



Our Relationship to Democracy

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The article discusses the lack of political accountability and cultural repression in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. The author highlights events such as the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban, and the formation of ISIS, which have caused irreparable damage to the affected regions. The author argues that it is necessary to be critical of the homogenization of an entire religion or region, and to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and identities within Muslim countries. The article emphasises the need to understand Muslim women's and men's writings in their own words, about their religious and political beliefs, practices, and perspectives. The author calls for dismantling outdated Orientalist myths and avoiding painting an overly romantic picture of the East. The article stresses that a blanket ban on Muslim immigrants or refugees is oblivious to the aspirations of distinct individuals and societies, and can exacerbate cultural and religious fanaticism. The perpetuation of a politics that creates cultural myopia and monocultural identities in a diverse society like the United States would be detrimental domestically and internationally. Finally, the author asserts that it is imperative to pay attention to the

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Abstract

The article discusses the lack of political accountability and cultural repression in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. The author highlights events such as the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban, and the formation of ISIS, which have caused irreparable damage to the affected regions. The author argues that it is necessary to be critical of the homogenization of an entire religion or region, and to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and identities within Muslim countries. The article emphasises the need to understand Muslim women's and men's writings in their own words, about their religious and political beliefs, practices, and perspectives. The author calls for dismantling outdated Orientalist myths and avoiding painting an overly romantic picture of the East. The article stresses that a blanket ban on Muslim immigrants or refugees is oblivious to the aspirations of distinct individuals and societies, and can exacerbate cultural and religious fanaticism. The perpetuation of a politics that creates cultural myopia and monocultural identities in a diverse society like the United States would be detrimental domestically and internationally. Finally, the author asserts that it is imperative to pay attention to the intricacies of history to prevent it from repeating itself. This article was previously published in Daily Times on 19 January, 2018 (<https://dailytimes.com.pk/183905/our-relationship-to-democracy/>).



We inhabit a world that has been sinking further into the morass of lack of political accountability and cultural repression after the gut-wrenching events of September 11, 2001. We have witnessed the fizzling out of the fragile Peace Pact in Palestine in 2003. We have witnessed the reduction of Afghanistan in Southwest Asia to a battlefield on which the former Soviet Union and its Cold War adversary, the United States, fought a proxy war. We have witnessed the legitimisation of the Taliban vigilante during that period, and then the brutal regime of the Taliban.

We have witnessed the invasion of Afghanistan, the rationale for which was the 'liberation' and 'emancipation' of the Afghan women. We have witnessed the invasion of Iraq, which enabled the ousting and execution of a dictator, who was once an American ally. We have witnessed the disbanding of the Iraqi army, growing sectarianism and political dysfunction in Iraq post-Saddam. We have witnessed instances of reckless regime change in Western Asia, Southwest Asia and the Middle East, which were brought about without careful thought being given to the repercussions and governance of those topographically and politically circuitous terrains. We have witnessed the installation of purportedly de jure regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the unspeakable degradations the populaces of those countries were subjected to. We have witnessed the declaration of a caliphate across northern and western Iraq as well as eastern Syria by the ISIS.

We have witnessed the condemnable distortions of Islam by that militant organisation and the egregious atrocities inflicted on not just minorities but on their co-religionists as well by ISIS. We have witnessed the regressive cultural politics of the Taliban in Afghanistan. We have witnessed the Hindutva movement in India, with its privileging the idea of an ethnically pure Hindu nation. These events were caused by political impetuosity and thoughtlessness, which cause such irreparable damage that their seismic tremors continue to destabilise other regions of the world. In such a complex world, multiple histories, cultures, and subjectivities cannot be pigeonholed, stereotyped or clubbed together.

I cannot emphasise enough that it is absolutely necessary to be critical of the folly of homogenising an entire religion as well as an entire region. Culture inscribes a wide range of experiences which centralising institutions attempt to render invisible and homogeneous. But people in Muslim countries are positioned in relation to their own class and cultural identities; their own histories; their sensitivity to the diversity of cultural traditions and to the questions and conflicts within them; their own



relations to the West; their interpretations of religious law and their concepts of the role of women and men in contemporary society.

In this current historical and cultural moment, critics and proponents of Islam often speak on behalf of Muslims, while rational Muslim women and men remain silent. It is the need to the day, particularly in the United States, to read and understand Muslim women's and men's writings, in their own words, about their religious practices, their political/ feminist practices, and how these practices affect their beliefs, convictions, and perspectives. It also becomes incumbent on these writers, as they attempt to address both the West and speak to their own cultures, to dismantle outdated Orientalist myths. There is, however, a fine balance between challenging the Western representations of Muslim men and women and avoiding painting an overly romantic picture of the East.

1.6 billion people of the global population subscribe to Islam. No single country or culture defines Muslim life or belief. In the classes that I teach on 'Women and Islam', I remind my students that all Arabs are not Muslims and all Muslims are not Arabs. An informed citizenry/ readership would compare Muslim women's and men's lives in a wide variety of cultures. In particular, such a citizenry/readership would focus on issues that concern Muslim women and men and that have brought them to the attention of international organisations such as rights, citizenship and refugee status as well as the role and interventionist politics of the developed world, the United States and Western European countries, in Muslim countries.

If we were more vigilant and paid attention to the intricacies of history, perhaps history wouldn't repeat itself.

During World War II, Jewish immigrants/ refugees were prevented from entering the United States, and now refugees from Muslim countries are going through the same trauma. Globalisation has hit a new low. Such blanket stereotyping and its corollary, a blanket ban, is oblivious to the aspirations of distinct individuals, societies and to the variations in religious practices and laws from one cultural context to the other.

Such politics can exacerbate cultural and religious fanaticism, globally, by emphasising a conception of identity between the 'authentic' and the 'demonic'. I observe that the political myopia being manifested during this period in the history of the United States treats the idea of a multicultural/ multiracial/ multilingual nation



as if it were a myth. The immigrant, by his or her status as an outsider, is portrayed to reaffirm the system that requires opposition in order to reassert itself. Also, subsequent to the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, a homogenised version of Islam replaced the old foe, communism.

It should be inconceivable, in the day and age of a global economy, to spurn the concepts of reason, rationality, and political and moral ethics. The perpetuation of a politics that emphasises, reinforces or creates cultural myopia and monocultural identities, in a society as diverse as that of the United States, would be the bane of our existence, domestically as well as internationally.

Democracy, as Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States of America, underlined, is 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. A government that protects and promotes vested/oligarchic interests while marginalising a section of the populace, which includes immigrants, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, leaves a lot to be desired.



About the Author

Author of several published articles, book reviews and editorials, Dr. Nyla Ali Khan has edited Parchment of Kashmir, a collection of essays on Jammu and Kashmir, written five books, including Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones: Transforming, Not Transmitting, Trauma, The Fiction of Nationality in an Era of Transnationalism, and Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between Indian and Pakistan. Several of her articles have appeared in academic journals, newspapers and magazines in the United States and South Asia. They focus heavily on the political issues and strife of her homeland, Jammu and Kashmir, India, where she visits frequently. Her unflinching commitment to pedagogy, scholarship, and her unrelenting faith in the critical focus that education can provide, motivate her to build bridges across racial, political, and ideological divides.