] See Amnesty International's report entitled *The Human Cost of Fortress Europe: Human Rights Violations Against Migrants and Refugees at Europe's Border* (London: Amnesty International Ltd, 2014) for a detailed account of the violations of human rights taking place on Europe's borders, including the deaths of thousands. http://www.amnesty.eu/content/assets/Reports/EUR_050012014__Fortress_Europe_complete_web_EN.pdf

[6] For example, international human rights organisations and local activists have documented a number of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual violence and long-term detention without charge, committed by the Nigeria military (Amnesty International, 2015; Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2015.) The controversial Prevent agenda in the UK as a tactic to prevent "radicalisation" of Muslim youth is also seen as an attempt by the British state to make surveillance of minority ethnic communities legitimate. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97976/prevent-strategy-review.pdf See also the podcast of a workshop on Prevent organised by Feminist Dissent at the University of Warwick on 15 January 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qE_Ig3G7KxA In India, there has been a spate of "encounter" killings and extrajudicial internments for those suspected of terrorism, especially in areas such as Kashmir and those under Maoist influence.

[7] The brutal murder of the cartoonists who ran the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 produced a deeply ambivalent response from the Left as well as from many liberals in the West, who saw the cartoonists as representatives of a secular West out of touch with the religious sentiments of France's disempowered and vulnerable Muslim population. The writer Rachel Kushner decried Charlie Hebdo's "cultural intolerance" and its promotion of "a forced secular view". See http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/27/nyregion/six-pen-members-decline-gala-after-award-for-charlie-hebdo.html?_r=0 (accessed on 28 June 2016)

[8] "Blowback: Vijay Prashad on How Islamic State Grew Out of U.S. Invasion of Iraq, Destruction of Nation", Democracy Now! August 25, 2014.

http://www.democracynow.org/2014/8/25/blowback_vijay_prashad_on_how_islamic_state (last accessed 6 July 2016)

[9] Other vocal Left intellectuals against intervention are Tariq Ali and Patrick Cockburn. For a response to Tariq Ali's opposition to intervention in Syria, see the blogpost https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2015/11/30/response-to-tareq-ali-2015-or-the-need-for-internationalist-solidarity/. For a response to Cockburn's writing on Syria, see Gilbert Achcar (2015).

[10] See George Bush's speech at the White House soon after the attack on the World Trade Centre towers https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html for instances of how Bush used a language soaked in religious fervor and faith to drum up national support for the war.

[11] In Iraq alone, as of early May 2016, an estimated 242, 000 people have died following the 2003 invasion according to records that are publicly available and aggregated by Iraq Body Count. Of these an estimated 157,148 to 175, 862 are civilians. For a brief overview of the Iraq Inquiry, see https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/06/iraq-inquiry-key-points-from-the-chilcot-report (last accessed 18 July 2016)

[12] These seminars can be viewed in full from our Events page at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/research/currentprojects/feminist dissent/events/

[13] See for instance the Jewish Leadership Council's policy paper (2010) *Big Society and the UK Jewish Community* available at: http://www.thejlc.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/bigsociety.pdf [last accessed 3rd July 2016].

[14] Notable exceptions include the journalistic posts on the *Open Democracy* Religion, Gender, Politics site and essays by Dhaliwal (2011), Dhaliwal and Patel (2012), Jefferys (2011), Macey and Carling (2011), Patel (2008 and 2013), and Yuval-Davis (2013).

[15] A study that interviewed young (18-35 years) former JAS members who had left the sect voluntarily found that religion and ideology was a thread that ran through many of their stories, with young women joining particularly to learn the Quran, knowledge denied to them given the low numbers of access to education for girls, and gaining higher status due to their roles in the group.

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The Hindus never ate beef*

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*except

charmakars (cobblers) did,

bhattas (soldiers) did,

natas (actors) did,

and so did Dasas & Medas & Vratas & Bhillas,

all sunk their teeth afresh,

when served cow's flesh,

&

they were joined by (drum-beat) Vedic Gods,

Indra was fond of bull's meat,

& Agni loved both bull and cow,

& old books even suggest how

& what kind of cow should be

sacrificed for which God, see

that you get

a dwarf ox for Vishnu,

& a big horned bull for Indra,

& a black cow for Pushan, & etc. etc.,

so that whenever the Gods were in the mood,

"verily the cow [was] food,"

and secretly, even now,

the Bhakts who have a beef but still eat it,

they always heave a sigh of relief,

knowing their Vivekananda

(they don't know how to treat it, it shakes their belief)

liked Biceps, Bhagwad & [yolo] Beef.

(thanks to B.R. Ambedkar and Ram Puniyani)

Akhil Katyal is a writer and translator based in Delhi where he also teaches literature. His writings have appeared widely in national and international journals and anthologies. He has translated the works of Mangalesh Dabral, Wislawa Szymborska, Agha Shahid Ali, Om Prakash Valmiki, Dorothy Parker and Langston Hughes, among others. He finished his PhD from SOAS, University of London in 2011.

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Why Universalism?

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Abstract

This essay argues that there are reasons why all groups, including feminists and those who are critical of forms of fundamentalism, need a perspective of universal humanity. Universalism is important because it is a view about the shared characteristics of all humans. It is particularly necessary to reiterate that there are such qualities in a world where ugly divisions between groups have once again become apparent. Universalism is also a normative perspective – a view that there are principles of justice that require that each person, whoever and wherever they are, is treated fairly and equally. With appropriate qualifications, I suggest that universal nature can be understood in terms of needs, or indeed of rights, so long as the limitations of the latter are appreciated. The essay responds to criticisms of a universalist perspective--from the post-modern to the view that universalism is invariably a false generalisation from a partial point of view. I suggest that sometimes these positions misrepresent universalism. At other times, though, they make better sense if they are construed as presupposing a universalist perspective.

Keywords: Universalism; post-modernism; intersectionality; justice; needs; rights; feminism; fundamentalism.

In my 2003 book *Revisiting Universalism*, I defended a universalising perspective, a view that suggests that there are political and moral

imperatives deriving from the fact of our universal humanity. In this essay, I will argue that there are reasons why all groups, including feminists and those who are critical of forms of fundamentalism, need a perspective of universal humanity. Given, however, that many theorists have challenged universalism, I will spend some time responding to critics of the viewpoint. I will then move to consider some alternative theoretical perspectives, including feminist outlooks, that have been offered as countering universalism. In the course of this, I will suggest, contrary to the view of some post-modern feminists, that there are also reasons, in certain circumstances, for defending a notion of universal 'woman'.

What do we mean by 'universalism' about humans? We mean a view that there are broad shared characteristics of humanity. But universalism is important because it is also a normative perspective – a view that there are principles of justice that require that each person, whoever and wherever they are, is treated fairly and equally. Human beings have, as Martha Nussbaum has put it **(1995, 5**): 'a dignity that deserves respect from laws and social institutions'. Respecting human dignity might entail drawing up a set of human needs or rights deriving from these and respecting these. Included amongst those needs or rights that are either basic or very important would be the right to life, the right to decent food and shelter and the right to freedom from persecution. The satisfaction of basic needs is necessary to ensure human flourishing. This point might be made in terms of needs or in terms of capabilities but, with appropriate qualifications, to be adumbrated below, and as outlined above, it could be conceptualised in terms of some notion of a right. Underlying the notion of a right is the view that individuals are entitled to respect as moral agents capable of making choices. Moreover, while the notion of a right is in fact associated with liberal citizenship, it is possible to re-think the notion in a fashion that may be more in accord with a genuine conception of universal humanity.

In my personal view, which I have defended elsewhere,[1] a universal perspective is best defended in terms of the common nature shared by all of the members of humanity. This common nature is a rich and diverse one and it suggests our deep connection with the rest of the natural world. This shared nature need not be an exclusively objective one. As Françoise Lionnet (1991, 2-3, 4) has suggested in her deeply engaging discussion of FGM, a universalist perspective on the body need not 'objectify the other'. Rather it is possible to suggest a form of universalism that creates a space where 'inter-subjectivity and reciprocity become possible'. Lionnet argues that the discourses on FGM of both early feminists and some of the more recent post-colonial theorists are misleading. She contends that accusations of 'western imperialism' and African barbarism are both empirically wrong and that each underplays African opposition to the practice.

In 2003 I argued that one central reason why it is important to defend a universalist theory about human beings is to characterise the shared humanity of, for example, the poorest person in the world and the richest person. Economic injustice is perhaps one of the most extreme types of injustice. A recent Oxfam report, from January 2015, suggests that the richest 1% will own more than all the rest by the year 2016 (Slater 2015). These figures themselves are enough to give any of us pause for thought. The Ebola outbreak illustrates, indeed, the kinds of threat posed even to the richest in the world by these damaging levels of inequality. A virus of this kind does not distinguish rich from poor, although, of course, the rich are likely to have access to health care that is unavailable to the poor. Unless the richest recognise their shared humanity with the poorest, then the poorest are liable to be written off as either implicitly not human at all or as possessing some inferior form of humanity. Extreme levels of inequality anyway, are detrimental to the well-being of all (see Wilkinson 1996). Economic and political instability, consequences of extreme levels of inequality, are detrimental, in the long run, even to the interests of the

rich. One can make parallel kinds of points though, about other areas of difference, including sex and gender differences, between groups of people. The *World Economic Forum* reports annually on a range of inequalities between men and women and suggests that these are significant across a range of indicators – including pay for similar jobs, educational attainment, political empowerment and health and survival (see Hausmann et al 2014).

A further example of an injustice is the denigration of the female body in certain forms of fundamentalism. While it is important for me as a white western woman to be careful not to offer an 'orientalist' or a western perspective on Islam, it is also necessary to point out injustices perpetrated by 'fundamentalist' forms of religion. One writer, Mariam Poya, an Iranian and Muslim woman, reserves the term 'fundamentalism' for a version of Islam that is about 'absolute control over the female body and mind' (Poya 2000). It is a normative perspective of universal humanity that allows us to see this as an injustice.

Of course, even these claims involve what might seem a paradoxical challenge to universalism. If some groups challenge universalism then how can a universalist outlook be applied to them? How can I claim an attachment to universalism on the part of the very groupings that set out to challenge the notion? However, those groups need to recognise the importance of universalism if humanity is to flourish. Social and cultural groupings do not live in isolation from one another.

Some common criticisms of universalism and some responses

Some of the above claims about the significance of universalism might seem obvious. But the basic position has been criticised from a number of different perspectives. One criticism of universalism concerns its scope. So, to take one example of this criticism, in his important monograph, *The*

Black Atlantic, that argued for a cross diasporic conception of 'black identity' against an Enlightenment ideal that was partially constructed on a premise of slavery, Paul Gilroy wrote (1993, 43): 'incredulous voices have drawn attention to the bold, universalist claims of occidental modernity and its hubristic confidence in its own infallibility'. Gilroy's work, alongside that of others, has demonstrated the exclusionary nature of certain Enlightenment concepts. Some Enlightenment thinkers actually excluded women and certain races from the scope of the notion of a right, and, more significantly, as noted above, Gilroy's work demonstrates how slavery was in fact part and parcel of certain elements of the Enlightenment ideal.[2] Human universality, then, has been seen as an Enlightenment conceit; it has been viewed as inevitably presupposing the imposition of purportedly and falsely 'universal' values on those falling outside its invariably European and white norm.

This point has also been expressed in a slightly different form by those who have argued that the very idea of a civic public which is implicit in universalising thinking excludes groups defined as different **(see Young 1989, 250-74)**. The notion of a republic or of citizenship, it has been argued, is always implicitly racialised or sexed. Such a critique of universalism, however, might indicate that the 'universal' outlook against which the comment inveighs, is not genuinely universal. Moreover, the criticism probably assumes, with its reference to 'Enlightenment conceit', that universalism is to be conceptualised in terms of the discourse of human rights.

Radically different thinkers, ranging from the Marxist inspired intellectuals Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002)[3] to the defender of certain religious communities, Saba Mahmood (2011), have critiqued the notion of a right and damned the liberal self with faint praise. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that the domination of nature by humans and of one group of humans by another is endemic in Enlightenment thinking and that the discourse of human rights is core to

this frame. Horkheimer and Adorno suggested that progressive forces, in Enlightenment discourse, are undermined by the links between the enlightenment commitment to freedom and equality and capitalist excesses.[4] This work poses a challenge to the normative assumptions underlying the liberal conception of the self.[5]

There is not the space in an article of this kind to respond properly and in depth to these significant challenges to liberal thinking. However, it is possible to respond that these interpretations of the notion of a 'right' suggest not that the concept itself, or its underlying values, is problematic but that its associations, with capitalism, individualism, sexism and racism represent inappropriate and partial interpretations of the notion. The notion of a right, if it is understood in a genuinely universal way, need not be viewed in terms of Enlightenment autonomy, with its ready association with individualism and its denial of the interconnectedness of humanity. One might note, moreover, that the conceptualisation of freedom, to take one value-laden concept, often associated solely with the Enlightenment, is core also to ancient Greek thinking. Hannah Arendt, for example, in her magnum opus, *The Human Condition* (1958), drawing on the ancient Greeks, emphasises how true action of human beings – for example political activity that recognises and depends upon the activity of others – requires some notion of freedom. In fact, for her, the modern world is characterised by the denial of this form of action, action that ought to characterise a feature of humanity as distinct from animality.

Moreover, having available to us, in our contemporary globalised world, a notion of universal humanity does not mean that we ignore the cultural, religious, sexed and racialised aspects of our identities as humans. If the notion of a right, therefore, were genuinely founded upon a conception of universal humanity, or on the needs and the flourishing, appropriately construed, of such a universal humanity, then it would not fall foul of these objections.

It is true, to reiterate points that have frequently been made, that specific exemplifications of human rights, as enshrined in legal constitutions and in the conceptions of citizenship deployed by particular nations, often fail to promote universal standpoints. Frequently the rights that are enshrined in the various legal systems, even of purported democracies all over the world, violate the notion of equal respect. Sometimes laws and institutions themselves perpetuate inequalities on grounds of sex or race, class or religious affiliation.[6] It is also important to mention those individuals who are stateless and who don't therefore have the protection of the law anywhere. Migrants often don't have 'rights' at least expressed in the form of citizenship of some state, anywhere. In the UK, 'terror suspects' are increasingly defined as being 'outside' the universal convention that allows them at the very least the right to life and the right not to be tortured. There are also extreme zones of exception such as Guantanamo Bay set up by the US government as part of its 'war on terror' policy.

But, to reiterate the point once more, these expressions of the limitation of the notion of a right do not mean that we should reject altogether the discourse or the concept of universalism. It doesn't follow from the fact of the imperfect application of principles of universal rights that the notion of universal rights itself ought to be rejected, nor does it follow that the concept itself is racist or Eurocentric or sexist.

Although, therefore, the concept of a 'right' as it is often interpreted, is flawed and is an imperfect tool, it is nonetheless a vitally important one. The significance of it, even in the liberal terms articulated in the Universal Convention, is highlighted by the recent threat, in the UK, to the Human Rights Act. The Conservative government in the UK at present is considering seceding from the European Convention on Human Rights.

Returning, then, to the claim of Gilroy, Gita Sahgal (2014, 67-83), for one, has forcefully challenged the view that a secular universalist human

rights perspective stems exclusively from European Enlightenment values and a European context. Indeed, she has argued that the movement in India that challenged the twin ills of colonialism and fundamentalist Hinduism was, and still is, the universalising discourse of human rights.[7] Moreover, and relatedly, Chetan Bhatt (2006, 98-115) has critiqued the ready association of non-western with 'victim' and 'other'. He suggests an association of this with the simultaneous denial both of full subject-hood to the 'subaltern' or the 'non-western' and of the possibility that some such 'victims' might themselves also be attacking, for example, the secular spaces of Asian peoples.

Finally, on this point, Neil Lazarus and Rashmi Varma (2008), make the following point: 'From the Haitian Revolution of the late eighteenth century to the Indian freedom struggle of the mid-twentieth, from Toussaint L'Ouverture's challenge to French ideas of citizenship to Gandhi's strategic ironisation of 'Western civilisation' as a 'good idea' (his tongue-in-cheek suggestion, of course, was that it would be a good idea if the West were to become civilised!), the history of anticolonial struggle is replete with instances not of 'alternative modernity' but of claims made to civic rights, freedom and citizenship on the ground of modernity' (326).

Atomistic individualistic 'pseudo' universalism

A second criticism, along similar though differently conceived lines to that of Gilroy, claims that a 'universalist' perspective is a chimera – it rests on a god's eye view of the world that is simply unattainable. So, for example, critics of Rawls'[8] self – the self that negotiates about norms from behind a 'veil of ignorance' – claim that such a self is a fiction. A 'universal' self is such a watered-down self that there is nothing left. Moreover, the 'liberal' universalist relies, it is said, also, on an 'individual' notion of the self, that is isolated from its communities, its cultures and its traditions.

'Liberal' and other political thinkers therefore countered universalism with communitarianism. In its communitarian version, liberal pluralists suggested that a community or a society is important for a moral theory to have practical force. Waltzer (1983) and Taylor (1992), for example, claimed that it is vital that we stay rooted in our communities in order to make sense of our shared ethical values. The self, according to this argument, is always 'encumbered' in its traditions, its cultural norms and its communities and it is these 'encumbrances' that form the basis for its values. As Gideon Calder has put it (2006, 5), 'every universalism masks a particularism'. Post-modernists, post-colonial theorists, some feminists and others advise us to focus on our differences, to celebrate our diversity. Many in western liberal democracies responsible for the policy enactment of views like this therefore developed policies that prioritised the values of communities.[9]

There is an important general point to make about this, however. First of all, while 'particularists' claim that the universalist cannot specify what it is that is universal in humanity, the universalist will counter that 'particularists' suffer from the same difficulty. For 'particularists' it is equally difficult to specify what form the 'encumbrances' ought to take.[10] So Rorty, for example, on the one hand, throughout his work, has expressed concerns about potentially false universalising perspectives, about any normative view that purports to be universal but that might not be. One should, he writes, 'face(s) up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires' (1989, xv). On the other hand, he claims, one must also create some kind of solidarity with others. But, the universalist might ask, what does this 'solidarity' mean and with whom? With a nation, for example; with a particular culture? Why? What about those excluded from the scope of the nation or the culture?

A central difficulty for this view of Rorty's is that it is difficult, without recourse to some notion, however nuanced, of universal humanity, for this sense of solidarity to be anything other than arbitrary. It will become

either a local community or a nation, or a cultural grouping and the question will arise in relation to each of these – why should we prioritise any one of them? In the end Rorty, indeed, himself reverts back to a notion of universality – a conception of universal vulnerability. Humans, for example, are frail beings subject to pain.

Moreover, and equally importantly, the view that the universal self is an unencumbered 'mind' that exists everywhere and no-where seems to rest upon a metaphysical view of the self that is ultimately in some sense Cartesian – the self as a 'mind' that has, as Kant pointed out, no identifying characteristics other than the fact of its thinking. But the universal self does not have to be construed this way. It can instead be viewed as a living, active, embodied self that is differentiated from other animals and from the rest of the natural world by its ability to devise norms and by its particular type of consciousness**.** The norms devised by such a self may change but they must include a constant and vigilant concern to protect the rights and abilities of all human beings, wherever they find themselves and with whomever they associate in their relations with others.

Thus universalism does not have to depend on a God's eye conception of the human self. The parameters of the human are fluid – technology in all its forms, for example, shapes what we know and count as human – but the human is always embodied and finite, rather than being, as the critics assume it to be, a strangely disembodied mind. In the end, then, this criticism of universalism is no different from the one expressed by Gilroy**,** since it identifies, mistakenly I am suggesting, all forms of universalism with the 'Enlightenment conceit'.

Criticism of the notion of justice

It is important also to mention those critics who have associated the very principle of justice with the Enlightenment conceit. So, for example, feminist political theorists have argued that the notion of justice itself

depends upon an inappropriate view of the self. Carol Pateman, for example, in her major and significant work *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (1989, 3), argued that the very discipline of political theory 'systematically excluded' the question of women from its frame of reference because it was based on the conception of a public citizen that excludes the private realm of the family. Feminist political theory, since the publication of that text, has been engaging in responding to this point either by re-thinking the notion of the 'public' or by extending some of the aspects of citizenship into the private sphere. Extensive feminist work, for example, has been done on domestic violence issues.[11]

But the point has also been made that the principle of justice depends, in the words of Iris Marion Young, on an ideal of impartiality that is the 'same for all rational agents' (1990, 100).[12] Young argues that developing principles of justice requires a point of view that abstracts from particularity, from context and from emotion. This, however, according to her, involves an inappropriate denial of difference or 'alterity' amongst subjects – differences arising from situation, context and other aspects of individuality. The ideal of normative reason, according to her, necessarily underplays differences between subjects. Deploying principles of justice, then, on this argument, necessarily leaves out important characteristics that differentiate humans from one another.

Young's argument is an important and a strong one. One way of reading it, however, is that it associates principles of justice with the form of universalism – the atrophied self – that has been critiqued in the previous section of this article. But secondly, Young seems to go further and claim that universalism is impossible because of the logic of identity that it presupposes. Every concept has an opposite. If, for example, the universal concept is reason, then it necessarily excludes emotion. However, as I have argued before, characterising humans in a minimal sense does not entail that they are only and exclusively that minimum. As argued previously,

describing human beings in terms of a universal nature or a universal form of reasoning does not mean that they are not also emotional, culturally embedded etc. So the criticism of the ideal of justice then, depends in part on a critique of a conception of universalism that has already itself been challenged in an earlier section of this article.

A Response to one further criticism of universalism

Moving now specifically to some feminist critics of a form of universalism, but a universalism now about women, post-modern inspired feminists challenged their early second-wave sisters. Their main criticism of the latter paralleled the above challenge to universal humanity. It was that many of the claims that purported to be universally true of women were in fact true only for women of particular classes, races and cultures. Abortion on demand, for example, was not a demand that those women undergoing forced contraception could relate to. Post-modern feminists, then, suggest that the early feminists unconsciously and falsely universalised from their own perspectives. These criticisms followed on the heels of the earlier feminists' insistence that their male counterparts had universalised from their own partial perspective. Some post-modern inspired feminists therefore concluded that there are no 'essential' or 'universal' characteristics of women.

In this vein, post-modern feminists argued that feminist theory must be 'explicitly historical' and 'non universalist' (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 19-38). One significant pair of writers on the subject, Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser, criticised earlier feminists on the ground that their theories were 'essentialist and mono-causal'. They also described universalising theories, in Lyotardian vein, as 'quasi metanarratives' (ibid., 27). As another writer on the subject put it: such theories falsely universalised features of the theorists' own 'era, society, culture, class, sexual orientation, and ethnic or racial group'. In fact, to give one example, these writers argued 'there are no common areas of experience between the

wife of a plantation owner in the pre-Civil War south and the female slaves her husband owns'.[13]

Post-modern feminists, then, as noted, drew on the work of Lyotard. In his classic text on the subject, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard had objected to the 'foundationalism' implicit in what he labelled 'grand narratives' as well as to their Enlightenment inspired and falsely optimistic faith in progress. In response to this, however, firstly, Lyotard's critique of the notion of a 'grand narrative' has not gone unchallenged. His description of contemporary science as being concerned with 'paradox, fracture, catastrophe' has been questioned (see Rorty, Habermas and Lyotard in Bernstein 1985, 163). Secondly, it is important to note that it is possible to believe in a universal theory without upholding a foundationalist epistemology (the desire to place knowledge on claims that are known with certainty). Thirdly, and most importantly for the present issue, it is, to reiterate the point, possible to uphold a universalist outlook about women, as well as about humanity more generally, without falsely generalising from one's own perspective. As Margaret Whitford once put it (1991, 5), feminist membership is like Merleau-Ponty's heap of sand: each grain individually is minute and slightly different from all the others, but the whole sandbank may block a river.[14]

'Woman' is multiple; there are many classes of women, many races and many sexual orientations. Perhaps each one of these has come into being as the result of a number of processes or as the expression of a number of powers. Some of these powers are biological; some are social. However, universality in the following sense is undeniable. Each kind of thing is categorised on the basis of shared characteristics of that kind. It would be impossible to categorise anything at all unless this were the case. The category human and the category woman are no different. It doesn't follow from the claim that all women are different that we must celebrate differences and deny universality. Moreover, the category 'woman' can also be used normatively, in an analogous fashion to that of humanity, to

critique unjust practices amongst women. There may be disagreements about what constitutes an injustice – abortion on demand may be perceived as a right by some women and not by others. Yet there are cases – FGM for example – where the practice would be agreed by many women to constitute an injustice against women. It is a recognition, once more, of shared membership of the universal that allows for this.

Some post-modern inspired feminists, it is arguable, in their desire to denigrate what was called hetero-normativity may have thrown out the ability to theorise male power.[15] The ontological conception of the human which is at least partially biologically formed, needs to be reinstated. This point has been made recently by Elizabeth Grosz (2011), who argues that it is Irigaray who recognises the huge significance of the division between the sexes in any ontology. It is notably Irigaray, according to Grosz, who has focussed on the ontological reality of sexual difference, sexual difference as a mode of being,[16] rather than a pair of objects that is discovered in the world. For Irigaray, reflecting Darwin, nature itself is sexed – it is at least two.[17] This division, according to Irigaray, cuts across all living beings, and is the condition for the emergence, in the human, of all other differences. An appreciation of this point does not mean that it is not also important to recognise the phenomenological experience of individual women. It is very important not to impose on, for example, the experience of someone who has undergone FGM, a point of view that is not derived from that experience. The vivid account of the phenomenon offered, for example, by Nawal El Saʻdāwī, in *A Daughter of Isis* (1999), viscerally conveys the horror of the experience for her and could not be conveyed by someone who had not experienced FGM.

Biologically sexed bodies are also socially inflected. Moreover, biology itself may be subject to norms. But it does not follow from this that the biological and the social are reducible to one another. A universalist inspired criticism of some post-modern feminists, then, which is also a criticism of the 'false' version of universalism critiqued by Gilroy and

others, is that they may underplay biological bodily identity. Even if this view about biology is not accepted, it remains the case that, for normative reasons, there is a universal category 'woman'.

'Identity' politics

For certain post-modernist feminists and for the early Rorty, although they conceive of identity differently from one another, all of us are, in some crucial sense, defined by our 'identity'. This identity may be performatively constructed, as it is with Butler, or simply given. For Judith Butler (1990 and elsewhere), for example, at least in so far as she has been read by some, identities can be made and re-made through performance. For some readings of her work and for the early Rorty, though, identities are both 'foundational' and, simultaneously, they express the normative interests of subjugated groupings.

I would like to note at the outset that the notion of identity is a very important one in certain contexts. There needs to be institutional recognition of oppressed groups. As Iris Marion Young has put it, 'a person's particular sense of history, understanding of social relations and personal possibilities, her or his mode of reasoning, values, and expressive styles are constituted at least partly by her or his group identity' (1990, 259).

But there are 'universalist' comments one can make about this theoretical perspective that assumes that 'identity' is paramount. One criticism is this: a point that is not often noted, to take one example, is that an investment in 'black' identity carries with it a counter investment in 'white' identity – in the US 'whiteness' appears to provide one with access to resources, power and opportunity (Lipsitz 2006). Yet whiteness is less frequently discussed than blackness in the elaborations of 'identity'

politics. As Richard Wright put it when asked about his view of the 'Negro' problem, 'there isn't a negro problem; there is only a white problem'.[18]

To express what is problematic about this: identity politics may only represent the interests of the grouping rather than remedying injustice. This is not to deny that these interests are very important and that political activity on the basis of these interests has been what has drawn attention, for example, to the issue of racism. Identity is also important for the recognition of the group.

However, it is also the case that it is an injustice rather than merely in the interests of black people that black people in the US, for example, are poorer than white people. A specific illustration of the problem of interests is that there is sometimes 'interest convergence' between a powerful and a disadvantaged group e.g. the case of de-segregation: it was initially in the interest of some whites to oppose segregation for economic reasons (it would favour development) rather than because segregation is racist and wrong. But this wholly ignores the problem of the injustice of disadvantage. Framing politics in the form of identities fractures the civil polity and fails to create opportunities for ending marginalization. Black inequality is an issue for all, rather than merely being one for black people. It requires a perspective of shared humanity and of justice to see that black inequality is unjust. Although it took a specific group to point this out, the injustice must be an issue for all.

A third difficulty is that problematic versions of the political position arise when a defence of the 'identity' of any one of these groupings becomes either a failure to recognise multiple forms of oppression, on the one hand, or, more controversially, circumstances when individuals or groups within such identified collectivities become themselves oppressors. Communities, in general, are important when they allow for the flourishing of all. Where they work against this, then they cease to be valuable. The identity of being Jewish, or Christian, for example, while it is

important in representing the interests of Jews or Christians, may gloss over inequalities and injustices within the collectivity.

Moreover, the focus on identity omits reference to areas of existence that are outside the control of the subject. Elizabeth Grosz, referred to earlier, seeks to problematize the focus in much contemporary feminist philosophy, on identity. She suggests that the concern, in much feminist theory, with the subject's feelings, identity, affects, agencies and energies and related issues, leaves out the 'rest of existence' – what is outside the subject or outside the control of the subject.

Inter-sectionality

There has been a popular theoretical response to the perceived limitations of 'identity politics' which has become known as 'inter-sectionality'. This term was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, 1241-1299), who is an African American critical legal theorist. According to inter-sectionality theory, people are constructed, as Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval Davis write (2014, 35): 'along multiple (and both shifting and contingent) axes of difference, such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, stage in the life cycle, sexuality, ability and so on'. The intersections are not simply added together but rather they constitute each other, so it is impossible for any individual, according to the theory, to be identified by means of any sub-set of the categories.

I would like simply to pose some questions about this theoretical approach. First of all, how do we know where to draw the line? How many 'inter-sectional characteristics' are allowed or perhaps more importantly, how many should be taken into consideration at any one time? How do we determine which characteristics are politically significant? Most of the contributors to the debate refer to the 'intersections' of class, race and sex. But are these the only kinds of division that are politically significant? Could one include, for example, religion or culture? How would the

inclusion of these additional categories affect the way in which the 'social divisions' are conceived and would it affect how they interact?

Is it possible to explain, for example, sexism within a particular religion in terms of the 'intersection' of divisions? Is it not clearer to explain such a practice simply as unjust? Does it not require a view that there is a universal humanity and that all should be treated fairly and well, to see this?

Inter-sectionality theorists critiqued early feminist 'dual systems' or 'triple systems' theories on a couple of grounds: sometimes sex and race operate together to produce a form of oppression that is distinct from either race or sex oppression separately. It is also said that gender relations are formed inside class relations and this is thought further to undermine the notion of them being separate systems.

But it doesn't follow just because gendering takes place inside class relations that gender is not a separable theoretical 'system' from class. It also doesn't follow, as I have argued earlier, just because each one of us is comprised of many intersecting and variable characteristics, that we cannot also be characterised in the terms that all of us share. But more importantly, the same kind of point can be made about this theory as was put earlier about identity theory. While the notion of intersecting systems of gender and race for example plays a useful methodological role in enabling certain kinds of research, policy and activism, if we are concerned, by contrast, to emphasise the injustices committed against certain groups or individuals through the intersection of, for example, oppression based on sex and race, we require a universalising outlook to make sense of this as an injustice. Discrimination against a person on grounds of the 'inter-section' of race and sex involves a dual injustice. It is a universalising perspective that allows us to make sense of this. Inter-sectionality, then, presupposes a universalising perspective.

'Oppressors' within marginal groupings

Moreover, neither identity politics nor inter-sectionality without universalism can address the equally important question of those who are 'oppressed' in certain circumstances becoming 'oppressors' in others. So, while it is the case that racism in general or 'racism' against Muslims or other religious groupings, or discrimination against Christians (expressed in many parts of the Middle East and elsewhere today) are each unjust and oppressive practices, it is also true that fundamentalist forms of religion are themselves oppressive and unjust and ought to be condemned.

A seriously problematic interpretation of communitarianism or identity politics, therefore, is when 'community' values, like, for example, reactionary and extreme views about gay people or about women, are allowed to reign unchecked within certain 'communities' or are allowed to represent the 'identity' of the community. Such cases obviate the reason for community or multi-cultural values being significant in the first place. Communitarianism or multi-culturalism, to reiterate, are significant when they work to promote the flourishing of all. When they cease to do this, they cease to have this value. As Pragna Patel (2013) has pointed out, (self-appointed) community leaders often become the spokespeople and therefore the 'authentic voice' of certain communities and this is harmful to less powerful groups within those communities. Patel speaks of the way in which the religious right in certain 'ethnic minority' communities in the UK has been granted representative status. One extreme example of the effect of this is the furore surrounding the play *Behzti*, a play about sexual and 'honour' based violence in a Sikh temple. The play exposed corruption and abuse of power within the Sikh community. The play was pulled by the Birmingham Repertory company in the face of protests from within the Sikh community. These community members attacked the play citing the ground of religious hatred, forcing the author, herself a Sikh, to go into hiding.

As Patel also points out, the religious right is on the rise at the same time as racism towards minorities and especially Muslims is on the increase. This illustrates, to reiterate again, the need for a universalist perspective: It is only a belief that both anti-Muslim racism and anti-sexism within so-called 'Muslim' communities are unjust, that allows and indeed requires all of us to condemn both. It is also these beliefs that form the basis for political action that can unite people across communities and identities.

A case that fascinated me was the view of a Muslim woman from the Sudan who expressed her shock at the right-wing versions of Islam held within some Muslim communities in the UK.[19] Perhaps right-wing versions of religion have been allowed to flourish at least partly because of practices on the part of many in the UK of inappropriate applications of multi-culturalist and 'community' forms of pluralism. In their desire not to fall foul of the supposed Enlightenment conceit, well-meaning non-universalist liberals may have inadvertently allowed pernicious and right-wing values to take root in some of the multi-cultural communities they argued should be tolerated.

It is important to note, of course, that 'right-wing' values within communities specifically in the UK have also been tolerated in cases like working men's clubs (some of which still exclude women) or, at the other extreme 'gentlemen's clubs'.

In this context, it is again a universalising perspective that recognises our collective shared humanity and the needs and rights that stem from this, that is the best theoretical approach to adopt. A universalising perspective at least recognises a number of key and core rights – the right to be free from religion as equal to the right to practise religion, the right to be treated equally as well as rights to be free from racism, sexism, anti-Muslim racism and homophobia. It is on the basis of our shared humanity that it is possible to theorise a perspective that recognises all of these as rights. Racism denies the humanity of those affected by it. Anti-Muslim

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racism may be different but, in its extreme variants, it tends to damn all Muslims as right-wing fundamentalists. Failure to recognise the rights of cartoonists to lampoon religious characters, the rights of all to be free from religious persecution, the rights of all to be free from sexism is a failure to recognise the rights of all to flourish as individuals and as groups.

It is a universalising perspective about humanity that allows us to recognise that crimes against humanity have been committed by powers, like, for example, Saudi Arabia as well as by states like the USA. One lesser known such crime is the collusion of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Pakistani army against secular nationalists and religious minorities in 1971 (Sahgal 2014). Indeed, it may be the denial of the possibility of a universalising perspective that leads some in the west to castigate as racist white people who set out to critique such practices. As noted earlier, leftist 'multiculturalism' has encouraged the naming of 'non-westerns' as victims rather than fully fledged members of universal humanity, and a corresponding reluctance to critique right-wing religious ideologies. As Chetan Bhatt has put it (2006, 98-115): 'Also of importance is the inert, innocent nature of the agency and subjectivity that left culturalism imparts to non-western subalterns and western diasporics, a kind of heroic, narcissistic, victimology that cannot name itself as such. In much multicultural theory, the diasporic subaltern is primarily a culturally-described, infra-ethical victim rather than a subject *fully* capable of ethical existence and judgment.'

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that it is important to defend some notion of universalism – universalism about humanity, on the one hand, and about women as well, in certain circumstances. I have given a number of reasons for these positions, and I have critiqued some proposed alternative theoretical perspectives. I have suggested that there are several ways of

defending universalism, one of which is the view that there are universal rights that apply to all, wherever and whomever they are. Sometimes, indeed, it will be important to use the notion of universal humanity to critique inappropriate applications of the notion of universal woman-hood.

One reason, pertaining to this journal, why it is important to retain the notion of a right applying to all of humanity, despite its limitations, is the opportunity it offers to counter, for example, 'sharia' law, which 'aims to replace the sovereignty of the people with the sovereignty of God, as revealed through the Sharia' (see Ruthven 1997). According to a number of Iranians, gender apartheid has been the fundamental principle of their regime, based on a version of Sharia law.

The notion of human equality before the law is a useful device with which to challenge a view that sets out to enshrine into the constitution the view that men and women are 'different types of human' (Motahhari 1990). There are many other positions analogous to this Iranian example, but the perspective of human rights that apply to all is useful to challenge any such view.

I would like to conclude the piece by suggesting why I personally believe that, in the end, it is the shared natural nature of all of us that constitutes our universal humanity. Human beings are natural beings. This need not be a reductive notion. Humans are not merely animals. But our animal nature is a deeply significant aspect of our being. We all share with the rest of the natural world a dynamic, evolving biological nature. This nature both encompasses all of humanity and also stresses the need on the part of humanity for a shared concern for the non-human nature from which we all derive. Humans differ from other animals, however, in one respect which is universal to all of us, which is that we are able to develop norms of justice and equality. Such norms ought to encourage us to respect the humanity and the flourishing of all members of the human species. Identity theorists, 'performativity' theorists and those who

believe in inter-sectionality all require universalising notions of justice and these notions are themselves, in my view, grounded in our common humanity.

Particularists, relativists and pluralists have criticised what has passed for universalism. Properly conceptualised, universalisms are neither Eurocentric nor partial. A universal view of nature need not offer a reductive and mechanistic view of human nature. Rather it could view all human beings as biological and natural beings but who are different from all other animals in having the ability both to commit horrendous crimes but also to recognise the rights of all to flourish. Although biology is shaped by race, class, sex etc. this does not make it any the less biological. Biological characteristics are themselves 'performatively' shaped by environment and culture.[20] They are not exclusively 'innate'. The same point applies in relation to any one of the categories. Each is shaped by all the others and yet it retains its distinctiveness. Reducing any one characteristic to any one of the others – the biological to the social or vice versa - involves a form of reductionism. Social reductionism is as much a form of reductionism as biological reductionism. We humans share some qualities with elements of the natural world from which we, as humans, have emerged but we are also uniquely able to recognise the harm that humans have done to this natural world.

When postmodernists and others critique what has passed as universalism they have derided it as an '"Enlightenment" conceit'. Unfortunately the perceived problems with some aspects of the 'Enlightenment' model of the self have led to misguided and unfortunate challenges to the very notion of universalism about humanity.

Our universal humanity rests partly on biological realities but these need not, as has been illustrated here, be read in a reductive manner. Nor are they, as some have suggested they are, trivial qualities. Indeed, to the contrary, our shared basic biological needs are the bedrock set of needs that must be satisfied, as I have argued before, if humans are to be able to

do anything at all. The natural – biological and environmental – realities affecting all of us will, indeed, ultimately shape whether or not the human race as a whole continues to reproduce itself.

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Notes

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[1] In various works of mine including my recent book *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth* (2015).

[2] It should be noted that Gilroy himself did not opt for the 'postmodern' alternative to the Enlightenment ideal. His concept of the 'black Atlantic' was deliberately intended to cross cultures and nations and suggested a common 'diasporic' identity. Neil Lazarus (1995, 323-339), however, has challenged the extent to which Gilroy's 'universalising' imperative about the diasporic identity is actually universalizing.

[3] See also David Held's, *Introduction to Critical Theory* (1980), Part Three, for a summary of critiques of these theories.

[4] These kinds of points have been made by Fanon in his major monograph, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967).

[5] Mahmood, in her turn, argues that the language of rights, freedom and equality has contributed to undermining religious and cultural traditions that themselves enable certain groups of people to flourish.

[6] One famous example is the French Revolution which proclaimed to support the rights of 'man' but which explicitly excluded women from the scope of the public sphere (see Pateman 1989 and Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999).

[7] A further common criticism of the human rights version of universalism is that it cannot decide between, for example, the competing rights of those who were and continue to be 'pro' choice versus those who campaigned against abortion. It has been argued that some in the 'global south' were being forced into reproduction controls. This was pointed out, for example, by Gayatri Spivak (1995, 3-5).

[8] In his magnum opus *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls hypothesized that principles of justice should be developed by people behind a 'veil of ignorance' about any of the qualities that differentiate them from others.

[9] A significant voice in the contemporary UK context is that of Tariq Modood, who offers a variant on some of the other theoretical perspectives, in his work *Multiculturalism* (2007).

[10] See Calder, op. cit, for an argument of this form. It ought to be pointed out that, although I am using the words 'universalist' and 'particularist', both words signify an idealised and general description of groups of people. Both are normative to the extent that they are attempting to specify significant commonalities between groups of people.

[11] See, for one example, the extensive work of Gill Hague and others, partly through The Centre for Gender and Violence Research at Bristol University.

[12] See also the work of Simon Thompson, 2006.

[13] Susan Bordo, quoting 'a historian' (1990, 133-56)

[14] It is also important to recognise the ground-breaking work of Judith Butler, who suggests that gender is a performative construction (Butler 1990).

[15] For some examples of this kind of argument, see Assiter (1999) and Gunarsson (2014).

[16] It doesn't follow that this distinction is not also social and psychological.

[17] If it is biological, then, a third category should be added – that of 'trans' people.

[18] Richard Wright, in conversation with a journalist in 1946, in Wright, Kinnamon & Fabre (1993, 99).

[19] This claim was made at a conference in London, October 2014, organized by Maryam Namazie and others, on Secularism and Anti-Fundamentalism.

[20] The American Association of Physical Anthropologists make the following claim about this issue: 'Biological differences between human beings reflect both hereditary factors and the influence of natural and social environments. In most cases, these differences are due to the interaction of both. The degree to which environment or heredity affects any particular trait varies greatly.' (1996. 101, 569-570)

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Fundamental Truths

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This poem was written in late 1989 for a fundraising event for the then newly set up group Women Against Fundamentalism. It refers to the WAF demonstration in support of Salman Rushdie's right to write, where the WAF women were abused both by the Asian men marching against Rushdie and the National Front counter-demonstration. WAF had to rely on police protection against both threats.

I heard the word fundamentalism first
When a Jehovah's witness bit the dust
Obscurantist rubbish, my auntie cussed
Oh my, I was impressed.

Then it surfaced here and there,
When abortion rights were in the air,
When that Greek Christ[1] his sins had bared,
I was born again.

Sodom and Gomorrah are still alive,
Ranted the Christians setting cinemas alight,
'Man' had strayed from the narrow and tight
I said, Hey, what fun!

Then this guy Rushdie wrote this book,
For this, I hear, a cool million he took
Anyway he has a right to cock a snook
Good luck to him.

Khomeini rose from the dead, his coffin tumbled
When Mohammed asked why Rushdie's words still rumbled
Inspiring Bradford Muslims to see who had bungled
Why Rushdie nor his book were dead.

The British liberals and the NF rushed to denounce their savage might
The British state upheld freedom of speech and civil rights
having just buried the Gibraltar killings[2] and Peter Wright[3]
Such unions are made in heaven.

The boil of racism erupting in pus
Sadly has silenced many of us
We make a small anti-fundamentalist thrust
and get lumped with the racist lot.

What can we do about those young Asian lads
Using anti-Rushdie marches to fight police squads
We picket a march, marooned, fighting both – Glad,
Yet our loyalties feel confused.

The threat of violence sets up Rushdie's safe houses
Eclipsing the daily violence that women's self-esteem arouses
The stranglehold of religion douses
Our very existence.

We must stand up and fight
Keeping both enemies in sight
Giving voice to women's rights
We have no other choice

Let us not forget what fundamentalism has done
When Hindus kill Muslims and think they have won
When Palestinian stones are scattered with Israeli guns
And the British state squashes the IRA

Ogden Nash made this comment
What is cold to the finger is chilling to the fundament.

Rahila Gupta is a freelance journalist and writer. Her work has appeared in *The Guardian* and *New Humanist* among other papers and magazines. Her books include *Enslaved: The New British Slavery*; *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters*; *Provoked*; and *'Don't Wake Me: The Ballad of Nihal Armstrong (Playdead Press, 2013).* She is co-authoring a book with Beatrix Campbell with the title *Why Doesn't Patriarchy Die?*

[1] A cinema in Paris was burnt down by Christian fundamentalists in 1988 for showing the controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ* based on a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis and directed by Martin Scorsese
[2] Three unarmed members of the Provisional IRA were killed by the SAS (Special Air Service) in Gibraltar in 1988 what was widely seen as extra-judicial killings
[3] Margaret Thatcher unsuccessfully attempted to ban the publication of *Spycatcher*, a book by former MI5 operative Peter Wright, on the grounds that it was a breach of the Official Secrets Act

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The Poverty of Apologism: The British Left, Feminism and the Islamic Right

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There was once a time when if you went to a Marxist conference and heard Marx's oft-quoted words about religion being 'the sigh of an oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and... the opium of the people', it was because the speaker was attacking religious belief. The words were seen as a byword for a kind of Marxist atheism. In a way, this was itself an over simplification of what Marx was saying, which was not an argument for atheism as such. His point was rather that religious belief could not simply be dismissed as a 'delusion'; we needed to understand that the very suffering and pain in the lives of oppressed workers encouraged a belief in a better world, which was articulated through the language and structures of religion. But Marx was also saying that the way religion dulled the pain of people's lives in its opiate-like manner also meant that it wasn't addressing the real problems – which he saw as those material conditions that caused that suffering and pain.

In my most recent experience of attending a Marxist conference – the 'Historical Materialism' conference in London in November 2015 - I was struck by the way that whenever I heard those words being quoted, as they were numerous times, it was as a defence of religious belief. There

are several dimensions to how this strange turnaround has taken place. If we look at contemporary political theory within universities there has been a vast swath of material, coming out of Post-colonialism in particular, which has contributed to this change. Edward Said's 'Orientalism' was originally published in 1978 but his call for the reframing of the knowledges by which the 'West' understood the 'Orient' as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (1990:3) have hugely influenced the shape of the debate. The Postcolonial theory inspired by this sees its mission as one of critically destabilising the categories of 'Western thought' - modernity, rationality, individualism - which it characterises as tools for the subjugation of the colonial subject. These ideas have had a major impact within the academy, and while it there is not space here to evaluate this in detail here[1], there is no question that has significantly impacted the perception of secularism. Once seen as a progressive default position, the doctrine of secularism has come to be understood as part and parcel of the Imperial Ideological State Apparatus, which 'the people' are fighting through the assertion of their subaltern religious subjectivities. While the presentation of secularism as a colonial imposition is not uniform within postcolonial theory, there is no doubt that these shifts have created a context in the humanities and social sciences where a defence of a secular politics can very easily lead one to be presented as promoting 'Western colonial thinking'.

The diminishing commitment to a secularism is equally reflected in the changing shape of left wing political activism in the UK. The key moment

here was the mobilisation against the Iraq War in 2003, which saw the Stop the War Coalition (STWC) enter into an alliance with the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). The latter group was dominated by a conservative form of Sunni Islam and there is evidence that sections of the leadership had significant links with the Muslim Brotherhood (House of Commons, 2015). In 2003 this coalition organised a highly successful demonstration in London involving two million people and in attempting to build on this popular opposition to the invasion of Iraq, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) - the biggest far left group in the UK - formed the Respect Party in 2004. This was led by the ex-Labour MP George Galloway who broke with the Labour Party leadership over the Iraq war. While SWP members were the main force within Respect, the party's development meant that it relied on Muslim votes and activism to deliver electoral results. In the 2004 European elections their publicity described George Galloway as a 'Fighter for Muslims…teetotal, [with] strong religious principles about fighting injustice'; indeed Respect became an organisation which as Hannah Sell noted was primarily appealing to Muslims 'on the basis of their religion' (Sell, 2004). Worse than this the supposedly leftist Respect Party had ended up in an alliance with the most right wing and puritanically intolerant forms of Islam that in East London were actually attacking more progressive anti-fundamentalist versions of Islam (Bhatt, 2006, 98-99).

While Respect has now largely collapsed as a political force, the confusion on which this politics is based, not to mention its failure to

interrogate questions of secularism, women's and LGBT rights, has unfortunately not. While there is no denying the intensity of racism being targeted at Muslim communities at the moment - expressed through far right political parties and movements like the Front National in France, Pergida in Germany and the English Defence League (EDL) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK - it is not in any way clear why this this requires sections of the Left continue to politically ally themselves with and defend the Islamic religious right. It was exactly this politics I encountered at the Historical Materialism conference on 6-7 November 2015 at SOAS in London. This is a conference I have attended regularly and most of the conference this year was very good, as it generally is. However the session entitled 'Islamaphobia, Secularism and Feminism' left me deeply troubled about the dominance of this form of apologetics for the Islamic right and the way a younger generation of anti-racist activists, justifiably concerned about anti-Muslim racism, have come to support this, while being entirely unaware of the way this politics involves the erasure not just of secularism, but of a whole history of feminist struggles against the religious control of women's lives and bodies.

The speakers in this session were Ian Birchall, former leading SWP member, a group presentation from David Miller, Nazarin Massoumi and Tom Mills, who have researched and written together on issues of Islamaphobia, and Nancy Lindisfarne, an anthropologist based at SOAS. Birchall's paper offered a critique of the French Left's support for the

secularist concept of 'Laicite' (see Birchall, 2015) suggesting, somewhat strangely in my view, that there was nothing progressive about this. However this work is beyond the scope of my discussion here, which is primarily concerned with the material in the presentation entitled 'Contesting racialisation: Islamaphobic social movements and the battle of ideas' from Miller, Mills and Massoumi. This material represented a reiteration of an earlier piece the three published with Hilary Aked on the Open Democracy website entitled 'The Five Pillars of Islamaphobia' (Miller et.al July 2015). Their paper began by challenging writers such as Kenan Malik, Fred Halliday and Nira Yuval Davis for their rejection of the term 'Islamaphobia' on the basis that this conflates legitimate criticism of religious institutions and ideology with racist attacks against Muslims. According to Miller, Massoumi and Mills this criticism this criticism is itself 'Islamaphobic' and simply demonstrates the way 'secularist liberals' are colluding with anti-Islamic bigotry. They went on to characterise what they call the five pillars of Islamaphobia as:

1. The state and government counter terror apparatus

2. Far Right movements, particularly focussing on the 'Counter Jihad' movement

3. The Neoconservative right, with a particular focus on the Henry Jackson Society

4. The Zionist movement and Israeli state

5. The pro war left and new secularists.

One might question the way this last grouping was presented as a single entity, but this was only one of many conflations here. In the group's discussion of the so-called 'new secularists', Southall Black Sisters (SBS) and British Muslims for a Secular Democracy (BMSD) were singled out for their 'Islamaphobia'. When I raised the question of how organisations like a committed anti-racist group like SBS could be reasonably described as 'Islamaphobic', Nazarin Massoumi replied that SBS was 'once progressive' but now 'supports the racist practices of the state' through its involvement in counter radicalisation strategies, by which I would assume she is referring to the UK Government's counter-radicalisation strategy, known as PREVENT. [2], though the group failed to offer any evidence of what this involved and how it was substantively 'Islamaphobic'.   Indeed it is revealing of the nature of this group's work that they see it as appropriate to place political groups like SBS and BMSD alongside MI5 and MOSSAD. This was a session with a young audience and one of the things I found frustrating was the way this whole focus on 'Islamaphobia' was so readily accepted by an audience almost entirely unaware of the work done by groups like Southall Black Sisters and Women Against Fundamentalism (see Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis [2014] for an account of the latter).

The final speaker was Nancy Lindisfarne whose presentation was entitled 'Islamaphobia and Cultural Racism'. This was a version of a paper which she has published with Jonathon Neale on her site at Academia.edu (Lindisfarne and Neale, 2015). They argue that Islamic movements in the Middle East were 'resistance movements' to Western Oil Empires. While

Lindisfarne does state that these movements are considerably less preferable than socialist or Marxist movements, she also depicts them as resistance movements that need to be supported by the Left nonetheless. When questioned about this, Lindisfarne went as far as to express critical admiration for ISIS' resistance stating 'you might not like everything they are fighting for, but my god they are fighting'; a remark that drew gasps of disbelief and disgust from many in the room. Lindisfarne was supported in this by members of the group RS21 (Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century - a recent split from the SWP) which denounced the 'purism' of those leftists who failed to see that Islamist movements were forms of anti-Western resistance that had to be supported as part of an ant-imperialist politics in the UK. How Islamist groups can be described as 'anti-imperialist' is something of a mystery to me. What might these people make of the role played by Saudi Arabia in promoting the violently puritanical Wahhabi Islam, which has provided the soil in which Islamist terror has flourished, and yet is a state which is closely allied to Britain and the US?

While an absurdity to the way Lindisfarne and her supporters would be so utterly unwelcome in the company of the people they are so ardently defending, I would argue that the work of Miller, Massoumi and Mills reflects a more cogent form of Left apologetics for the Islamic Right. David Miller, a Sociology Professor at the University of Bath, has researched corporate propaganda and lobbying and has written two books on this topic with William Dinan (Miller and Dinan, 2007 & 2008). He was involved

in the establishment of the public interest investigations website 'Spinwatch' in 2005, which describes itself as investigating 'key social, political, environmental and health issues in the UK and Europe' (http://www.spinwatch.org). Indeed there is much valuable research on this site and what is most concerning here is seeing an individual who has done valuable research into the areas of corporate lobbying and propaganda from a social justice perspective become involved in such torturous apologetics for the Islamic right. In his response to my questions at Historical Materialism, Miller offered an explicit defence of CAGE (formerly Caged Prisoners), an organisation set up by Moazzem Begg in 2003 as a support group for prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and Miller et al's argument in the piece entitled 'Apologists for terror or defenders of human rights? The Cage controversy in context', also published on the Open Democracy site (Miller et. al, June 2015) represents the fullest statement of their views.

This article characterises those questioning the politics of CAGE as representing another aspect of 'the more general assault on politically active Muslims and an attempt to push Muslim organisations to the margins of public life'. Yet it is notable throughout this article that the only politically active Muslims who are defended from this 'assault' are all extensively involved with right wing Islamist groups. Are there no other forums in which Muslims are politically active? These are certainly not deemed worthy of discussion by these writers. In examining the case against CAGE, Miller et al are drawn into the most torturous defence of

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Asim Qureshi, Research Director of Cage, who has continued to offer a quasi-defence of jihadist Mohammed Emwazi, known in the British tabloids as 'Jihadi John' who joined ISIS and was involved in a series of sadistic murders, and who was murdered in a drone attack in Syria in October 2015. Qureshi has gone on record describing Emwazi as 'extremely kind and gentle', though Miller et. al. rush to his defence insisting that he really meant Emwazi before he was 'radicalised'; indeed they appear happy to accept Quereshi's somewhat generous characterisation of Emwazi as essentially a victim of M15 and the security services. The article then moves to a discussion of Qureshi's support of the Muslim scholar Sheikh Haitham al-Haddad, who has written in defence of female genital mutilation, wife-beating, anti-Semitism and stoning for the 'crimes of adultery and homosexuality', and whom Querishi describes as 'one scholar in the UK that I think has an important contribution to make'. With studied neutrality, Miller et. al. comment that "there is no doubt that Haddad expresses a conservative strand of Islam, in particular on the appropriateness of punishment fitting the crime (Hudud) and on questions of sexuality". But one is left wondering as to exactly which of these human rights abuses Qureishi sees as representing that 'important contribution'.

In spite of this rigorous fairness toward a range of reactionary misogynist and homophobic Islamists, the real villains of the piece emerge in Miller et al's discussion of Southall Black Sisters and Gita Sahgal. CAGE's links with Amnesty International were notably criticised by Gita Sahgal. She was then head of the Gender Unit at Amnesty International and she

criticised CAGE for promoting jihadi politics above the politics of human rights (http://freethinker.co.uk/2015/03/16/gita-sahgal-was-right/). Despite rejecting Sahgal's concerns at the time, these were subsequently proven, and Amnesty have now severed all links. For Miller et al this makes Gita Sahgal a 'cause célèbre for neoconservatives, the pro-war left and similar Islamaphobic groupings' rather than an advocate of human rights and feminism over Islamist reaction. Similarly Southall Black Sisters are characterised as part of a 'strange political convergence between radical feminist anti-racists and various Islamaphobic movements.' This statement by Miller et al builds on the distortions necessary to justify their argument throughout, demonising feminism at the same time. There is indeed nothing 'strange' about feminist resistance to religious repression, which one could well argue has been a major focus of feminist struggle from Mary Wollstonecraft's work in 1792 to the present day. There is also nothing strange or new about the pathologisation of this resistance by religious ideologists and their apologists, and indeed Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis' (2014) book on the legacy of the group Women Against Fundamentalism details these struggles extensively.

I would conclude with two points. The first is that David Miller's analysis, growing out of a concern with propaganda and representation, has become a form of politics in which the 'real' ceases to exist. The fact that there are young men and women who find something attractive in the oppositional identity offered by Islamist extremism and ISIS is a reality. This cannot be conjured away by shouting 'Islamaphobia' at organisations

like British Muslims for a Secular Democracy and Southall Black Sisters which are genuinely trying to develop strategies to address this reality. But the work of Miller, Mills, Massoumi and Aked has no actual answer to this real problem. In their world, reality only exists as a binary of representation; you are either for or against 'Islamaphobia'. The incredibly dangerous implication of this was revealed at the Historical Materialism session when Miller stated that "Islamist is just another term for Muslim"; and in the way he here equates Muslims in general with Islamists, places him on exactly the same terrain as Donald Trump, the Sun newspaper and far right English Defence League, who all share the view of Muslim communities are undifferentiatedly in thrall to Islamist extremism and violence. While they see this as an expression of Muslim barbarism, Miller et al's view is simply a mirror image of this.

While there is justified concern with the way entire Muslim communities are characterised through the lens of 'security' and 'radicalisation', Miller et al are simply conjuring away the actual politics of the people they are defending. As writers like Karima Bennoune (2012) have pointed out using extensive documentary evidence, Islamic fundamentalism is itself based on the abuse of human rights. She demonstrates that the extent of the resistance to this, which is often led by women, and the way it is made up of people who are Muslims, atheists, secularists, and socialists. Gita Sahgal and SBS have been attacked because they reject this binary of 'Islam' vs 'The West' which is reproduced through both right wing and left wing narratives. SBS has consistently and

indeed fearlessly stood up for a leftist, anti-racist, feminist secular politics. One might have thought that this would be the kind of politics one would expect to hear championed at a conference like Historical Materialism. Instead people were treated to a form of apology for organisations and an ideology that is directly involved in attacks and murders against the left, feminists, trade unionists and secularists which are taking place all over the world. There are some really important questions here that the British left needs to ask itself in deciding which side it is on.

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Notes

[1] Key texts in the development of Postcolonialism are the numerous works of Gayatri Spivak, and the Subaltern Studies group. Chaturvedi, V. (ed) (2012) *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* offers a useful selection of key debates. For a more critical approach to Postcolonialism see Chibber, V (2013) *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital.*

[2] PREVENT is described by the UK Government as 'about safeguarding people and communities from the threat of terrorism...It aims to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' (http://www.ltai.info/what-is-prevent/). The PREVENT strategy has been controversial on the UK amongst the Left, with many groups characterising it as 'criminalising' or encouraging hostility to Muslims (see for e.g. Quarashi, F 'Prevent Gives People Permission to Hate Muslims' Guardian 4/4/16). However others have made the point that 'much of the opposition to Prevent stems not from "ordinary" parents and teachers, but is being organised and co-ordinated by ultra-reactionary Islamists, specifically Cage, Mend and their front organisation, Prevent Watch.' (https://shirazsocialist.wordpress.com/2016/03/03/what-attitude-should-socialists-take-to-prevent/)

'Seasons of Mud 7' by Yousif Naser © Yousif Naser, all rights reserved

Red Dust Road*

Jackie Kay

Chapter 1

Nicon Hilton Hotel, Abuja

Jonathan is suddenly there in the hotel corridor leading to the swimming-pool area. He's sitting on a white plastic chair in a sad cafe. There's a small counter with a coffee machine and some depressed-looking buns. He's dressed all in white, a long white African dress, very ornately embroidered, like lace, and white trousers. He's wearing black shoes. He's wired up. My heart is racing. 'Jonathan?' I say.

'Yes,' he says, standing up and turning slowly to meet me.

I hadn't meant to meet him here. I'd been sitting in the swimming-pool area at a nice table by the bar, waiting for two hours, looking up at every elderly man coming through the opening in the wall. It's a strange thing, looking at one black man after another wondering if he is your father. It seemed this morning that everyone was. Several handsome men appeared, all of an age with Jonathan, wearing more and more elaborate outfits in all sorts of vivid colours – bright green, bright blue, burnished gold, tangerine orange. It was like sitting watching a fashion show of old black men walk the gangway to the pool bar.

Each one made some kind of entrance, it seemed, because each one could have been my father.

I wasn't sure that the staff at the hotel reception would definitely pass on my message to send him to the pool bar, so I kept going back to check. Jonathan had said he would arrive sometime in the afternoon.

Everybody told me that afternoon in Nigeria could be anything between noon and 5 p.m. I went to the reception and asked if anybody had called for me. 'No, nobody,' they said. Then I rushed to my room to check again by phoning the hotel operator. 'Yes,' she said, 'somebody called for you.'

'When?'

'About three minutes ago,' she said.

I tore along the corridor and pressed the lift button. Downstairs I saw the man in white sitting in the odd little cafe. It's the first time I've ever seen anybody sit there since I got here yesterday.

'Can we go straightaway to your hotel room?' he asks me.

'Can we go to my room?'

'Yes, I would like to go to your room now.'

We walk along the corridor to the lift and all the lights suddenly go out. Another power cut. I take his hand and lead him towards the lift in the dark. I grope about in the darkness holding my father's hand. Then the lights suddenly come back on again and we get into the lift. He doesn't talk. I know he won't talk until he gets into the room. He doesn't look at me. He looks down at his black shoes and clasps his hands. He's carrying a plastic bag. A white plastic bag. When I met my mother, she was also holding a plastic bag. Both my birth parents, on first sight, looked like some homeless people look, who carry important papers in carrier bags.

I had been told they met in 1961 in the dance hall in Aberdeen. Jonathan was a student there and my mother was a nurse. They kept in touch during my mother's pregnancy, then Jonathan returned to Nigeria and my mother went to a mother-and-baby home in Edinburgh to have me. I was adopted five months later by a couple in Glasgow – the people who are to me my real parents. They are lifelong and committed socialists. When I traced my birth mother some years ago I discovered that after her relationship with Jonathan, she had become a Mormon. The Latterday Church of Jesus Christ Saints or whatever. The Mormons, she told me, believe that adopted people cry out to be adopted while they are still in the womb. When I told my mum that my mother was a Mormon, she said, 'Oh, Jesus, that's the pits. Why not have a wee half bottle and forget all about it.'

And now we're in the room. I'm about to have a conversation with my birth father for the first time.

Jonathan is moving about from foot to foot, shifting his weight from side to side, like a man who is about to say something life-changing. He begins: 'Before we can proceed with this meeting, I would like to pray for you and to welcome you to Nigeria.' I feel alarmed. Extreme religion scares the hell out of me. It seems to me like a kind of madness. But it is obvious to me that Jonathan won't be able to talk at all if I try and skip the sermon. So I say, 'OK, then,' and he says, 'Sit, please.' And I sit.

He plucks the Bible from the plastic bag. Then he immediately starts whirling and twirling around the blue hotel room, dancing and clapping his hands above his head, then below his waist, pointing his face up at the ceiling and then down to the floor, singing, 'O God Almighty, O God

Almighty, O God Almighty, we welcome Jackie Kay to Nigeria. Thank you, God Almighty, for bringing her here safely. She has crossed the waters. She has landed on African soil for the very first time. O God Almighty!' He does some fancy footwork. He is incredibly speedy for a man of seventy-three. He's whirling like a dervish. Suddenly, he takes off his shoes and puts them on my bed and kneels on the floor and reads the first of many extracts from the Bible. He seems to half read and half recite them; he appears to know the Bible by heart. As he recites he looks at me directly, quite a charming look, slightly actorish. The sermon for him is a kind of performance; his whole body gets thrown into it.

'God has given you this talent. You are a writer. You have written books. You have been blessed. God already knows about you. Don't think for a second that God hasn't been waiting for you. Now all you must do is receive Christ and your talent will become even bigger and you will become more focused. Amen. From this moment on you are protected. God protects the talented. Amen. You can walk through fire, you won't get burnt. You can swim in dangerous waters, you won't drown. Don't even bother with your hotel safe. God is looking out for you.'

I shift uneasily in my seat. Christ Almighty, my father is barking mad. He spins and dances and sings some more, singing in the most God-awful flat voice, really off-key. The singing sounds like a mixture of African chanting and hymns. It's a shock. Despite the fact that he can't sing, his performance is captivating. I watch his bare feet dance round the room and recognize my own toes. He looks over directly into my eyes again to see if I'm persuaded. 'I see in your eyes that you are not yet able to put your full trust in God. And yet you know that that would make me happy. At every reading you do, you could take the message of our Lord. Think of the people you could convert.' (I think of the twelve people at a reading in Milton Keynes Central Library on a rainy Thursday night.)

'Think of all the people you could bring to the Lord if you get ready to receive Christ.' I look as noncommittal as possible. I start to think that I should try and get this to stop. It feels like a kind of assault. He senses me thinking this and says, 'Just one more extract from the Bible. I prayed to God you would be attentive and you are being attentive. I prayed to God you would be patient and you are being patient.'

He wants me to be cleansed, cleansed of his past sin. 'If animal blood can cleanse sins under the Old Law, how much more can the blood of Jesus Christ cleanse us and prepare us for glory?' As Jonathan says this, his eyes seem to light up from behind like a scary Halloween mask.

'For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctify the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the

blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?'

I realize with a fresh horror that Jonathan is seeing me as the sin, me as impure, me the bastard, illegitimate. I am sitting here, evidence of his sinful past, but I am the sinner, the live embodiment of his sin. He's moved on now, he's a clean man, a man of glory and of God, but I'm sitting on the hotel room chair little better than a whore in his eyes, dirty and unsaved, the living proof of sin. Christianity has taken away his African culture and given him this. I'm thinking about colonialism and missionaries and not properly listening. I hear his voice in the background. God knows how long it has all been now.

I keep trying to rouse myself to ask him kindly to stop. 'And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood. And hath made us kings and priests unto God the father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.' I've zoned out now, drugged by his voice. I go in and out of consciousness like somebody who's very ill. I can't see properly. Pages of the Bible are flying around the room like hummingbirds. I am desperate for a drink. My glass of wine is sitting on the table in front of me, but it seems disrespectful to drink alcohol in the middle of my own personal service.

'Thank you for your patience,' Jonathan says again after another half-hour facing up to eternity. The tears are pouring down my face. I can't stop. It's a flood. It's self-pity. Jonathan is delighted to see them. He thinks maybe I am ready to receive Christ. He thinks I'm moved by his sermon. I am moved; my cheeks are soaking wet. I wipe them with my bare hands as Jonathan's voice goes deep and he lifts his hands into the air and claps and spins like a windmill. I think maybe it's nearly over.

Dear God; I'll believe in you if only this will stop. I look at my watch. He's been praying for a solid hour. The man can talk. We have that in common too. 'I prayed you would be docile. Thank you for paying attention.' I shuffle in my seat ready to get up. Then he starts up again, more whirling and twirling and shouting to God Almighty. More clapping and foot-tapping and spinning and reciting. A whole big wad of the Bible rolls out of his mouth like ectoplasm.

'For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world. Open your heart to him. Repent of your sins. Allow me to purify and cleanse you. I want to pour out my glory. Believe what I am telling you.' I try to think of all my

sins. True, there are a lot of them. But the fact that I was born out of wedlock? That is not my sin.

Jonathan still wants me to receive Christ. 'You won't give me that assurance? Why won't you give me that assurance?' I don't reply at first because I'm not sure I'm supposed to answer. Then there is a tiny moment's silence where I say: 'I would like you to respect my beliefs as I respect yours. I'm not comfortable with being born again.' I don't want to hurt his feelings and if I told him that I was an out-and-out brutal atheist he'd have to sit down. Even if I said I was an agnostic, he'd feel dizzy. He tells me of meeting a man on the way to the Nicon Hotel in Abuja who was a non-believer and how much of a blow to him this man was, how he'd had to get away fast before the man pulled his spirits down.

Jonathan needs believers; he needs believers like some people need cocaine. He needs the fresh hit, the new blood of a beginner believer. I start to see him as a kind of holy vampire, dressed in white, ready to take me in, to help me receive Christ. There's not even a wee wafer or anything in the room. 'God has intended us to meet after I became a born-again Christian. We should deliberate on the issue of new birth. Your talents are even greater than mine. You are going to be very big and God is going to help you. All you have to do is receive Christ and every- thing will blossom from there. Your whole career. You won't believe the big changes that are going to be happening to you.' He's desperate. He's trying to bribe me with my own career! The writer in me perks up for a couple of sick, ambitious seconds. Nope – not even for my writing could I receive Christ. My head is pounding, a tight headache as if somebody has been banging nails into my forehead. Perhaps I'm being crucified! 'So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets; and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went into the city. Do you see it? Are you ready to take your city and our land for Jesus? Repent now of every single sin in your life. Receive healing. Follow the six steps to Salvation: Acknowledge, Repent, Confess, Forsake, Believe, Receive.' He has the whole list of extracts written down on a tiny scrap of lined paper which begins with 'Welcome Jackie Kay to Nigeria' in blue biro (chapter such and such, verse such and such). He starts up again. He's like a bad poet who doesn't know when to quit, reading one poem after another to a comatose audience. I think, Oh, fuck it, let me drink that wine. I reach out and knock the whole glass back in one gulp. It's been two hours, two hours of non- stop praying. I'm exhausted. All the blood has drained out of my face. I can feel how pale I must look. My father has drunk my blood.

I say: 'You definitely know your Bible,' and he beams with pride. There is clearly no compliment I could pay him that would be higher than that, except perhaps, 'You're a good-looking man for your age.'

And then all of a sudden it stops like the rain at the end of the rainy season. Jonathan sits down, shattered. 'I thank you again for your patience. And now the time is yours. I will eat with you. I will have a drink with you. I will stay for as long as you like. I am in no particular hurry.' I have a terrible headache; the idea of spending an indefinite period of time with my father is not now as attractive as it was on the aeroplane.

At the bar, I knock back another glass of wine and ask him if he is glad to meet me. 'Yes,' he says, 'because you are evidence of my past. Once I used to go clubbing and such, and drink wine and meet women and now I am a preacher. You are my before; this is my after. You are my sin, now I lead this life.' Sin again, how dreary it is to go on and on about sin. 'You obviously have my genes. None of my children are dullards. Not one of them. But if people were to know about you, they would lose their faith in God,' Jonathan says. Goodness, I think, I never knew I was that powerful. 'The only way I could be open about you would be if I was able to showcase you, and you agreed to be born again. Then I would take you to the church and say, "This woman is my daughter. She is my before. This is my after." But you have given me no assurance that you would receive Christ and even if you did I would still have to think about how all this would affect God. I have discussed it with God and God agrees with me that for the time being it is best to keep quiet about this. I have told nobody that I was coming here to see you today. I have not told my young wife. My wife is also high up in our church. She is head of the women, I of the men. If I was going to tell anybody I would tell her.'

So I'm a secret, a forty-year-old secret, and must remain one unless I accept the Lord. I'm surprised that it seems so difficult for him to tell his wife, given that she was not married to him at the time. 'What age is she?' I ask.

'She is your age,' he says. 'God – in his wisdom – has provided somebody for my sex drive. We are trying for a baby.' I like that: God – in his wisdom – has provided somebody for my sex drive.

'You are seventy-three!' I say.

'So? A man can do it at any age,' he shrugs. 'God would like us to have another baby.'

How lovely it must be to believe in such a God, to hide your past in God's name, not to feel a second's guilt. To be religious in this way must be great fun. When I tell my mum about it on the phone, down the incredibly clear

line from Abuja to Glasgow, how he doesn't want to tell any of his children, and how I must remain a secret, how he feels I am his past sin, she says: 'By God, did we rescue you!'

Jackie Kay is an award winning writer from Scotland, she has written of poetry, fiction and plays. She was appointed as the Scottish Poet Laureate in 2016.

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A Black Feminist's Dilemma

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Me, Myself as a Black Feminist

My politics are rooted in anti-racism and black feminism. Pragna Patel articulates and emphasises the origins and use of the political term 'black' to represent the solidarity amongst Asian and African Caribbean people and other minorities in resisting race and gender oppression in the UK **(Patel, 1997)**. Heidi Mirza points out that, as British black women 'we as racialized, gendered subjects can collectively mark our presence in a world where black women have for so long been denied the privilege to speak' **(Mirza, 1997)**. I am considered to be a member of the Indian Sikh diaspora within Britain, the country of my birth. I have never identified solely as a Sikh woman as I have never analysed my oppression entirely on my faith. Although I identify a Sikh heritage in conjunction with my ethnicity and diasporic experiences of my family, my perceptions of my experiences of prejudice and discrimination have always been as a result of any one or a combination of my race, class, age and gender. I therefore identify as a black feminist. Within this article I refer to Sikh, Black and Asian as appropriate to give meaning and context to the social locations and not as mere interchangeable labels where meaning is irrelevant or 'ethnic neutral'.

Invitation to Community Resilience Forum

This explanation of my identity is required in order to explain my positionality with respect to an invitation I received to join a Sikh Community Resilience Forum for Coventry at the end of 2014. A third of Coventry's population is categorised as Black and Minority Ethnic with 5% of residents defining Sikh as their religion (and 7.5% as Muslim and 3.5% as Hindu). This proportion is higher than the national average. I received the invitation as a member of the 'Sikh community' in the city. The aim of the forum was to engage in on-going dialogue between the City Council and the Police to ensure communication between these two statutory agencies and Sikhs for the benefit of the 'Sikh community'. The forum was initiated by the Police to communicate messages to the 'Sikh community'. Membership was by personal invitation. The objectives were to discuss how to achieve an improved way of working together so that communities can be safe and ensure sensitive issues and concerns, which may impact on cohesion in the city, would be raised and discussed. Attendees would need to be prepared for 'difficult discussions'.

Margaret Harris et al. (2003) has charted how interest in faith-based organisations grew at the beginning of the 21st century with the advent of the New Labour government and its interest in faith based organisations providing social welfare and service provision alongside voluntary organisations and charities. New Labour also facilitated the expansion of faith-based schools in the UK. In my view, government interest in seeking

the opinions and engagement with so called 'faith communities' has grown.

As a feminist activist in the city I have raised issues on race and gender and this brings me to the attention of a number of local agencies. It was this activism that led to the invitation - although they did also admit they "wanted a woman" on the forum. It is of course flattering to receive a personal invitation, where your opinions are sought but the invitation left me with a black feminist's dilemma: should I join this forum and advocate on behalf of Sikh women in the city or should I politely decline the invite and therefore not utilise the opportunity to give a 'voice' to Sikh women in the city?

Intersectionality and the Faith Agenda

Intersectionality is a term first introduced by the African American Harvard law professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1991. She looked into how African American women were excluded from the white feminist movement and similarly from the anti-racist movement that was dominated by and for the interests of African American men. She argued that race and gender inequality 'intersect' to represent the full experiences of African American women and cannot be separated out into constituent segments of inequality. Intersectionality has been used to refer to the intersections of inequalities that are reflected through

combinations of women's experiences including faith, gender, race, class and sexuality.

The need for feminism to research women's subjectivity within the context of race, class, gender and sexuality has long been advocated by black feminists **(Davis, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991; Brah 1996)**. British South Asian women's lived experiences follow numerous dimensions and reflect multiple axes of everyday racism, gender inequality within family and society and class status. Intersectionality uncovers how British South Asian women are negotiating and navigating through power relations of race, gender (familial and intimate relationship) and class (access to social and economic capital) to ensure that the aggregate of these social locations are not only understood but acted on.

My major difficulty with the invitation was the framing of dialogue entirely on faith lines. For me, discussion should rather focus on the shared experiences of discrimination and abuse as a diasporic group within the city. This would share histories and diasporic experiences incorporated within not only faith lines (Sikh, Hindu Muslim, and Christian) but also shared ethnicity, immigration, colonial history, culture or nationality (such as South Asian, African Caribbean, African or Polish). For me, issues of community cohesion are best raised and resolved within the shared experiences of being a minority 'other' and not solely as the faith 'other' as it's the former that shape our lives and the discrimination we receive as a collective.

Heidi Mirza writes 'A very basic reality is that the forces of structural racism and sexism are always shifting, creating new forms of 'othering'' **(Mirza, 2014)**. For example recent research on the impact of the spending cuts on Black and Minority Ethnic women revealed one participant's view about further education for her children. She stated 'My husband has lost his job and we don't have much money and so we are only thinking about now sending our son to university and not our daughter' **(Sandhu, Stephenson and Harrison 2013, 42)**. If this sentiment bears fruit then issues of gender inequality should not be regarded as a subservient issue to other forms of inequality including those of race and religion nor by faith groups. The research uncovered how, as Black and Minority Ethnic women, we are being disproportionately affected by the spending cuts, from non-dependent deductions[1], to the Benefit Cap[2] and loss of jobs in the public sector including the NHS. It is the intersection of race, gender and class that determine the reality of our lives as women and as Black and minority ethnic.

Multiple identities take form for South Asian women at birth. To explain this, I use the analogy of 'default,' a computing term. In computer science a 'default' is a setting that is automatically assigned to a computer program such as the size of font or number of characters allowed in a first name **(Christensson 2014)**. It can also be called a preset as it is automatically assigned before a user or a programmer has changed it. Using this analogy of default, at birth, South Asian women in the UK inherit multiple axes of inequality and so are defined by the intersectional default

of gender and race. We inherit this multiple intersection 'automatically' and as we go through life the default changes to accumulate other axes such as age and disability. Nira Yuval-Davis highlights 'People who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or social category can actually be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social locations (e.g., class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle)' **(Yuval-Davis 2006, 281)**.

Black feminists have charted black women activists' resistance to gender based violence and other injustices in the UK **(Patel 2003; Wilson, 2010)**. Furthermore, solidarity came from Asian and African Caribbean women's struggles in their joint fight against racism and their exclusion within the white women's movement **(Mirza 2014)**. However, in recent times, as Patel points out, the defining marker for minority communities has become faith and this is a problem because it 'confines identity as well as communal institutions, within narrow, static categories that neither reflect nor serve their constituent members, especially vulnerable sub-groups such as women and sexual minorities' **(Patel 2013, 41)**. Feminists have charted the reduction in secular spaces as faith based leaders combined with the state's faith based approach has led to a reduction in women's spaces and the erosion of women's rights **(Patel and Siddiqui, 2010)**. Encouragement from the government and local councils means that, where alliances were once built between Asian, African and Caribbean people across the spectrum of shared experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia, the result now is more fragmentation, resulting

in 'a host of ethnic identities all competing with one another for recognition and government funding for their own pet projects – not on the grounds of what they do but on who they claim to represent' **(Chakrabortty, 2014)**.

However, Yuval-Davis points out feminist activists have no more of a mandate to speak on behalf of the women they are representing than anyone else. She points out that as activists and advocates feminists are often not from the same social position as the women they are representing and counsels 'Feminists and other community activists cannot (and should not) see themselves as representative of their constituencies' **(Yuval-Davis 2006, 282)**. She advises activists to advocate on behalf of others with reflexivity and an awareness of people's multiple social positionings.

I come from a similar background, social class and heritage to Sikh women in the city. Parents and other members of my family arrived from India as immigrants in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. I possess a privilege borne out of a university education and social capital resulting from professional networks. My personal and professional experiences with faith leaders do not lend themselves to a belief that women's interests are at the heart of their concerns. I have never felt an equal in the gurdwaras as I watch men perform the major ceremonies, have prominence over women and preach sermons. Their privilege shines above everything else. I do not believe that men with such privileges and experiences will advocate for women. As Black feminists, we argue that white feminists do

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not necessarily advocate for issues that are not in the realm of their everyday experiences **(Mirza, 2014)**. But as Yuval-Davis points out my social and political values may differ even amongst a shared portfolio of Sikh heritage. I do not claim to be the '"authentic voice"' **(Yuval-Davis 2006, 282)** but I do claim a voice is more likely to represent the interests of women over and above community leaders. It was the need to vocalise these intersectional experiences that leads me to question the authenticity and depth of knowledge of community leaders' interests and concerns. Moreover even if the concerns are present, I believe the depth of knowledge and networks required do not exist to ensure that women's inequality is raised and dealt with.

A Black Feminist's dilemma

My dilemma was whether or not to become part of the Community Resilience Forum or to make a feminist stand for secular spaces and discourses. I had never advocated for or on behalf of Sikh women. My activism has always been rooted in Black and Minority Ethnic networks and organisations. And yet there was an underlying assumption by the Forum that my identity and activism prioritised my religious rather than racial identity. Sikh women's lives, like many other women of other faiths, intersect primarily on axes of race, gender, class and sexuality. By participating in the forum I would be projecting faith over other social relations and categories and giving credence to this new form of 'othering'

which does not bear witness to my experiences as the 'other' dictated by my gender, class and race. By attending the forum I would have been denying the other axes of inequality that I and other Sikh women face and cannot separate out from. All these axes of inequality would be collapsed into one with the label of 'faith'. This would have verified the assumption by the Forum that religion was a priority over my identity and activism.

However, it is important that women's voices and experiences are heard in discussions and debates of living safely in the city both in the public and private spheres. As the sole woman representative, I would certainly not shy away from ensuring women's rights were at the forefront by pushing for focus on domestic and sexual violence, caste discrimination and the right of girls to an education. I would have ensured that Sikh women's voices, in the context of lived experiences as BME women, were heard in the discussions and debates. There are not many outlets where experiences specific to BME women, albeit Sikh women, are sought and heard in the city. This was a rare opportunity and not one to miss or indeed take lightly. Furthermore it was unlikely that other representatives on the forum would advocate a feminist position and so the omission of a feminist perspective in such important discussions added to the dilemma. Although I acknowledge limited opportunities to voice experiences specific to Asian women, I wondered whether there are experiences related to community safety that are / can be specific to faith. And if so, is this best fought separately or in collaboration with other groups?

While considering my decision, I was reminded of Southall Black Sisters'
(SBS) stand to defend its beliefs and principles. SBS[3] is an internationally
renowned women's organisation that provides advocacy and support to
women who are experiencing familial and intimate partner violence. They
have campaigned on issues such as forced marriage, no recourse to public
funds and honour based violence.

In 2000, the New Labour government established a Home Office
Working Group on Forced Marriage with a remit to look at forced
marriages within South Asian diasporic communities in the UK (**Home
Office 2000, 28**). This was in response to a debate in Parliament in 1999
and a seminar held jointly by SBS and Institute of Public Policy. Following
the seminar SBS called for a Government Inquiry into the issue of forced
marriage **(Siddiqui, 2003)**. SBS were invited to join this working group.
They had some reservations that the membership was being formed as a
result of faith. SBS emphasised its secular position and 'that people should
be invited on the basis of their expertise rather than their religious group'
(Siddiqui 2003, 9). But these concerns were not addressed. There were
differences of opinion which centred on the fear that exposing all
attributes of forced marriage would lead to subsequent backlash in
communities. There was also difference of opinion as to the influence of
community leaders in tackling forced marriage effectively within the
communities and in some cases their acts of complicity in the subjugation
of women **(Siddiqui, 2003)**. SBS's position was that the state needed to
protect women and not leave them in the hands of community leaders.

After much debate, SBS felt they had no option but to resign and did so on 24 May 2000, just before the report was due to be published, because mediation was put forward as an option for minority women experiencing domestic violence. SBS contended the serious nature of safety for women if this is seen as a viable option **(Siddiqui 2013, 176)**.

Similarly, I believed that taking up the invitation to represent Sikh women at the Community Resilience Forum would endorse the faith-based approach. It would endorse the claims that such community leaders speak for the communities. It would endorse my role in de-secularisation, which has seen the erosion of women's spaces and rights. As Patel argues, 'The space to manifest religion has grown but the space to be free from religion, especially within social institutions from which the most vulnerable sub groups seek guarantees of liberty and equality, is shrinking daily' **(Patel 2013, 45)**.

To be a black feminist means building alliances to fight gender, homophobic and race discrimination but not to forsake one vulnerable group over another. I therefore declined the invitation albeit with the dilemma lingering. As Yuval-Davis reminds us, 'Core of emancipatory feminist values should not be up for negotiation' **(Yuval-Davis, 2006, 290)**.

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is currently setting up a social enterprise for BME women in Coventry to access the labour market.

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Notes

[1] Housing Benefit is reduced at source for claimants where people living in the same house over 18 and considered to be non-dependent, such as an adult son or daughter.
[2] Benefit Cap is a limit on the combined total of benefits that working-age people can receive amounting to:
- £500 per week for couples and lone parents regardless of the number of children they have.
- £350 per week for single adults with no children or those whose children do not live with them.

These amounts will be reduced further in April 2016
[3] Southall Black Sisters, 'About SBS', http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/, Accessed 4 September 2015.

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Islamisation of the Muslim World

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Through the erasure of cultural practices and a denial of the diversity of Muslims and Islamic practices across the world, Islamists are reinforcing their world view and creating a homogenous, monolithic Muslim identity, an identity in which culture and history are to be separated from Islam and Islamic practice, in which there is no space for ethnic or tribal identities, and where national, regional and local boundaries are irrelevant. This is a world in which only the boundaries of the Ummah (Muslim world) count, where there is only one law, religious law (Sharia), and in which an identity in which the separation of religion and state is heretical. The religious community is the state, the Ummah is the community, every aspect of one's life is circumscribed by religion and women, their lives and their bodies are the battleground. Anything that does not fit with their world view is simply swept away as not Islamic. Their message and teachings are spread through extensive use of social media, satellite broadcast channels, podcasts, conferences and events, local religious bookshops, study circles, mosques and the establishment of Islamic institutions including schools and Sharia courts. In this article I equate Islamism with Salafis[i], 'a term which literally means predecessors but in the Islamic context means those who follow the practices of the

first generation of Muslims' (Bowen, 2014). Many Salafis follow the dominant ideology of Saudi Arabia also the home of Wahabbi Islam.[ii]

In this article I present evidence of the ways in which I believe Islamist movements are utilizing the creation of a single 'authentic' Muslim identity as part of their political cause. I draw upon my own personal experiences as a woman of Muslim heritage and draw upon original research I have undertaken which explores the impact of the imposition of an Islamist Muslim identity on women in London. The research involved in-depth interviews with 14 women aged between 19 and 75 years of age. All the participants identified as Muslims and of South Asian (Indian and Pakistani) origin and descent. Whilst the focus of this research has been on these specific communities the Islamist iconoclastic mission is not limited to South Asians or to Muslims in Britain.[iii]

Idols, Icons and Culture

In March 2001, the Taliban destroyed the 1,700 year old Bamiyan Buddhas in central Afghanistan. In Iraq, ISIL (Islamic State) has destroyed ancient ruins in the cities of Hatra and Nimrud, obliterated artefacts from a museum in Mosul that are even older than the Bamiyan Buddhas and destroyed the Temple of Bel in the ancient city of Palmyria in Syria. The accepted view is that ISIL, the Taliban, Al Qaeda and others are destroying ancient monuments for iconoclastic religious reasons. However, it is also an action of attacking or assertively rejecting

cherished beliefs and institutions and/or established values and practices. Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam - have a history of iconoclastic zealotry. Islamist movements have been using this approach to impose their 'authentic Islam' upon Muslims across the world by destroying what they see as 'idols' and indeed anything which can interfere with their interpretation of Islam. Islamist movements have banned music in Afghanistan (Baily, 2001), Mali (Denselow, 2013) and Libya (Bacchi, 2015), are exerting ever increasing control of women's movement in public spaces, imposing religious dress codes and attacking and murdering anyone who dares to dissent, as can be seen from the murders of secular writers and bloggers in Bangladesh and the imprisonment of journalists in Turkey. Anand Veeraraj states:

> Idolatry is anything that thwarts the worship of the Living God who brings forth new life and transformation. Idols by nature constrict the movement of the divine spirit and foil new creation from emerging. Idols are not limited to images and statues alone. At times, our ideologies, doctrines, theologies, rituals, liturgies, languages, creeds, dogmas, scriptures, sacred places, cultic personalities, denominations and institutions may turn into idols. When that happens, we should not hesitate to smash them down or discard them altogether.[iv]

I would argue that the Islamist project concurs with Veeraraj's description of 'idols' as can be seen from its determination to erase any practices that do not sit within its austere and puritanical interpretation of Islam by

labelling them as 'cultural' and not Islamic. This concern with homogenising Islamic religious practices is supported by extremists and those often considered liberal and/or reformist. Tariq Ramadan (2004) seen by many as a progressive Islamic scholar, criticizes the confusion between culture and Islam. He suggests that Muslims themselves conflate the two things, especially if adherents in a country that cannot speak the language of the Qu'ranic scriptures. The vast majority of Muslims do not speak Qu'ranic Arabic, although most will learn to read the text without an understanding of the language. Ramadan argues this is made worse if, as is the case in much of the West, there are no local and authoritative Islamic institutions. Ramadan argues that Western Muslims need to learn to observe Islam without letting local cultural practices interfere. This distinction between cultural and religious practices has begun to permeate much of the discourse with liberals and progressives arguing that problematic practices such as forced marriage and honour based violence are related to culture and not religion and therefore the two should be distinguished. Ramadan's call is certainly being heeded by the Islamists as can be seen from the adoption of Salafi practices as authentic and rooted in the universe of Islam. This is in stark contrast to 'cultural' practices – anything the Salafis do not agree with. But can religious practice be completely separated and divorced from cultural practice? Did Islam – a faith born in what is now Saudi Arabia – completely reject all that went before? I do not think so. The Ottoman Empire was sustained and inspired by Islam and Islamic institutions, and, in order to survive it would have

taken on and merged with local cultures. But prior to this, early Muslims adopted and modified practices associated with the jahiliyya, for example in terms of local food laws and polygamy.[v] Instead of having unlimited numbers of wives, Islam limited the number of wives a man could have to four at any one time. Some practices had to be adopted in order to support the spread of the new faith. As Ramadan states:

> There is one Islam, and the fundamental principles that define it are those to which all Muslims must adhere…. Western Muslims…have no choice but to go back to the beginning and study their points of reference in order to delineate and distinguish, what in their religion is unchangeable (thabit) from what is subject to change…. (9).

But where are these points of reference? Who can claim to know this truth? Is it the Qu'ran alone? Does this allow for the various practices of Sunnis[vi], Shias, and others or just the Salafis? How does it reflect the varying schools of Islamic jurisprudence? Ramadan proposes a way forward that begins 'with the message of Islam and its universal principles… to a movement of reform and integration into new environments' (5). Ramadan's position throws up so many questions for those who do not support Salafi interpretations it also leaves no room for diversity of practice or cultural/local context. Moreover, the consequences of this way of thinking cannot be underestimated in a context where Islamists are murdering Muslims who do not submit to their ideology.

Their hope no doubt is that the world's 1.6 billion Muslims will be under Islamist control. The battle is one of power and for the very soul of Islam.

The insidious imposition of a single Islamic identity has been taking place over many years through the assertion of an 'authentic' Islam. This identity, based on Saudi interpretations of Islam, has taken root and permeates all aspects of Muslim life. Public manifestations of religious piety are evident everywhere due to the pressure on Muslims to be seen to be living the true Islamic life and striving to be better Muslims.

National, ethnic and cultural identities are the casualties in the battle for Islam and Islamic identity. Sufism is the dominant form of Islam among British Muslims of Pakistani origin, which is also the largest Muslim ethnic group in Britain[vii]. So much of Sufi cultural heritage, practices and traditions are being erased by the Islamists in favour of a more puritanical and orthodox interpretation of Islam. Islamist extremists have attacked and threatened to destroy Sufi shrines in many Muslim majority countries and bombings have taken place at numerous sites resulting in the deaths of hundreds of worshippers to date. Examples of this erasure are given below.

Cloaked and policed by Islamist ideology

I have witnessed a marked change in the visibility and appearance of Muslim women on the streets and in the media with the imposition of Islamic dress codes for Muslim women. It is almost impossible to see an

image of a Muslim woman without a hijab in mainstream media which suggests this particular idea of 'Muslimness' is not simply restricted to Muslims but has now found its way into how other British people expect Muslims to be and what makes an authentic Muslim woman. The niqab (full face covering), hijab (headscarf) and abaya (long overgarment) are now the uniform of Muslim women. The implication is that women should be covered lest they tempt men. The dresses worn by South Asian Muslim women for centuries have been replaced by the austere black/blue/brown uniform of the Islamists. The vibrant colours and varying ways of wearing salwar kameez, sarees, and other forms of dress associated with the sub-continent are now less and less visible. The shawls, dupattas and various styles of burqa worn by south Asian women have been replaced by the Arab style hijab/niqab. Streets once filled with Indian/Pakistani boutiques sporting the latest colourful fashions are now filled with abaya shops, hijab stalls and various other forms of religious attire. Perfume has now been replaced by halal, Islamist approved ittar[viii] free from haram[ix] alcohol.

Nadia[x] told me about her experience:

> I wear my hijab because I guess it's what I'm supposed to do – according to my religion. It wouldn't be good if I didn't wear it. I hear what they say about those women who don't. I miss my sarees. The blouses and the embroidery. Even when I go to weddings and wear a saree, it has to be under the abaya.

It would seem that hijabs are not even removed in all female company. Lubna said:

> I don't cover. I choose not to. I was at a funeral and sitting with the women. One of the women started telling me off for not wearing my hijab. She said the angels would hang me by each strand of my hair over the fires of hell for not covering. I was in a room full of women. There were no men.

The imposition of Islamist approved dress codes is now the norm for British Muslims. But it is not limited to adult women. With the proliferation of Muslim faith schools, dress codes for young girls are being cemented. Unlike school uniforms in secular schools which can be removed at the end of the day and at the end of one's school life, the head covering for girls are firmly engraved as acceptable dress for the good Muslim in the future. Tahira said;

> My daughter is 5. I didn't want her to go to a Muslim school or to have to wear hijab so young but my husband is worried about what people will think if we don't send her there. He says wearing the hijab now will make it normal so she doesn't have problems in the future.

What began with dress codes has seeped so much further into the daily lives of Muslims. Behaviour is policed in the battle for piety. Saima said;

The maulvi[xi] at the madrassa asks the children if I pray at home and if I fast in ramzan[xii]. I feel like I'm being watched. He told my daughter I would go

to hell for not wearing hijab and it wasn't good that their father is no longer living with us. What can I do?

Rites of passage have traditionally been framed within religious practices. Prayers and rituals at births, marriages and deaths are all part of our cultural and religious practices. These too have been subject to change over recent years. In my experience, Muslim weddings were colourful fun-filled occasions with dancing, music, laughter and men and women in the same space. I fondly remember mehndi[xiii] parties where women took centre stage and our Punjabi/Muslim/ South Asian identities came together and were celebrated. Some families did hold segregated events but these were very few and far between. Muslim weddings are now austere affairs with mehndi (celebration before the wedding) now deemed irreligious and 'cultural' because of the dancing and singing. Men and women are segregated, music is not allowed. This chimes with Hina's account of her own wedding;

> I had dreamt of my wedding day for years. It wasn't what I wanted. Mum and Dad were so worried about what people would say. Men and women were in separate halls. I was sat on stage in the room with the women. Just before my husband came in, there was an announcement made and all the women covered their heads and faces. He came in, a couple of photos were taken and he left. One woman even said 'Why are you taking photos? It's haram'. This isn't what I wanted.

Parveen told me about comments made by the caterer before her grand-daughter's wedding:

When we mentioned there would be a DJ and dancing he kept asking me 'are you sure aunty ji? What will people say? It's not right. We are Muslims?' He even said 'your grand-daughter's in-laws may not be happy with your plans.' I am a Muslim and have been for longer than he has. What is this new Islam? We're Punjabis, we are proud people and know what is wrong and what is right.

One of the most heart wrenching stories I heard was from Guljabeen. She had recently lost her husband after nursing him for many years. A woman in her 70s she was forced by her sons to undertake iddat.[xiv]

My son is very religious. He does not even allow a television or radio in the house. When my husband died, my son spoke to a local alim! about what I had to do. The alim said I must remain in iddat for four months. I am not allowed to answer the phone because I must not speak to a man, answer the door or leave the house for any reason – even to go into the garden. I must stay home and pray. I am an old woman what difference does all this make? Is my loss not enough that I must now endure this prison?

But for Guljabeen, even the prayers that she had to recite were subscribed.

I wanted to hold a khatum (prayer gathering) every Thursday for my husband. Just like we used to back home in Pakistan but they tell me

this is not correct way. No Thursdays, no annual khatum to mark his passing, no giving of clothes to the poor in my husband's name. Why is this wrong now? Are we all Wahabbis?

In addition to dress codes and new ways of marking life events many Muslim women now find themselves subject to an imposition of traditional gender roles with men as guardians and protectors and women as obedient wives and mothers staying within the domestic environment. Nighat is married with three children.

I have a degree from a good university. I want to work but my husband doesn't let me. He keeps telling me that my job is to look after him, the children and the house. Allah says that is my role. He's right it's in my religion. He says our daughter won't go to university as she will be married as soon as we can find a suitable man. This makes me so sad.

I have been researching polygyny amongst British Muslims since 2010. In my research I argue that the emergence of polygyny is connected to the Islamist project. Women in polygynous marriages will only have redress through Sharia courts. Muslim men avoid falling foul of English bigamy laws by only entering into religious marriages. As Rabiya told me:

My parents have been trying to find a husband for me for a few years now. All of the men I have met say that I will not be their only wife. They're so open and tell you upfront. I know it's in our religion and the men tell you this but I don't want this. I'm 25 and my friends say I'll have

to agree to it or I'll be left on the shelf. I'm getting old and no one will

want me.

In recent years I have witnessed the growth of Islamic institutions

including Sharia compliant finance institutions, Muslim faith schools in

which dress codes and gender roles are reinforced and Sharia courts

reinforcing the primacy of faith and an Islamic identity in all aspects of

one's life. Pragna Patel (2013) has written about the impact of this on the

legal apparatus which involves making state law and policy 'Sharia'

compliant and has referred to this as 'shariafication by stealth'. I suggest

that the Islamist extremist agenda extends beyond the legal structures and

is an extension of the Islamist mission that connects the public and the

private spheres and constitutes a re-ordering and reframing of these

according to a single, authoritarian version of Islam. These Sharia courts

impact disproportionately on women and women's lives as they

pronounce on family matters. At a recent meeting held to discuss the

Government's planned review of Sharia councils often referred to as

Sharia courts, Khola Hassan, an assistant judge at the Islamic Sharia Council

stated that 90% of the users of Sharia courts are women.[xv] This is not

surprising given that only Muslim men have the right to unilaterally bring

an end to the marriage whereas a Muslim woman must approach a Sharia

Court and terminate the marriage through khul'a[xvi]. For women in non –

registered marriages this may be the only recourse they have to ending an

unsatisfactory union. However, Muslim women in registered, recognised

civil marriages are being advised by religious scholars and some solicitors that they too need a religious divorce which in my view is not the case.

Samreen told me:

> I was married to my husband for 10 years. It was terrible. We were divorced in the English courts but then my solicitor who is Muslim too told me I needed an Islamic divorce and he could help me with this. I thought he was right. I went to the court and they kept asking me when we last had sex! What has that got to do with anything? Then they asked my ex to come to the meeting too. I was so frightened. He now knows where I live and keeps saying he'll give a divorce if I give him my son. The judge at the Sharia court said I have to do this. Is this right?

Supporters of Islamic dress codes, institutions and Sharia Courts often argue that they are responding to demand and that women (and men) are exercising their choice and agency. Is this really choice? What are the consequences of rejecting demands to conform to expected norms of behaviour and dress? I know only too well from my work on violence against women and girls over more than three decades the ultimate price paid by many Muslim women for trying to choose their own paths in the context of their own families. The consequences of challenging a global political movement and ultimately what many see as the irrefutable word of God does not bear thinking about. That is not to say that we give up. There are many dissenting voices within Muslim communities and we are

speaking up and joining with others fighting for freedom, liberty and justice. Silence is not an option.

Yasmin Rehman is a freelance consultant and researcher. She is currently working with Welsh Women's Aid, providing training on equalities, diversity and inclusion for higher education institutions. Yasmin has worked for 30 years predominantly on violence against women, race, faith and gender, and human rights. She co-edited a book, *Moving in the Shadows*, which examines violence experienced by minority women and girls in the UK. She is working on a second book looking at polygamous marriage and its links to violence and abuse of women and girls. Yasmin is a Board member of EVAW (End Violence Against Women Coalition) and a Trustee of the Centre for Secular Space.

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Notes

[i] Salafis are fundamentalists who believe in a return to the original ways of Islam. The word 'Salafi' comes from the Arabic phrase, 'as-salaf as-saliheen', which refers to the first three generations of Muslims (starting with the Companions of the Prophet), otherwise known as the Pious Predecessors.

[ii] Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Sunni Islam and is practiced in. Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The word Wahhabi is derived from the name of a Muslim scholar, Muhammad bin Abd al. Wahhab, who lived in the Arabian peninsula during the eighteenth century (1703-1791)

[iii] Iconoclasm is literally the destruction of religious icons and other images or monuments for religious or political motives.

[iv] Rev. Dr. Anand Veeraraj was born in India and immigrated with his family to the USA in 1988. He is an ordained minister of the Church of South India and serves as the Pastor of the New Jersey Indian Church and directs the Princeton Forum on Asian Indian Ministries, PC-USA. http://www.globalringdemo.com/csi/old/print/article/014%20Anand%20Veeraraj.pdf

[v] *Jahiliyya* refers to the pre-Islamic period, or a time of "ignorance" of monotheism and divine law. In current use, it refers to secular modernity, for example in the work of Abu al-Ala Mawdudi , who viewed modernity as the "new jahiliyyah." Sayyid Qutb interpreted jahiliyyah as the domination of humans over humans, rather than submission of humans to God. The term denotes any government system, ideology, or institution based on values other than those referring to God. To correct this situation, such thinkers propose the

implementation of Islamic law, values, and principles. Radical groups justify militant actions against secular regimes in terms of jihad against jahiliyyah.

[vi] The followers of Sunni Islam, one of the two major branches of the tradition make up approximately 80 percent of the Muslim population in the world. The Sunni are the majority in most Islamic countries outside of Iran, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain. Sunna—translated variously as the "trodden path," "the way," "example," or "habitual practice"—refers to the example or path of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers.

[vii] Sufism focuses on the spiritual aspects of faith with rituals which include the recitation of prayers, poetry, music, singing and visiting of Sufi shrines which are part of the cultural and religious landscape of the Indian sub-continent.

[viii] *Ittar* (Hindi/Urdu) *Attar* (Arabic) is essential oil derived from botanical sources and is decreed as halal perfume by many Islamic retailers.

[ix] In Islamic jurisprudence, *haram* is used to refer to any act that is forbidden by Allah, and is one of five Islamic commandments that *define* the morality of human action. Acts that are *haram* are typically prohibited in the religious texts of the Quran and the Sunnah.

[x] The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

[xi] Maulvi is an honorific Islamic religious title given to Muslim religious scholars.

[xii] Urdu/Hindi word for Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting.

[xiii] Traditional Pakistani and Hindu or Sikh/Punjabi weddings in India can often be long, ritualistic, and elaborate affairs with many pre-wedding, wedding and post-wedding ceremonies. Different countries and regions of a country celebrate the ceremonies in different ways according to their own marriage customs, rituals, and culture.

[xiv] A period of seclusion following the death of her husband. *Iddat* is usually four lunar months and ten days and is to ensure the wife of the deceased man is not pregnant.

[xv] http://www.islamic-sharia.org/services/

[xvi] The situation in which the wife initiates divorce proceedings is known as *Khul'a*. Once the husband agrees to divorce her in exchange for some money or the remission of her dower, the divorce is known as Talaq. It is as valid as the Talaq given by the man of his own initiative. Khul'a depends upon the agreement reached between the two parties. If the husband agrees to give Talaq provided that his wife either abandons her right to the dower (if the dower has not yet been paid) or return back the amount of the dower to the husband (if the dowry has been paid). http://www.islamic-sharia.org/khula/

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I want to 377 you so bad*

Akhil Katyal*

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*This refers to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial era law that criminalises homosexual acts. In 2013, the Supreme Court of India upheld the legality of this law. LGBT activists and other human rights legal practitioners have launched several challenges to this law.

till even the sheets hurt i want to

ache your knees singe your skin

line you brown breathe you in i want to

mouth you in words neck you in red

i want to beg your body insane into sepals

i want to 377 you like a star falling off the brown

i want to feel you till my nails turn water

i want to suck you seven different skies

i want to be a squatter in your head when

it sleeps when its dark i want to break laws

with you in bed and in streets and in parks

Akhil Katyal is a writer and translator based in Delhi where he also teaches literature. His writings have appeared widely in national and international journals and anthologies. He has translated the works of Mangalesh Dabral, Wislawa Szymborska, Agha Shahid Ali, Om Prakash Valmiki, Dorothy Parker and Langston Hughes, among others. He finished his PhD from SOAS, University of London in 2011.

My Journey from Islamist to Free Thinker

Mubarak Bala*

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Innii umirtu an uqaatilan-Nasa, hatta yash-hadu an Lailaha illallah...ilaa akhir...

I have been commanded (by Allah) to wage war on all mankind, until they testify that there's no god but Allah... If they do then they're safe from me. They and their families and belongings are safe...

*- **Hadith of the Prophet of Islam**.*

The above words are not the words of Shekau, al-Baghdadi or Bin Laden but a hadith (sayings of Prophet Mohammed) of significant value and source. Vital, if you wish to understand the mind of a jihadist.

Naturally, anyone born in a specific region of the world grows to assimilate that society's culture, behaviour, way of thought and religion. So what changed me? The answer is simple. I asked the right questions. I learned, reasoned and researched and took the decision to do what is right: to be what gave me peace of mind and what satisfied my conscience.

From a life of a pseudo-Islamist, I weaned myself to be liberal, secular, humanist, agnostic and, finally, an atheist, all without ever knowing the books or ideologies of atheism. All I knew was science and Islam. In the end, I realised there were many instances when I did not believe but was

put back into the system by fear, societal norms, family heritage and the pressure to go with the crowd. This is my story.

I was born in the mid 1980s, in the state of Kano in Northern Nigeria. Born to a family of scholars, I trace my lineage to the disciples of Usman dan Fodio, the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate. The dan Fodio Empire conquered and ruled a big chunk of West Africa. Lasting from 1804 to 1903, it enslaved, converted and subjugated diverse tribes into its fold. This included even traditionally Muslim city-states like Kano, Zaria and Bauchi that had been Muslim for centuries. Their faith was not considered pure enough. Consequently, they were attacked and conquered. Arriving British colonialists toppled the empire in 1903.

The only difference between the method of the Caliphate and that of today's Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad (JAS), commonly known as Boko Haram, is time-lapse. Modernity forced the religion to adapt to a secular constitution. Modern education has given people the impression of freedom. The new name for jihadism is now terrorism. It is why JAS kills Muslims. Their faith is not strong enough; it is diluted by secular, ungodly westernisation, instead of the sharia system Muhammad recommended through allegiance to a line of Caliphs (not Sultans).

The primary school I attended was a Muslim-only school, one of many funded by Saudi Arabia under the Daurah-Islamic Foundation. So was my secondary school: a Muslim-only private school. The area I grew up in Kano is overwhelmingly Muslim. Subsequently, I had the smallest amount of

contact with non-Muslims or secularism. All I knew was my religion and I was taught that Islam is perfect everyday. At the same time, I understood science, which my school taught with the caveat that it is only true when in agreement with doctrine. Science thrilled me and still does. Growing up, I read more of it than required in the curricula through texts I could find at home. You will notice how easily this aided my journey in the final lapse when my mind was conscious and adult.

During the First Gulf War, our teachers told us how Saddam Hussein was fighting the infidels and winning. I could remember the time we were given extra lessons on jihad and taught to shoot bows and arrows. I was 9. We were told we should be ready for the coming fight and that it was inevitable. The purpose of teaching us science and sports was to learn '*their evil ways, and use it against them*'. For some reason however, many, like myself, thought Islam agrees with science, save the 'lies of evolution'.

In 2001, when at 16 and just finishing secondary school, the north of Nigeria was celebrating the September 11th attacks and bin Laden's al Qaeda. I went to the market and selected the best picture of bin Laden in a fighter jet. Now I know it was altered using PhotoShop: the original picture was of a French fighter jet. I brought a big poster, and pasted it at our front yard where friends gathered to listen to the BBC Hausa news and digest if the war with America and Israel was succeeding. We were told it was foretold in the Quran (Q9: 11). This is the poison we were fed. Bin

Laden's pictures flooded northern Nigeria. They still do in some parts. It is ironic – but not surprising -that now similar ideology is ravaging the region.

That same moment coincided with my discovery of a radio tape, narrated by an apparent American Muslim convert, purportedly exposing a shadowy group who worship the devil and consp[1]ire to undermine Islam. He called them The Freemasons, evolved from the Knight Templars. He vilified the West and secular leaders as being members of a cult-like agenda bent on dominating the world and brainwashing us with ungodly practices. He called it the New World Order, quoting Bush Senior. Popular culture still calls them The Illuminati.

I transcribed the tape into a book in my last year at school while I was supposed to be studying for my final exams. By the time I got home, I had transferred it to a computer for further distribution, and later the internet. I made several copies and sent these to many people, including those with government positions. I wanted to see my immediate society be better and thought Islam was the solution. Yes, I've always been an activist, long before my struggle between Almajiri and secularist. I thought I was on the right side of the divide then.

Doubts about my faith had always remained in my mind however. At school, I made sure I read all through the Qur'an to see if it chimed with what I knew to be true. I asked too many questions and got unsatisfactory answers or was warned off with phrases like '*God is too mysterious for your*

feeble brain', '*There are things which you just don't ask*', '*Careful, you'll incur Allah's wrath with these questions*' and '*Naa, they can't go to the moon, it's all a lie*'. I intensified study of the religion to increase my faith and prove my doubts wrong.

My first real contact with other types of Nigerians was in 2003 on remedial studies outside of Kano. This opened my eyes to human beings of other religions who I was conditioned to think of as filthy, impure, and the enemy. The most common insult we use for them is 'arna' meaning pagan, even though they are of the Christian and/ or animist faiths. I noticed they were just normal people with similar hopes and aspirations. I befriended many, reasoned with some, and took part in interfaith debates. I got a Bible and studied it for the debates. Even though they were forbidden from touching the Qur'an, I encouraged them to do so, hoping they may see its glory. I became liberal.

I also secured Islamic debate tapes, especially those of Ahmad Deedat, who headed the South African/ Indian Islamic Propagation Centre, which converted many Christians into Muslims. I admired him so much that I lobbied the state government that a road should be named in his honour. The road leading to the Kano Government House is now Ahmad Deedat Road. I met his son Yusuf Deedat who flew in from Durban to commission the road and he thanked me.

I did not want to go to university near home as this meant my father would impose burdens of religion on me so I changed universities after a

year. At the relatively secular Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, I had the freedom to meet more people. I learned so much. I read. I debated. I reasoned. Subsequently I became very secular. I saw how religion divided peoples. I imagined a better world. Even at that time I thought Islam was still true and Muslims are just not being Muslim enough.

This time coincided with violent uprisings ignited by Islamists in the name of the Muslim Students' Society (MSS). One of the conditions under which my father had allowed me to leave university in Kano was that I had to join the MSS. I had done so to ensure his economic support. The turmoil led me to break away from the MSS and form my own secular group with the help of a friend. We named it 'I4E', Islam for Earth. Although the name sounds fanatical, I coined it for us to secure legitimacy among those we wished to secularise and gain the resources we needed such as media equipment and a mosque to hold meetings and public lectures.

We soon became seven people, then more. We failed to get a licence at the federal level. The name was too Islamist so we subsequently changed it to Mannah (Heavenly Food) World. We funded this from our own pockets. Its purpose was to secularise and instil tolerance.

The organisation held lectures and Iftar specials (fasting dinners) and distributed banners, fliers, pamphlets and bulletins. I worked hard but failed to introduce university-wide interfaith dialogues. I blamed the failure on the MSS and outside influences, mostly Sharia revivalism and

tribalism. We had successes though and things quieted down. Religion took the back seat once again. This was around 2007.

Today, the organisation produces jingles and Hausa movies in the Kannywood industry. Its new name is 'New Qamar Productions' (Qamar means the moon). I am no longer involved though. The co-founders think I'm too radical with the new irreligion I openly profess. I still hope to further its purpose, to translate science documentaries about space, the human body and 'how things are made' and other videos that teach philosophy and reason into Hausa.

By 2007, when I went for Hajj, I prayed fervently for guidance. I knew I was clearly diverting from the path due to my doubts. I made it my priority to re-study the religion, re-commit once and for all and to live a life of a pious god-fearing Muslim. I knew my heritage and wished to conserve it. I also nurtured political ambitions, thinking I could offer new ideas and usher in change, but political aspirations in Nigeria all depend on which region or religion one comes from. It is political suicide to be an atheist. Another concern was my hereafter (I still thought there was one). So, I decided to double my efforts, blame the devil for my weakening faith and do what I was supposed to do: study. By then, I was lagging behind academically. My CGPA was strong but without the distraction I would have done far better.

As the years passed, continuous study and posing question to scholars and hearing their answers convinced me that the problem is really Islam. I

came to realise that its message is tainted. By 2009, I became agnostic. Please note that I just found out these terms in the past year. All I knew back then was my level of faith was decreasing. I reasoned with like-minded people but kept things private, while being openly secular. By then, I had freed myself to think beyond the boundaries set uncrossable by religion, effectively a freethinker.

This went on for years. I realised that most of the answers I sought could not be found, that humanism and social justice cannot be achieved, with religion in our midst, especially the Islam and Christianity inherent in the country. The nature of my writing changed, covertly passing on ideas of secularism, with religion taking the backseat, and having a focus on exposing social injustice that hinders society.

My family noticed the changes and chose to victimise and threaten me over them. I told them I was a rebel now. They did not understand it. They thought it was either the devil or a demon. Any blasphemy is translatable as mental illness. They just could not wrap their heads around the thought that religion, their religion, could be wrong.

The irony is, they have had a better level and quality of education than me. Some lived for years in the UK and only became more bigoted while there. I would say Western governments have failed woefully for allowing unreason to infest the minds of the young. My family thought sanctions, economically, would deter me. I lost many privileges over the years, but freedom surely costs. By now, I know its worth.

By 2012, terrorism had hit home and hit hard. A Sept 11th and 7-11 scenario ravaged my country. Ironically, the same people now pray the US sends over drones or boots on the ground to finish off the terrorists. Some have deluded themselves, thinking the CIA is funding and aiding the terrorists or even saying it is not Muslims but US operatives or any local tribe they happen to hate. JAS rose from isolated incidents to a regional menace, birthed much like the Taliban in a madrassa system of education and lacking any modern knowledge of the world.

I knew it was a recipe for trouble. Many militant groups had emerged before, but they were primitive in their weaponry and easily crushed – but not this one. The Maitatsine uprising in the early 1980s in Kano for example saw over 10,000 killed in a few months before it was quelled.

Efforts by militant Christians to fan the flames made things worse and further proved a major setback in having people look closely at the religion. The circle of friends I tried to reason with were those with whom I had attended school; the educated, the elite and the leaders of the future. Our debates were mostly private and in person. Some were on BBM and WhatsApp groups and, later, on Facebook. By then I felt more like an atheist but I just was not confident to name myself as such. I was actually afraid of the term.

It was Twitter that catapulted me to realise I had been an atheist all along. All the memes and statements circulating made sense. It was as if I was the one writing them. Anything I would see, I would say, '*Wow! I*

thought of this too!' The time I devoted to learn and reason were all because my brain inherently refused to register fallacies. I understood evolution, and realised why it posed a threat to dogmatic faiths. I do not hate people. I love those I know and have compassion for those I don't, especially the downtrodden. I abhorred terror and all violent extremism. I realised this is humanism.

I calculated the risks but went ahead anyway. I saw urgency to the dangerously escalating situation in Nigeria. I saw us sinking. I realised that if I could tell them who I am and what I believe, doubts may set in, and they may at least go secular, saving the next generation, before we become another Somalia or Afghanistan.

I started subtle debates with close friends, criticising society and religion. Many thought and said it was only 'a phase'. Others said I was becoming a Jew (by Jew they mean Westernised). Friends that had earlier in life trusted my judgment, intuition and analysis now feared what I might say. I reasoned with them so well they feared they may 'lose their faith' and become the 'arna' they were supposed to hate. Many took off. After all, we were all radicalised via the same process. The few that did break free from religion however, wanted to keep things private.

With every terror attack, I become more vocal. That was when the debates and writings became more critical. What finally made me come out as atheist was a video of a beheading of a female Christian back in 2013

by boys around my age, speaking my language. It hit me that the time for silence is over. Either someone speaks out or we all sink.

I then told people bluntly, including my mother. She was so scared for me that she told my dad. Instead of debating me or asking how I came to that conclusion, he wanted me to see a psychiatric doctor. I finally agreed, giving the condition that the doctor has to be a non-Muslim, which they refused. Finally the pressure mounted and I succumbed. It was November 2013. I was lucky the doctor was secular. He listened to all they had to say. He said this was not a psychiatric problem and that they could only preach to me or pray for me. My father was very unhappy with him and sought another doctor.

By June 2014, they had pre-planned with another doctor without my knowledge. During the very first visit we made, with all the members of the family, the doctor told me I needed a god, and that even in Japan they have a god. He said atheists were all mentally disturbed, that denying the history of Adam and Eve was delusional. They (the doctor, my father and my senior brother) mentioned a story about one Al-Ghazali, an Islamic scholar who questioned Allah, went crazy, repented, and got better.

Being the most senior consultant in the hospital, the doctor said his decision was final. He prescribed a bed for me. I quietly went home as they went to pay for the bed. I started planning to move out of the house. That was when they took me by force. They beat me up, wrestled me and sedated me. They said they would have to kill me if I do not comply. When my story came out in the media, the hospital management cancelled the

doctor's prescription and assigned me a new doctor. I was re-diagnosed sane but kept in protective custody under State Security. I was told the city and region was demanding for my head as if we are in 14th century Europe. I was appointed a lawyer and a legal process was started. My father sent delegations to plead with me to drop the case. I said he had to apologise in person, not punish those who helped me and return my property. Those terms were long broken, and I decided to seek justice in the future.

The response to my hospitalisation not only saved my life but it encouraged people to question. A number of atheists, especially in Islamic communities in Northern Nigeria, are now confident. They are coming out the closet or reaching out to contribute with ideas or advice for the project of secularising our peoples and winding down the indoctrination of dogma imported from the Middle East which has been ravaging our lands. I hope I have inspired people to have the courage to think and not fear knowledge or something 'new'. It's important to note that ex-Christians in Nigeria have risen too, long before this, vocal and confident.

I wish and plan for a society saturated with tolerance, peace, accommodation, reason and harmony. It may not be today that we solve all our problems but we need to see religious indoctrination as the viral programme it is.

Islam has some 1.5 billion people. Many of us are victims and prisoners of conscience, struggling for reason and freedom *from* our religion.

Remove the apostasy laws, the imaginary hellfire and see if our number reaches a billion.

Mubarak Bala is a humanist, an ex-Muslim and an atheist. He is on Twitter @mubarakbala

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'Seasons of Mud 1' by Yousif Naser © Yousif Naser, all rights reserved

In conversation with Yousif Naser

Shakila Maan*

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Shakila Maan has produced a short film to accompany Yousif Naser's paintings that are appearing in the journal. The short film, "In conversation with Yousif Naser" presents an intimate vignette into this extraordinary painter's life. Yousif has been living in London since the early 1980s and has silently contributed to the development of art in the UK and across Europe. He recently returned to Iraq for the first time and found a country devastated and unrecognisable.

"In conversation with Yousif Naser" also explores the artist's work, illustrating the tireless nature of his approach to his art, which is rapid and in a state of evolution; the essence always being a voice of dissent.

Yousif's unique art remains at the forefront of painting on the world stage, breaking new ground with works such as Black Rain, Exercise in Desperation, Letters to Nobody, Dark Walls, Ten Seasons and Seasons of Mud.

Please click on the image below to access the video:

Shakila Maan is a film maker and writer. She is part of Southall Black Sisters and was a member of Women Against Fundamentalism.

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Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity

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One of the groups of women whose history is expressed in the term 'Feminist Dissent' is surely Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF). The 2014 book published to mark their twenty-five year history is essential reading for anyone coming to the debates about anti-racist, anti-fundamentalist feminism.

How do you challenge reactionary ideas when expressed within minority communities without giving firepower to racists? How do you fight racism without constructing monolithic ideas of communities? How do you recognise the role of religious institutions in providing material support, in times of a shrinking state, and a sense of solace and belonging, while still allowing for criticism of their domination of struggles within communities? These are the questions that could be discussed in the space created by WAF. They aren't new, and they aren't insoluble, but at the moment they seem hardly up for debate.

As it says in the introduction to the collection of nineteen political narratives, `This book celebrates – while also acknowledging the huge challenges it faces – a particular kind of feminism, one that has been concerned with challenging both fundamentalism and racism' (7). Reading this book is both inspiring and depressing.

WAF came together in 1989 when the 'Rushdie affair' exposed the difficulties of sections of the political Left (and others) in dealing with both the attack on free expression and criticism, and racist responses to the mobilisation against the author. While many on the Left were paralysed with confusion, and fear of offending what they believed to be Muslim sentiment by opposing the mobilisation against Rushdie, a group of women associated with Southall Black Sisters met to discuss what they saw as the growing strength of religious fundamentalism. They linked the threat to Rushdie's right to expression to their own struggles against racism and the silencing they themselves had experienced in their `own' Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities.

It is inspiring that this group of women came together publicly to attempt to give clarity to a confusing situation and to the need particularly for women to have space for criticism and expression. The women came from different nationalities, ethnicities and religious backgrounds: Catholic and other Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh as well as atheist. The coming together from different backgrounds seemed to be a pleasure as well as a political strength for the women involved, especially

at a time when identity politics were dominating and dividing feminist groups elsewhere.

The discovery of what was common in the different backgrounds of the women makes a rich thread throughout the book. WAF wasn't anyone's only political home; the women continued their involvement in other socialist or anti-racist struggles. It was a forum where women involved in other activism came together to develop a definition and critique of fundamentalism and gain strength to take back into other contests.

The book is organised as a series of mini biographies, tracing personal and political development, what concerns led the women to WAF and what they took away from it. Feminists who challenge dominant narratives of gender, 'race', migration, nationalism, religion and politics have interesting lives, so the chapters are a pleasure to read. They show on a personal basis how wider battles and different experiences led to the same struggle. In Rashmi Varma's chapter, 'Telling Lives' she writes: `As reactionary fundamentalist movements across the world make daily inroads into our everyday lives, into our intimate spheres as well as the public spaces we traverse, the very act of telling lives can be a pointedly political one' (224).

In the first phase of WAF, issues tackled included the pressures on women from the Indian subcontinent to keep silent about domestic violence, the rise of the Hindu Right, the influence of clerical and nationalist struggles on Irish women in London and the meaning of Jewish cultural identity in religious and secular Zionist contexts. The contributions from Irish and Jewish women especially highlight the effect on women, both inside the nation and in the diaspora, of nationalism intersecting with religion.

The complex ways that South Asian communal politics play out in Britain and then in turn influence politics in the Indian subcontinent itself is an important theme of the book. The chapters that deal with Southall are incisive and interesting which makes sense since Southall Black Sisters shares much history with WAF. Many won't be aware that in Britain, 'the resurgence of religion as a political identity began in earnest in the 1970s, among Sikhs mustering support for a separate Sikh state (Khalistan) in India' (10). People who know something of the anti-racist movement in Southall may not have considered it from the perspective of anti-fundamentalist feminists.

Georgie Wemyss' chapter with the appealing title 'Activist Listening' describes how, on the other side of London, the politics of Bangladesh's 1971 war played out in an FE College. There, the college management's cultivation of the authority of the conservative Islamic Society to control a potentially unruly student body echoed colonial strategy of the British Empire.

Several of the chapters address complex political histories that should be better known. Clara Connolly's chapter reminds us of the huge importance and influence of Irish struggles on radical movements in

Britain, something younger activists may not appreciate, even as they protest the existence of different laws governing abortion still in place in 2016. Chapter ten, by Nadja Al-Ali, explores the tensions that arose when British and Iraqi women came together in sustained anti-war activism. Nira Yuval-Davis connects WAF politics with what is now known as intersectionality, and expresses the warmth of the connections made during WAF activism as well as the limitations of the approaches developed.

The women in WAF made a distinction between religious belief and authoritarian political movements that use religion. Looking at their own life experiences, WAF came to define fundamentalism as modern conservative `political movements that use religion to gain or consolidate power, whether working within or in opposition to the state' (p.8). This definition emphasises the similarity of different fundamentalisms, noting that they all share a central concern with women and the regulation of women's bodies.

The nuanced politics of the women in WAF, interested in critiquing the state as well as the 'sealed borders' of ethnic minority communities, expresses a struggle found throughout the world but often ignored. Within the academic world as well as in migrant and educational struggles, for example, religious identity is often privileged at the expense of other possible expressions of identity. Moreover the concept of 'secularism', often ill-defined, has been critiqued as 'western' by some academics and activists.

To WAF in the nineties, the counter to this type of thinking was twofold: first, to insist on the right to dissent from religious authority in their own communities, drawing on non-western and western traditions of secularism and free thought and the wider political struggles of the time. And second, to make visible the workings of Christian privilege, often invisible in the assumption that white British people aren't particularly religious. As a group of women affected by racism and involved in the anti-racist movement, they wanted to highlight the ways in which Christianity is part of the assimilationist project of British nationalism. Additionally, they sought more complete separation of church and state, campaigning against the blasphemy law that was only abolished in 1996, and crucially, calling for the removal of Christian privilege in schooling. They foresaw that the entrenched privilege of Church of England and the Catholic Church in relation to state schooling would cause other religious groups to demand similar accommodation.

There is a lot of honesty in the book; arguments and divisions, some serious, are discussed and examined; there is no attempt to smooth over serious differences in the name of sisterhood. Some of these differences concerned the extent to which it was possible to work as feminists within religious movements. Several contributors discuss, very interestingly, the politics of alliances, including with groups organising along religious lines. A failure to appreciate the organising possibilities

opened up for women in religious communities led some women to criticise WAF.

Other differences emerged later, especially after 9/11. Many feminists felt that it was not the right time to oppose the Muslim Right given the war drive and increased racism in the UK, or that positions from which critiques were made were problematic. This debate, which did more than anything else to spell the end of WAF as a group, is considered from different viewpoints by several contributors. They don't shy away from airing their strong disagreements with Gita Sahgal's position on Amnesty International's work with ex-Guantanamo prisoner Moazzem Begg which led to her leaving Amnesty International. That particular controversy still plays out, and WAF women continue to speak up, not always on the same side. But the bitterness of the arguments is not new, as the book makes clear.

The book itself is wonderfully accessible. The excellent introduction by Yuval-Davis and Dhaliwal traces the history of WAF against a changing British state and introduces the method of the narrative history. There's a useful index, and notes at the end of each chapter providing references for further investigation via books from the early years of both WAF and Southall Black Sisters, academic articles, videos, leaflets and links to the WAF archive which contains the excellent Women against Fundamentalism journal.

"The personal is political" has maybe become a cliché, but this book shows the importance of finding and making a space where women (and men) can talk about, and act on their real experiences, and escape the domination of abstractions used to control us. The finding of this common ground is not automatic. To expect this is to set up our own abstractions, separated from real and contradictory experience.

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Shining the Spotlight on Child Sexual Abuse

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Earlier this year, the film Spotlight won the Academy Award (Oscars) for Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay. Spotlight tells the story of a group of journalists at The Boston Globe who break the story of the clerical abuse of hundreds of children by over 200 Catholic priests in the Boston area in 2002. It was the first major reporting of abuse by Catholic clerics in the US and shocked the nation, indeed the world, with the breadth of abuse and the silencing of victims and their families by the Church and their lawyers.

I saw the film in Australia at a local cinema in Newcastle, New South Wales. As a social researcher writing on the Catholic Church at the Royal Commission and the NSW Special Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, I wasn't surprised that I recognised in the small audience a number of survivors, families and supporters of victims and Catholic community members. I wasn't surprised that it was a small number; this is a difficult film to watch about a subject most people do not want to think about.

The Royal Commission into institutional child abuse was set up in 2013 after years of work by survivors and supporters to uncover abuse across institutions including the Catholic Church.

Despite knowing much of the literature in the field and having attended many sessions at the Royal Commission, it came as a shock when the last screen shots listed the number of American cities affected by clerical abuse and cities around the world. The list runs into the hundreds and in Australia includes Newcastle, Wollongong, Adelaide, Ballarat and Melbourne. People around me gasped as we recognised Newcastle on the list: somehow seeing our small city on the big screen bought home the reality of this crisis. Clerical sexual abuse is not a small issue on the periphery of social maladjustment. It's a major crisis of institutional abuse of power that has affected millions of people across the globe.

The film does a great job in recounting the story of how the journalists bought clerical abuse to public attention. This may not have happened at all unless a new Editor - Marty Baron (Lieve Schreiber) - was appointed. He

read a small article on a Catholic priest – John Geoghan - who had been abusing children but allowed by Cardinal Bernard Law to continue working with children in parishes and schools. Baron directs the Spotlight team to investigate what Cardinal Law knew and how many priests and victims are involved. Despite missing documents, recalcitrant Church lawyers and Church silence, the team eventually uncovers over 200 abusive priests and a Church hierarchy who were systematically moving them between parishes and schools, setting up treatment centres in local neighbourhoods and paying victims paltry amounts of compensation and binding them to silence.

The journalists are not the real heroes. Five years prior to the publication of the story, the head of the Spotlight team Walter Robinson (Michael Keaton), had been handed legal files on victim cases by a lawyer working for the victims Mitchell Garabedian (Stanley Tucci) and a box of evidence from Phil Saviano (Neal Huff) who was representing SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests). This material named paedophile priests and outed Cardinal Law for knowing about it but doing nothing. From this Robinson filed a small report which he deemed inconsequential at the back of paper. It took two outsiders - Baron who was from out of town and Jewish, and Garabedian, an Armenian - to see the seriousness of the issue.

Why did this happen? The answer to that lies in the dominance of the Catholic Church in the Boston area and the ways in which institutions create forms of social `reality'. In a way, most of the journalists who were raised Catholic, were blind to the issue; they were insiders reporting on inside matters. And those matters did not look unusual or important. Compare that with journalists such as the award winning Joanne McCarthy, who broke the stories of Catholic clerical sexual abuse in the Newcastle-Maitland diocese over the last 10 years and who has repeatedly indicated that although she was raised Catholic she is now an atheist and has no ties to the Church. We can also see this in operation in the Royal Commission which is completely independent of any of the offending institutions.

Another important factor is the commonly held notion, especially by Church leaders, that sexual abuse is the result of 'a few bad apples' as has been noted by numerous Catholic clerics here. When bishop Paul Bird gave evidence at the first hearing into clerical abuse in Ballarat in May 2015 he indicated that the problem for the Church was not a systematic one, but of a small group of opportunistic men joining the priesthood for the wrong reasons. Likewise when Cardinal George Pell gave evidence in February 2016 by video link from Rome he said that he was aware that some boys had been abused but didn't think it was his responsibility to address this further. These beliefs do significant damage as they fail to recognize the

problems that institutional cultures generate. To take a quote from Spotlight "It takes a village a raise a child, and a village to abuse a child". There are prickly moral issues involved in coming to terms with how so many societies across the globe have failed to protect children from harm. How have so many people known but done nothing? What does this say about the ways in which we treat those who are situated as different and other?

The real heroes in this appalling travesty of justice are the victims and survivors, their families and supporters. They are the ones who suffered the abuse and its aftermath. It was their stories which were disbelieved and discredited. They were often treated abysmally by the institution, and stigmatised as troublemakers. They are the ones who year after year have borne the psychological, social and financial consequences of major trauma yet who have continued to raise this issue until it is heard. The Royal Commission is Australia's chance to right this terrible wrong. If you can, see Spotlight, it at least shows how one community came to be outraged at what happened to their children.

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The World Before Her: A Review

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I'd like to begin at the end.

As Nisha Pahuja's engaging documentary, The World Before Her, winds down, the protagonists are seen leaving the two spaces that were the focus of the film. Ruhi Singh, the aspiring Miss India, departs from the beauty pageant boot camp and competition and flies to her hometown of Jaipur. Heart broken and sullen after her loss, she walks out of the airport clouded in loneliness and is met by her father. A few hundred kilometres away, in another part of the state of Maharashtra, the Hindu nationalist camp organised for young girls and women by *Durga Vahini* (The Army of Durga) also concludes. The young leader of the camp, Prachi Trivedi, slows down, her resolute and aggressive persona giving way to quiet contemplation. As she ponders over her future in the Hindutva movement, the young girls leave the camp amidst loud and prolonged goodbyes. Numbers are exchanged, promises to meet are made, hugs are traded, and the girls enthusiastically wave to one another as cars take them away from the camp to their homes.

How did a camp organised by an exclusionary nationalist right-wing movement that was teaching young girls to perpetuate communal violence and imbibing them with hatred become a space for friendship and intimacy to flourish? How do we reconcile the politics of those loving long goodbyes with the politics of violence that the documentary showcased a mere few frames ago? On the other end, how does a competition that reduces a group of young women to an indistinguishable collective of bodies in identical clothing and make-up (so much so that in one scene the protagonist Ruhi Singh's parents are unable to locate her in a group photo of all the Miss India contestants) allow for the emergence of individual subjectivities and a multiplicity of stories, narratives, and emotions? It is these kinds of questions, contradictions, and tensions that contain the brilliance of The World Before Her. Nisha Pahuja's film not only compels the viewer to register the details of these two 'worlds' available to Indian women but also allows her to leave the screening with new questions and unseen answers.

The film opens with a snapshot of the life of Miss India contestants moving headlong into preparation for the big competition. Ruhi Singh, a nineteen year old contestant from Jaipur, appears confident and determined, telling the camera that she wanted to win the competition to make her parents proud. Wanting to live a life where she was 'free' and able to make her

own choices, she had left her small town in search of opportunities in the fashion and beauty industry. In particularly poignant scenes we meet her parents who are fully supportive of her choices, looking out for her newspaper appearances (and later on, watching the competition on television) with excitement. At the beauty pageant boot camp, young women from all over the country are thrown into the world of fitness training, gym workouts, beauty, hair, and make-up consultants, diction experts, ramp-walk trainers, fashion designers, and cosmetic surgeons. With an attitude that can be best summarised by the dialogue – "It hurts? It looks fab!"- they are painfully sculpted into identical bodies that must give perfunctory answers with the perfect intonation. But as the film draws deeper into life at the boot-camp, the viewer gets glimpses into the multiple stories – full of vulnerability, insecurities, and strength – behind their flawless exteriors. Ruhi, plagued by anxiety about the competition, sits on the balcony crying and calling her parents for reassurance. Ankita, hesitant to wear a bikini in public, wonders how far she is willing to go to get the crown. Pooja, the former Miss India, narrates the heart-breaking story of her father and his family rejecting her at birth because of her sex. Another contestant speaks of how her father sent her to live in a Buddhist monastery when she was very young. Although her story drew astonished laughs from the audience, it connects to the rest in similar ways. These young women were in search of forms of independence, freedom, choice, and equality in a country that they often saw as suffocating and limiting. As they navigated the beauty industry in carefully crafted and instrumental ways, they were also simultaneously reduced to subjects of patriarchy and neoliberalism that capitalised on their bodies and dehumanised them regularly.

In what seems like a world away, we meet Prachi Trivedi, a young member and teacher of the Hindu nationalist women's organisation *Durga Vahini* (The Army of Durga). Established in the early 1990s the organisation adheres to the larger right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology, embracing the idea of a *Bharat* (India) where Hindus are given an elevated status and minority groups such as Muslims and Christians are excluded and suppressed. Key to organising and running a residential training camp for young girls held at a local school, Prachi tells the viewer of her long involvement in the movement, voicing her hatred for "weak figures like Gandhi" and her espousal of violence for the benefit of the nation. The camp, a part of a carefully crafted system of similar gatherings at various levels (national, regional, district, and local), aims to impart intellectual, spiritual, and physical education to girls (between the ages of 18 and 35) to transform them into strong and moral members of the Hindutva movement. Through Pahuja's coverage of the camp we see the nuances and aesthetics of the daily rituals and everyday politics of this gendered Hindu nationalist space. The trainees are made to wake up early and partake in rigorous exercises and prayers in the school ground as the saffron nationalist flag sways with the wind and a photograph of *Bharat Mata* (the Mother Goddess represented cartographically on a map of the

subcontinent) glistens in front of them. They then take lessons on various topics – from their spiritual duties as daughters and wives-to-be to morality and mythology to holding guns and learning martial arts. Scholars such as Yuval-Davis (1997) have elaborated in depth on the intersections of gender and nationalism. Women are not only the reproducers and symbolic markers of nations and nationalisms but are also the imparters of moral and family values these movements espouse. As the documentary unfolds its scenes of pedagogical practices and strategies of this Hindu nationalist women's organisation, the aforementioned arguments of feminist scholars come alive. However, looking at the strategic and laborious formulation of the training programmes (as well as the inclusion of physical training, warrior goddesses, 'feminised' histories and aesthetics, and even career counselling for the girls), the film also compels the viewer to ask – are the teachers in the camp merely holding on to their 'natural' roles of mothers/educators or are they challenging these assigned roles and male-dominated discourses and reshaping Hindutva? Is there space for gendered (or even feminist) dissent within the Hindu nationalist project?

Although we hear from some of the members of this camp (including a young girl who takes great pride in not having any Muslim friends) and witness their blossoming friendships, Prachi shines as the protagonist tying the scenes from the Hindu nationalist camp together. Strong and confident, at a point in the film she looks into the camera and utters that she would kill for Hindutva and harm anyone that goes against her nation. But alongside her tough exterior that screams at and terrifies the girls in the camp and learns to fight with aggression, the film portrays the contradictions and gendered conundrums that occupy her mind. Prachi's father, a staunch and easily dislikeable patriarch who takes great pride at telling the viewers that he has used physical punishments to discipline his precious daughter, wants her to get married and have a family. Prachi, wanting to devote her life to Hindutva and the Hindu nation, longs for freedom and wants to achieve it by fighting for a belief system and ideology that is entrenched in patriarchy. Prachi goes through the film jokingly shutting down her father's aspirations for her while being visibly anxious and teary about these expectations. Perplexed by gendered norms, in a delightfully queer moment in the film, she laments that she is neither a girl nor a boy and she simply does not know how to be either. Her personal tensions and contradictions pointing to political ones for the movement itself.

While these 'two worlds' seem disconnected at first, the documentary's juxtaposition of them draws unnerving and interesting parallels. On an interview in a green rural Maharashtra, Prachi Trivedi tells the viewers that she is alright with her father hitting her as "he let her live" in spite of her being a girl child. A few scenes apart, the mother of former Miss India Pooja Sharma, tearfully speaks of giving birth to Pooja, a girl, and being asked to kill the baby by her husband and in-laws. Refusing to commit

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infanticide, she leaves her husband, raising her daughter alone. The undertone of patriarchal control (in personal, public, and political spheres) connect the two stories in concrete ways forcing the viewer to ask – how different are these worlds really? The embodied nature of this control in the two spaces further solidifies this connection. As women in the Hindu nationalist camp train their bodies in preparation for self-defence, reducing themselves to exercise counts and objects of martial arts manoeuvres, in a particularly dehumanising scene, women in the Miss India boot-camp walk down a beach, their faces and bodies covered with white cloths, only their legs visible as objects of the shoot. Women's bodies in both these worlds are rendered sites of control and objectification but as these bodies train for larger goals (Hindutva or Miss India), do they also become sites of subversion, agency, and bargains? Alongside patriarchy, the film also (mildly) engages with neoliberalism as a force that is re-shaping the lives of Indian women. The Hindutva movement embraces neoliberalism in the name of 'development' and the movement's women are now being trained to build respectable careers alongside becoming wives and mothers. Their aspirations (voiced by Prachi in particular) resonating sometimes with the latte-sipping Miss India contestants that embrace globalisation and cosmopolitanism with ease. Finally, in both these spaces, the viewer can locate the numerous everyday bargains and negotiations with patriarchy that these women undertake to find their space in an India that has room for many worlds. **(Kandiyoti, 1988)** Bargains that allow them agency and even partial empowerment in systems that were built on patriarchy. But how far will these negotiations and bargains take them in their quest for freedom? What shape does this freedom take?

As Miss India contestants glide on stage with their sashes, dresses, and high-heels, exhibiting the results of their beauty and fitness regimes and answering mundane (and often ridiculous) questions with poise; Pahuja takes us back to the Hindu Nationalist camp. The young girls get dressed in white outfits with saffron sashes, ready to participate in a public parade of their training. They joke that the sashes make them feel like beauty pageant contestants. They walk through the city's streets, holding banners, beating drums, showing off their swords and guns, singing and shouting slogans, and marking their gendered nationalist space in the public domain. Both these parades while focusing on the women of the film, show the viewer glimpses of the audiences. And it is in these glimpses of those excluded from a film about Indian women that one can ask the final questions – What other worlds exist for Indian women? How do they overlap and how do we represent them in their entire complexity and depth?

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"Seasons of Mud"

Yousif Naser*

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Illustrations for Issue One

Yousif Naser is an Iraqi painter based in London. His "Seasons of Mud" paintings illustrate the first edition of Feminist Dissent. Yousif was born in 1952 in Amara, on the edges of the marshes of southern Iraq.

'Seasons of Mud 6' by Yousif Naser

The paintings in the "Seasons of Mud" series are composed of energetic brushstrokes that speed the narrative to its conclusion in a way that is brutal and frightening. The beauty of this is beguiling. Moving away from the black and grey tones, Yousif's "Seasons of Mud" is a deceptive collection. Under the shocking pinks and the sea greens are grotesque figures in a state of torture or maimed by war and bombs. Fish, dogs, human heads, human bodies in a state of subservience, grotesque scenes of torture lie in camouflage and ultimate ambush of the psyche.

You can see more of Yousif's work at his website:
http://www.yousifnaser.com/

Feminist Dissent

Inside this issue:

Feature articles on Why Feminist Dissent? And Why Universalism?

Voices of Dissent on the Poverty of Apologism and the British Left, A Black Feminist's Dilemma, Islamisation of the Muslim World, and My Journey from Islamist to Free Thinker

Creative work by Jackie Kay, Akhil Katyal, Rahila Gupta