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Exceptional Sexuality in a Time of Terror: “Muslim” Subjects and Dissenting/Unmournable Bodies

Dina M. Siddiqi

Introduction

- 1 Dominant representations of violence against queer bodies that are also Muslim invariably render such lives and subjectivities exceptional. However, this exceptionality can be sustained only if we bracket out much of what constitutes the everyday fabric of life: economic hardship, political oppression, religious difference, war, and so on (Mikdashi and Puar 2016). Once de-contextualized—or detached from locality—Muslim queer precarity can easily be reified, allowing for the production of globally legible exceptional subjects, shaped by and feeding into resuscitated imperialist tropes of sexuality and Islam (Massad 2016; Long 2009; Rahman 2014). At work is a tautology—queers who are Muslim are in danger because they are Muslims who are queer.
- 2 My essay seeks to complicate received understandings of violence against queer (and other) bodies in Muslim South Asia by re-visiting the 2016 killing of two Dhaka-based gay-rights activists. The murders catapulted the lives of Bangladesh’s gender and sexually non-conforming communities onto a global stage. Using a transnational lens, I track how a narrative of exceptionalism plays out, is negotiated and resisted in this particular context. Bangladesh’s place in the global imaginary—a development success story, predominantly Muslim “but” secular, the menace of radical Islam lurking in the shadows—makes it an especially instructive site for exploration. The analysis that follows is premised on the assumption that privileging sexuality as a site of *particular* harm or repression occludes critical aspects of the operations of power, not the least in relation to the politics of dissent.

- 3 The essay is made up of two distinct strands of analysis. The first calls for expanding the frames through which we read extremist violence against queer bodies in a "time of terror." To be clear, my point is *not* to dismiss any role of religious ideology in the making of violence. Nor is it a defense of or apology for particular religious ideologies. It is, rather, to challenge a set of underlying assumptions on the relationship between violence and the secular. My concern is with the narratives that get attached to certain acts (the killing of bloggers, gay men, religious minorities), the questions that are asked or not, and the politics of circulation and citation therein. What, for instance, is lost in the framing of these deaths as exclusively—or even primarily—as a problem of free speech versus blasphemy, or the result of rising intolerance? Through an examination of the different meanings assigned to secular/state violence (enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detention) as opposed to religious violence (the public-execution-style murders of bloggers, gay men, and others), I contend that queer precarity is not a mere symptom of rising intolerance/fundamentalism in Bangladesh but should be situated within a broader framework that accounts for an authoritarian state, its historically ambivalent relation to religion, and the nation's structurally marginal transnational location. For the hypernationalist and authoritarian state, I contend, queer and politically dissident bodies are equally disposable. In contrast to this equal-opportunity indifference, the global media (and international bodies of various kinds) tend to act on a specific hierarchy of suffering in which queer bodies in Muslim nations carry a particular representational burden.
- 4 In a section on what I call secular blasphemies, I trace the production of the figure of the anti-nationalist in relation to long-standing fears of Islam. I go into some detail in order to foreground the historically awkward place of religion in the nationalist imaginary, and the implications thereof. I show how policing the national story is rendered an act of patriotism, while dissent from the official narrative invites accusations of anti-nationalist thought. Polarizing debates over the Shahbagh movement (see below) covered up a simultaneous proliferation of laws regulating political speech of various kinds.
- 5 State-sanctioned nationalist narratives and a series of increasingly draconian laws of sedition effectively collapse the Islamic terrorist onto the *Razakar*/war-time collaborator and anti-nationalist.
- 6 The second strand of the paper turns to the tensions and contradictions generated by the reification of gay and transgender violence in Bangladesh. I analyze an anonymous letter (I will refer to it as *The Letter*) circulated digitally just after the April killings. The authors, who self-identify as queer Bangladeshis, refuse absolutist narratives about Islam, even as they register state repression. For the authors, to do otherwise would be a form of complicity in imperialist projects *and* would draw attention away from transnational capitalist exploitation. Unpacking *The Letter* allows me to 1) address the question of the relationship of the Bangladeshi state to queer bodies; and 2) examine the ethical and epistemological dilemmas that have emerged in the so-called Muslim world since 9/11, and the resurrection of orientalist tropes to justify imperialist ventures (Abu-Lughod 2013; Farris 2017; Toor 2012). What are the consequences of looking at narratives of Islam in isolation? How do we write about violent social practices, without minimizing ground realities, but also without re-inscribing particular places as spaces of religious excess? How do fault lines between activism and academia—and the global North and South—play out in these debates?

- 7 In the conclusion, I bring the two strands of my argument together. I consider the consequences of the current political climate, in which some killings are unmournable and queer bodies are politically useful in selective ways. I end with a brief reflection on the politics of dissent in times of authoritarian terror that seems to characterize so many postcolonial states today.
- 8 This essay draws on over twenty years of engagement with feminist and queer activists in Bangladesh. Between 2016 and 2017, I also carried out formal and informal conversations—primarily on the pros and cons of *The Letter*—with friends in the LGBT community and sexual-rights activists. I first met Xulhaz Mannan, one of the two gay men killed, when I found myself at an early planning meeting for the publication *Roopban*.¹ I remember little of that evening, except for the excitement and anticipation in the air. I rarely saw Xulhaz after he joined the US Embassy but we remained Facebook friends. I have since met the one person who survived that brutal attack. He was kind enough to read through this essay and offer his thoughts.

Geographies of Islam: local versus global?

- 9 On the morning of April 25, 2016, men posing as postal couriers slipped into the residence of Xulhaz Mannan, one of a handful openly gay LGBT activists in Bangladesh. Armed with machetes, the men killed Xulhaz and his friend Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy. A second friend, who locked himself in a bathroom, managed to survive. Carried out in broad daylight by assailants still at large, the murders of the two young men came as a shock to most people. Episodic attacks by self-proclaimed Islamic militants in the past generally targeted publishers, bloggers, and alleged atheists. The new focus on gay men had a chilling effect not only on various queer communities but also on professionals associated in the public imagination with sexual-health initiatives. In the backdrop of panic and uncertainty, individuals shut down social media accounts and disappeared underground; those with means sought refuge or asylum abroad.
- 10 Unlike much else that transpires in the country, the news made international headlines.
- 11 The iconic nature of the murders—the use of the signature machete favored by local Islamist militants—attracted global attention to a place generally ignored in the international media. For several weeks in a row, and long after, leading international news outlets, from *The New York Times* to *The Huffington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, carried reports and feature stories on the murders (Khaled 2016; Rahman 2017; Sanjum 2017). Xulhaz's name and face quickly became associated with Bangladesh's queer movement and the LGBT magazine, *Roopban* that he had helped to found.
- 12 Just two months later, a spectacularly staged, ISIS-style attack on an exclusive restaurant in Dhaka left 20 people dead. The Holey Bakery killings, as it came to be called, consolidated fears of the nation's descent into fundamentalist terror.² Not unexpectedly, national and international accounts of both events drew on a "default" global narrative—of yet another secular state under threat from an intolerant strand of Islam bent on muzzling freedom of thought and action. Notably, the temporal juxtaposition of the two events, and their shared discursive universe, forced an unprecedented public reckoning with questions of gay rights, religion, and the secular

state. For a moment at least, the queer and terror issues came to be tied together in the public imagination.

- 13 An exclusively empirical formulation—"why religious radicalism?"—forecloses an examination of the broader discursive environment in which some questions are raised and others disappear from the frame altogether. Thus I hold at bay various iterations of a question that has taken over popular and academic circles: what accounts for the emergence of such ferocious religiosity in a nation known for the "moderation"³ of its Islam?
- 14 The territory that is now Bangladesh has historically been represented as possessing a distinctively Bengali and moderate form of Muslimness. This is reflected as much in Euro-American Areas Studies as in vernacular scholarship and officially sanctioned narratives. The April killings and Holey Bakery attacks created a rift in this apparent Bangladeshi difference. These two violent episodes in quick succession recalled an earlier moment, when a fatwa against the writer Taslima Nasreen caused her to go into hiding in 1993. This was the first time that the image of Bangladesh as a space of religious moderation had been called into question, in South Asia and globally. In the intervening 20 years, Bangladesh seemed to have overcome the religious threats to women's rights in particular. Thus, the popular response was one of perplexity and despair at the apparent backslide, and a renewed loss of the nation's syncretic, secular culture. To a rather great extent, this apparent disjunction has been mediated by falling back on the analytically problematic but long entrenched binary in the study of South Asian Muslim societies: good "local" Islam (syncretic, tolerant of difference, Sufi) and bad global/transnational Islam (Arab, Wahabi, rigid, intolerant). In this respect, a major methodological challenge the paper raises is how to address the specificity of Islam in Bangladesh without reproducing the trope of the nation as a space of moderation or of excess. This calls for complicating received notions of the local, as I hope to do through my analysis.

On secular violence

- 15 What do we miss when we accept conventional explanations for extremist violence—those that place religion (text, practice) at the core? What ideological labor does the exclusive, near obsessive emphasis on Islam and its potential for radicalism perform? Janet Jakobsen observes that a focus on religion distracts from the role of the secular state in the production of violence (Jakobsen 2016). Building on Jakobsen, I suggest that a priori associations of Islam with (extremist) violence correspond to the common sense belief that secular regimes provide the absolute bulwark against religious violence. At work is also the presumption that secular states are not generative of violence, at least not of the kind that matters. The narrative is persuasive only because of the entrenched assumption that 1) secularity brings safety to all bodies and 2) secular violence is not real violence. This understanding also relies on a neat analytical distinction between religion and politics. As I show in the following section, we lose clarity and complexity when we mistake a larger trend—in this case against public speech—with an instantiation of religiously motivated hatred.
- 16 Jakobsen notes that the available solution to violence is more state violence, which is then rendered or represented as necessary violence (cf. Asad 2003 on necessary pain). In the name of threats to secularism, such countermeasures by the secular state are not

only acceptable and warranted, they cannot be named or recognized as violence. The slew of military operations in the aftermath of the Holey attack—in which the “terrorists” weeded out of their dens were invariably shot in the back while attempting to escape—present a case in point. Despite often sloppy staging and dubious details, when carried out under the sign of security or saving secularism, these extra-judicial killings tend to elicit muted if any protest.

- 17 Unpacking the binary of religious/secular violence, I argue, allows us to grasp more fully the interconnected logics of violence at different scales. While there are “homegrown” individuals and groups in Bangladesh who are happy to turn to violence in order to eliminate certain kinds of speech and action—and while ISIS may well have a base in the country—an exclusive focus on “terrorists” obscures the complicity of the state (and transnational forces) in creating the context and conditions that enable such killings (see Abu-Rish [2016] on Jordan). Here, it is worth keeping in mind that the blogger Abhijit Roy was hacked to death in public, while numerous witnesses—including the police—stood by. The presence and inaction of the police is astonishing but not exceptional. The new normal in Bangladesh includes extra-judicial killings, often justified through the flimsiest of storylines. In the prevailing culture of fear and intimidation, skepticism towards state-sanctioned narratives and performances of justice coexists with a deep sense of uncertainty, of never being sure of the “truth” of events.
- 18 The current proliferation of laws regulating political speech, religious critique and officially sanctioned histories and hagiography must be located on this backdrop. A state that relies on eliminating political rivals through such extra-legal means, and appears indifferent to the violence visited on others, must also regulate, silence, and criminalize potentially threatening speech. The question arises: which speech and which bodies? The contours of Bangladesh’s laws of sedition produce an environment that enables tolerance for some bodies and not others, for some deaths, and not others. What are the boundaries between what can be spoken of and what must remain unspoken? Who draws the lines between the terrorist and the political dissenter, recast as anti-nationalist? These are not questions that can be addressed if we adhere to a fundamentalism/secularism binary.

Voicing dissent in a time of terror

- 19 Several days after the killing of Xulhaz and Tonoy, an anonymous English language document circulated briefly in the blogosphere and on private list-serves. The Letter, as I call it, was both provocation and plea. Directed at well-wishers of the Bangladeshi queer community at home and abroad, the unknown author(s) positioned themselves as voices from *within* the queer community. Their dispatch contained a blistering critique of national and international accounts of the murders, and global exhortations of solidarity since then. The author(s) made an ardent appeal against forging solidarities that reinforced Islamophobic and neo-imperial framings. Here they recall the paradoxical effect of the increasing legibility of queer movements in Muslim spaces. The rise of gay activism in Euro-America, and related interest in queer communities elsewhere, can result in increasing Islamophobia (See Rahman 2014). Along with unpacking the liberal language of tolerance in which the issue of gay rights (or lack thereof) had been framed, The Letter invited readers to reflect on the dangers of

representing Bangladesh as "an Islamic fundamentalist country unsafe for secular bloggers, free thinkers or gender deviants." The following extract encapsulates its central message:

Ask yourself what is at stake when the international media focuses on some death and not others? Why "free speech" and "sexual and gender diversity" and not power-grabbing, land grabbing and coercion? Because while the West has handpicked extremist Islam as its enemy (with the banner of ISIS), speaking out against the violence of labor practices and money-making in third world nations is not high on their agenda.⁴

The single-spaced three page long text addressed a range of other concerns, from the dangers of queer visibility to the pitfalls of NGOized forms of organizing. The anonymous missive concluded with a bold declaration: "The queer fight is against Western hegemony, *not by its side* (emphasis mine)."

- 20 The Letter calls into question the relationship between publicity, visibility and protection, given the contemporary logics of publicity. The author(s) remark that calls for international solidarity when they result in the relentless pursuit of leads for news stories are counterproductive. The ensuing attention renders it almost impossible to remain safely in hiding. The reader is reminded of Michel Foucault's observation in *Discipline and Punish* that visibility is a trap. The author(s) write: "Awareness calls for visibility. However, visibility does not ensure safety or security. *Forcing* visibility in unsafe situations like this might benefit those who seek asylum or humanitarian parole (super expensive!), or have top notch security but it will only make those without these options *totally disposable* (emphasis added)." Visibility, they suggest, may be a marker of progress and protection but only for certain bodies. Indeed, this is a long-standing debate in queer circles that exposes a general fault line between working-class, non-English-speaking *hijra* and affluent, English-speaking gay- and lesbian-identified individuals with access to the internet (Siddiqi 2009 and 2011).⁵
- 21 Attentive to the nuances of class and cultural capital that a cosmopolitan, NGOized selfhood confers (referring perhaps to individuals such as Xulhaz, who was related to a former Foreign Minister and a former employee of USAID), The Letter foregrounds the multiple paradoxes and inevitable fractures of deploying transnational visibility as a main strategy for queer movements.
- 22 Presumably conscious of the homogenizing effects/epistemic violence that global "celebrity" carries with it, the writer(s) call on their imagined audience to desist from reducing Bangladesh's complex and layered LGBT community to one face (Xulhaz Mannan) and one organization (*Roopban*). The author-activists express a corresponding concern over the glorification of Xulhaz and the "forgetting" of his friend Tonoy in the numerous, globally circulating tributes produced in the wake of their killings.
- 23 The writer(s) clarify their use of the English word queer in the text to describe gender- and sexually- non-conforming persons. This was, they explained, "a place holder," used in lieu of more appropriate vocabulary.
- 24 This "letter without a name" was signed off "in rage," in the name of *ashabhyo manushjon* (literally savage or uncivilized people). The refusal to identify with the civilized or *shobhya* world, with all that is proper and human, presumably signifies the refusal of the civilizational framework, of liberal notions of the human, complete with their colonial, Islamophobic and racial underpinnings (see Asad [2003]). It is a rejection of the discourse of civilization that shores up development and humanitarian politics.

- 25 The Letter received a hostile reception from mainstream human rights activists and gay men within Bangladesh. The latter were pre-occupied with arranging protection for themselves or their friends whose sexual identity and/or work-life suddenly rendered them vulnerable to (presumably Islamist) violence. The unnamed authors were roundly condemned, accused not only of minimizing the dangers of extremist Islam but also of acting irresponsibly "when real lives and bodies were at stake." The consensus was that, strategically, it would be best to ignore this unwelcome discursive intervention. Neither did the provocative contents receive much traction from diaspora or international audiences.
- 26 As is only appropriate in these social-media saturated times, this missive arrived and (was) disappeared in the on-line world. The decision to remain anonymous no doubt arose from considerations of safety, but may also have been the result of anticipated hostility to the propositions in the letter. Calls to move away from Euro-American ideological frames and institutional apparatus would be jarring in the context of Bangladeshi civil society in "normal" times.
- 27 The Letter may as well have come from another planet given the fear and panic generated by the killings—which took everyone by surprise even though some form of violence was anticipated. Bangladesh had gone from a place where, in 2006, two university undergraduates "outed" themselves at an international conference on sexuality to one where, a decade later, government-approved and foreign-funded programs on MSM sexual-health services were drastically scaled down or halted altogether. The uncertainty and terror had a surreal quality, as though an epidemic had been unleashed, vectors of which had to be suppressed by any means necessary. The visceral immediacy of unexpected danger argued against any kind of discursive intervention. Notably, key mobilizing support came from the donor community, with whom many activists already had close working relationships.
- 28 The implicit opposition between "anti-imperialists" and "activists" that The Letter hints at recalls fault lines that have surfaced elsewhere in the so-called Muslim world. These emergent tensions center around efforts, especially since September 2001, to foreground the articulations of empire and geopolitics with hegemonic knowledge formations of Islam in relation to gender and sexuality (Abu-Lughod 2011; Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem 2008; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Puar 2007; Toor 2012). Scholars in this vast and heterogeneous field are primarily but not exclusively located in Euro-American universities. They have been particularly attentive to the subtle and overt harnessing of colonial and orientalist narratives—of Muslim backwardness and the need for external salvation—to justify violent projects of empire. The singular focus on an ostensibly timeless Islam, such analyses contend, displaces the critical role of global political economy, imperialist relations, and state bureaucracies, *inter alia*. Effectively, this body of scholarship brings into question prevailing development initiatives and related donor politics that are central to the livelihoods and subjectivities of mainstream women's and human rights activists/professionals. As such they directly implicate what we might call practical field operations.
- 29 Some critics have dismissed such efforts on the basis of geographic origin. In this view, elitist scholars based in Euro-America, removed from their putative realities on the ground, have the luxury of critiquing imperialist policies in a vacuum (Zia 2018; see also the critique by Nafar, Nafar, and Jrery 2012). By extension, scholarship generated from such locations is neither credible nor authentic. In contrast, activists fighting "in

the trenches" of the global South are cast as having real stakes in the struggle against Islamist extremism since they are the ones who face actual violence (see Zia [2015]).

- 30 One result of this problematic North-South/global-local distinction, mapped on to a stark activist-academic divide, is a systematic misreading of calls to complicate and situate readings of Islamist violence. Abu-Odeh, for instance, argues that anti-imperialist critiques are externally generated, contain minimal institutional analysis and display a remarkable lack of knowledge of, or even curiosity regarding, "the complicated world of local activists, the fluid difference between them and their causes, and between their causes and those causes' various articulations" (Abu-Odeh 2015). The title of her piece, "Holier than Thou? The Anti-imperialist versus the Local Activist" sets up mutually exclusive categories. The figure of the anti-imperialist is constructed through a series of exclusions; she can be neither activist nor local, and certainly not a "local" activist. Complex theoretical interventions can be dismissed as accusations of Southern activist "submission to the imperialist West" (Abu-Odeh 2015).⁶ External locational privilege is said to encourage paternalism toward "local activists," much like that of colonial officials toward so-called "natives" (Abu-Odeh 2015). In fact, the charge of complicity can travel in the other direction. "Anti-imperialists" are frequently accused of being apologists for Islamists and other right wing forces.
- 31 Such reductive and essentializing tendencies do nothing to move the conversation forward. The authors of *The Letter* offer a way out of this seeming impasse in their implicit call to dismantle the binary of imperialism versus rights. Highlighting instead the terrain of land, materiality, and power, they remind us that state regulation of sexuality—and resistance to it—is imbricated in multi-scalar and transnational structures of governance, both discursive and material.
- 32 Historically, the relationship of the Bangladeshi state to (some) queer bodies was mediated by a rarely invoked colonial provision criminalizing sodomy. More recently, a combination of development and public-health initiatives turned the governmental gaze on those classified as Men who have Sex with Men (MSM). State interest in non-normative sexualities tends to hinge on the availability of funding for HIV/AIDS prevention. In addition, through the availability of funding, the new global interest in non-normative sexualities in the global South enhanced already existing initiatives surrounding gay rights. The murders of Xulhaz and Tonoy added a layer of complexity in which the state has been forced to protect its secular reputation, without changing its stance on questions of queer identity. In other words, and as *The Letter* indicates, LGBT politics in Bangladesh are deeply entangled in the mechanisms of global governance and a humanitarianism ethos, and thereby regulate the modes of solidarity available.⁷ The effect is to stabilize international NGO and donor narratives that hinge upon the assumption of a backward, religious space that must be saved or civilized through developmental aid and models. By default, mainstream NGO and civil-society actions rely upon this individuated form of human rights discourse.
- 33 How individuals from the queer community negotiate this complex terrain is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, those to whom I spoke on the subject are perfectly aware of the uses of their bodies and sexualities by state agencies and transnational bodies. Some are more critical of imperialist/developmental politics than others. Divided on the question of visibility, there is consensus that funding is essential to both organizing and bodily protection.

- 34 In asking why the deaths of Xulhaz and Tonoy are nameable and mournable internationally but not those killed or disappeared by the state, The Letter provokes us to rethink why some forms of violence constitute Terror while others—perpetrated against those who dissent politically—do not. In the next section, I contextualize the trope of the secular Bengali nation under attack, and historicize the violence of certain secular nationalist utterances. This “detour” into recent political history provides an example of what is possible if the reading of queer precarity in Bangladesh (and elsewhere) were to be unanchored from the conditions and framing identified by the authors of The Letter.

Secular blasphemies and nationalist dissent

- 35 The Bangla term *rajdroho*—literally revolt against the raja or ruler—is akin to the Merriam-Webster definition of sedition as the incitement of resistance to or insurrection against lawful authority. This is somewhat distinct from the 1898 Code of Criminal Procedure from which the current sedition laws are derived. The original code, put in place to “manage” intercommunity relations, “restore” law and order and of course to crush political dissent, defined “seditious material” as that likely to incite “disaffection” towards the Government of India or “class hatred” between India’s different communities. As I show, sovereignty resides not in the body of the Raja but in the nation and its national story, quite literally today.
- 36 If, as Lotte Hoek (2017) contends, the melodrama of nationalism is the hallmark of contemporary Bangladeshi politics, what are the stakes for those who dissent? Any answer must attend to the *moral force* of what Hoek calls “the master discourse of 1971” (p. 69) that is, to officially sanctioned modes of remembering the (implicitly sacred) time of independence.⁸ Hoek rightly observes that this master discourse has classically melodramatic features, operating through “highly conventionalized rhetoric and gestures that point to a Manichean order of right and wrong” (p. 69).
- 37 It is the structuring of Bangladesh’s nationalist drama—popular ideas of how “1971” is or should be remembered and corresponding economies of affect—that is relevant for my analysis. Any nationalist storytelling is at the same time an effort to mask multiple fractures and inconsistencies. In this respect, Bangladesh’s political history tends to reinforce a Manichean outlook. Almost from its inception, the origin story of 1971 has been the subject of bitter disputation. One outcome of the numerous official erasures and exclusions, of the interchangeable nature of heroes and villains is a popular desire for historical clarity or a resistance to ambiguity. Under the circumstances, calls to protect the nation through policing the “real” story of independence cannot but carry a particular emotional charge. Policing national history is thus rendered an urgent act of patriotism.
- 38 The competing and extraordinarily partisan versions of history in circulation leave little room for nuance or complexity.
- 39 Asad Ahmed (2009) writes that (religious) blasphemy as a trope enlists “a tested set of binaries to reductively make sense of the world: secular/religious, liberal/fundamentalist, rational/irrational, and, by simple deduction, ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’—as if all these categories were internally coherent, consistent and informative about the imagined orders they describe” (p. 172). What we might call secular blasphemy, I

suggest, performs a similar task—making sense of the world in reductive binary terms through the nationalist liberal imaginary. Blasphemy as concept allows us to understand the affective attachment—the extraordinary passion for and defense of —“*shothik itihash*,” that is, of the right version of the national story. In other words, the story of 1971 has taken on something of a sacred quality, so that any criticism of the sanctioned narrative appears to verge on the blasphemous. In particular, the figure of 3 million dead—precisely because it is so disputed—has become sacrosanct. In the face of long-term denial of wartime atrocities, the number carries profound symbolic weight, and easily mobilizes violent nationalist affect.

- 40 If the formal and informal policing of the 1971 story corresponds to revisionist political projects and the continued deferral of war crimes trials, the *razakar*/traitor/anti-nationalist features centrally in these contestations, not the least because of such deferrals. The literal embodiment of sedition, the image of the *razakar* has over time been folded into that of the bad Muslim—fanatical, irrational and violent, secretly desiring Pakistan. In this view, today’s “fundamentalists” are the *razakars* of 1971.⁹ By extension, “incorrect” readings of 1971 are not just tantamount to sacrilege. They also constitute a serious threat to the national interest.
- 41 Paradoxically, efforts to right a major historical wrong—the deferral of justice for the victims of 1971—gave new purchase to the already stark moral universe of Bangladeshi cultural politics. In 2009, the ruling Awami League finally established an International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) with the objective of prosecuting individuals suspected of committing crimes against humanity during the war. Primarily from the JI, most collaborators (*razakars*) had until then enjoyed a remarkable degree of legal impunity and political authority, several having served as ministers in previous governments.
- 42 Forty years in the making, the Tribunal was the object of eager anticipation. The absence of public reckoning or a national reconciliation process for so long magnified the moral authority of the Tribunal and the affect that it generated. Emergent grammars of justice—popular and official—hinged on long-sedimented binaries around nation and Islam:

Pro-Liberation War : Pro-Pakistani
 Freedom Fighter : *Razakar* (war time collaborator)
 Awami League : Jamaat I Islami and the BNP
 Patriotic : Anti-national/Seditious
 Secular (Progressive) : Religious (fanatical)

These binaries map on to ontological anxieties about the nation itself. This may be one reason why the lines between wartime collaboration, by definition anti-national, and the expression of ideological or political dissent tend to be blurred—not just by an increasingly authoritarian state but also the intellectual gatekeepers of the nation.

- 43 Recalibrated periodically, these oppositions—and the moral force they represent—came into stark relief in 2013 with the spectacular irruption into political life of the Shahbagh movement. In early February, a small group of young leftists gathered at the crossroads of Shahbagh to protest the life sentence awarded to a JI member convicted by the Tribunal. Rumors abounded that the AL had come to a political understanding with the JI over the issue. Concerned that a change in government would lead to the latter’s release, the group insisted instead on the death penalty. Their demand resonated powerfully with otherwise “non-political” citizens who had seen too many criminals walk free after a regime change, and who had waited a long time for these trials. Dubbed *Ganojagoron Moncho* or Platform for People’s Awakening, at its peak, it

drew in an audience of several hundred thousand men, women and children daily. The demand for judicial impartiality quickly transmuted into a collective demand for the hanging of all war criminals. The slogan *Phashi chai*—we demand hanging—became the movement's key rallying cry. Put differently, state violence—the death penalty—came to stand for the closure of the national wound of deferred justice.

- 44 Fractures emerged almost as immediately, revealing unspoken rules about what could and could not be spoken out about the 1971 war and, by extension, about the Tribunal. Readily re-inscribing older binaries, Shahbagh worked as a litmus test of sorts: one was either *for* the movement, and thereby for liberation and secularism, or against it, and thus by implication for Pakistan/JI and fundamentalism.
- 45 Fault lines surrounding the movement's relationship to Islam appeared soon enough. The figure of the traitor (*razakar*), already dense with meaning, took on a life of its own. Nayanika Mookherjee (2012:50) notes that denunciatory practices toward *razakars* are primarily performed and staged. In non-nationalist counter-publics, Shahbagh's strident secular nationalism came to be read as implicitly against-Islam. A counter-movement led by a heretofore-obscure group of Islamists capitalized fully on older binaries and associations, successfully labeling *Shahbaghis* as atheists. The contradictions inherent to the nation were quite literally staged as public drama.
- 46 At a time of heightened emotions, the slogans and chants enacted a form of rhetorical bloodletting. While there was no uniform Shahbagh worldview, dominant voices expressed concerns about the danger not just from religious extremists but also from the anti-nationals in their midst. In the prevailing environment, any form of dissent could be reductively recast as anti-national, standing not just against the nation but also the 1971 war and the spirit or sentiment represented by that war (*muktijuddhor chetona*). A casual remark on a talk show by a BRAC University professor that the Shahbagh movement exhibited "fascist undertones" garnered death threats and demands for him to be fired. A (prurient) short story that depicted the numerous and visible young women who spent their nights protesting at *Shahbagh* as sexually lax drew enormous condemnation. In other circumstances, such an accusation would have elicited murmurs of puritanical approval. In this instance, the backlash was so severe that a public apology from the prominent elderly male author did not suffice. The newspaper in which the story appeared was forced to permanently withdraw the piece and issue an apology of its own.
- 47 When cast as essential to the protection of the nation, the extraordinary violence of certain secular-nationalist utterances, and their generative potential, is effectively occluded. What in other contexts would be considered censorship comes to be seen as sensible and necessary measures. The trope of the secular nation under attack from all sides actively invites the regulation or criminalization of speech. Under these circumstances, attempts to construct a counter-public can also be dismissed as dangerous, anti-national activity. In late 2015, British journalist David Bergman, who ran a blog on ICT proceedings discovered this first hand after referring in his blog to academic studies that differed from the official Tribunal-sanctioned figure of 3 million dead. The ICT charged Bergman with contempt for having "caused grave hurt to the emotion of the nation and also belittled the authority of a court of law" (Ali 2015).¹⁰ Here the nation itself is personified, a sentient being with emotions capable of being wounded. In turn, 49 signatories to a petition that challenged the charge against Bergman found themselves threatened with contempt of court. The message was clear

—deviation from the sanctioned narrative would not be tolerated. Any such speech act would be deemed unacceptable, a “profanity” that had to be excised urgently from the body politics before it could defile the realm of the sacred territory of 71/Shahbagh.

- 48 The tussle over the dead body of Piash Karim, the professor mentioned earlier, offers a sobering illustration in this regard. In death, his body took on a political life of its own (cf. Verdery 2000).¹¹ A popular if controversial public figure on the talk show circuit, Piash (as he was known) was an outspoken critic of the AL government. Following his unexpected death, his family requested official permission to display his body at the iconic nationalist monument, the Shahid Minar, so that the public could pay their respects. This routine ritual of remembrance for public figures provoked enormous resistance from those who felt Piash’s body would defile the sacred space of the Shahid Minar. A popular chant from that time, “The burden of Piash Karim’s body will not be borne by the Shaheed Minar” signaled that Piash’s views were a burden to the nation. Another, “The sacred Shaheed Minar will not bear the body of a (Pakistani) agent, take it to Pakistan” collapsed the distinction between Piash the critic of Shahbagh, his corpse and Pakistan itself. The framing of the dead body as national burden called for its symbolic expulsion from national territory into enemy/Pakistani territory.
- 49 Riding on a tide of populism generated by the Tribunal and Shahbagh, in 2013 the government amended the 2006 Information and Communications Technology Act, rendering it even more draconian in content and reach.¹² Notably, the amendment sharpened colonial era provisions on hurting the religious sentiments of a community.”
- 50 Official media policy, The National Broadcasting Policy introduced in 2014, effectively criminalizes any speech judged to be anti-state, or that goes against national ideology, the national interest or is “inconsistent with Bangladesh’s culture” (Bangladesh Gazette 2014a). Among other things, the policy restricts reporting on “rebellion, anarchy or violence” (Bangladesh Gazette 2014b) if such reporting is deemed to be against the national or people’s interest. The Digital Security Act of 2018, under consideration by Parliament, prescribes a maximum penalty of life in prison for the crime of spreading “false information” about the 1971 war, or about the national founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; seven years for disturbing public order; and two years for defamation or harming religious sensitivities. It is worth noting that the penalty for defaming Mujib’s reputation is much higher than it is for hurting religious sentiments.
- 51 Since then, the formally secular state has invoked the ICT law to silence not just journalists questioning state actions but also several bloggers accused of atheism and/or of producing disparaging commentary on Islam. It is no small irony that these bloggers were charged with the colonial crime of “hurting” the sentiments of a religious community.
- 52 Paradoxes abound. The secular Bangladeshi state has used sedition laws to silence “atheist” bloggers charged with hurting the sentiments of a religious community, even as it calls for (must be seen as calling for?) the protection of the same bloggers from Islamist terror (but not other kinds).
- 53 Threatened in its monopoly over the national narrative, the current regime presents itself as sole guardian of the secular Bengali nation. The state must also contend with not being perceived as anti-Islamic or pro-Indian, which often slides in the right-wing imagination into being “pro-Hindu.” As a result, the moral defense of the nation includes a defense of (moderate) Islam, one that is acceptable and non-threatening to

global investors and the donor community. The unstable place of Islam in the nation and the imperatives of global finance generate their own contradictions. This explains the police refusing to grant permission for a gay pride procession at the annual Bengali New Year's celebration that Xulhaz had organized for the week preceding his murder. The ostensible reason was the inability to provide security to the procession in the face of Islamist threats. Yet this same police force arrested several of Xulhaz's gay comrades who decided to attend in their own capacity. Ultimately, to the state, both queer and politically dissident bodies appear equally disposable.

In lieu of a conclusion

- 54 The current moment stands out because of the peculiar prominence granted to Muslim sexual subjectivity in discourses of global governance and as well as the striking emotional charge such discourses carry. Sexuality, arguably, is increasingly central to the production of an idea of an Islamic difference, as Momin Rahman has argued recently (Rahman 2014). Given the global obsession with Muslim terror, the existing developmental and humanitarian focus on non-normative sexualities in the global South takes on a particular salience in the Muslim world. Thus, "gay killings" in Muslim spaces garner special attention. The Bangladeshi state and its actions must be located in this broader context.
- 55 In a set of reflections on the production of queer theory from locations where war and colonization are quotidian contexts of life, Mikdashi and Puar (2016) ask if we should "rethink what sexual injury is and the economic, political and military work that designations of sexual or gendered injury does in the first place. How do these designations affect which deaths or injuries are internationally nameable and mournable and which deaths are merely 'collateral damage' in the Middle East?" (p. 220).
- 56 In the spirit of Mikdashi and Puar, in this essay I have mapped the political and economic work of exceptionalizing Muslim "queer precarity" in the context of NGOization and developmentalism rather than war. As I contend in the introduction, privileging queer sexuality as a site of special harm obscures key aspects of the operations of power. While all kinds of bodies and speech are policed by the state, only some bodies and injuries are globally legible/mournable in the prevailing narrative. The analytical frame through which the dominant discourse is organized simplifies and obfuscates a much more complex set of circumstances in Bangladesh.
- 57 The slippage between the fear of Islam and fear for the nation's integrity generates conditions for silencing political dissent. The effect is to normalize state or secular violence, which then appears to be the only bulwark against religious extremism. At the same time, contestations over who owns the national narrative allow the lines between terrorist and anti-nationalist (those who dissent politically) to be blurred. In effect, secular blasphemies and the production of fear of Islamist terror/Pakistani traitors mask the state's systematic silencing of dissent.
- 58 The defensive posture of the Bangladeshi state opens the door to thinking more broadly about the nature of democracies in contemporary postcolonial states, and in relation to the global trend toward right-wing authoritarian rule. The intensely contested nature of postcolonial nationalism signals an inherent fragility and instability. Anxieties around the viability of the nation—that which has been fought for

with blood and which promised a certain freedom—are harnessed to legitimize authoritarian state structures. Indeed, framing non-normative sexuality as an external, “western” threat to national purity, is a well-worn strategy of postcolonial states (see the essays in Picq and Thiel [2015]). The figure of the anti-nationalist—Islamist, terrorist, sexual renegade, whatever specific circumstances call for—is crucial to such maneuvers. As a result, state violence appears necessary and normal, distinct from other forms of violence that constitute Terror.

- 59 What stands out in the Bangladeshi context is that sexuality as threat can be appropriated by the state to justify interventions against real and imagined threats of Islamist violence.

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NOTES

1. For more on the history of *Roopban*, see Hossain (2019).
2. See BBC News (2016): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36692613>
3. The qualifier "moderate" assumes that Islam, in general, is not.
4. This letter has vanished from the internet. I am quoting from a personal printed copy.
5. *Hijra* are not named but the text notes that it is "lower income folks, or those who are isolated and not networked" who are vulnerable.
6. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/lama-abu-odeh/holier-than-thou-antiimperialist-versus-local-activist>
7. The question of funding remains a thorny issue. What kind of inadvertent complicities and compliances are involved, for instance, in taking US State department funding? For Bangladesh and other Muslim transnational spaces, LGBT rights are deeply entangled in global governance structures that legitimate certain forms of governance and prescribe a certain direction. Indeed, as The Letter indicates, a complex structure of asylum-seeking has developed in the wake of these killings.
8. Military operations in March 1971 to quell an "insurrection" in the former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) turned into a nine-month-long struggle for Independence. The (West) Pakistani army, in collaboration with some local Bengalis, raped, pillaged and murdered with impunity. Post-war agreements shielded Pakistani-army personnel from prosecution by the Bangladeshi

state. For some people, the phrase—*tirish lokkho bhai boner roker binimoy shadhinota* ("Freedom was won in exchange for the blood of 30 lakh brothers and sisters") arguably possesses the quality of a religious chant.

9. Mookherjee (2012:66) traces critical shifts in popular constructions of the collaborator that correspond to the reintroduction of parliamentary democracy in the 1990s. Earlier literary accounts stressing complicity, contradiction and economic self-interest gave way to imagery of *razakars* as fanatical Muslims who possessed secret sympathy for Pakistan and were poised to undermine secular nationalism.

10. <http://www.thedailystar.net/contempt-charge-against-david-b-23430>

11. The professor mentioned earlier who passed away several months later.

12. Government of Bangladesh (2013) states: "If any person deliberately publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted in the website or in any other electronic form any material which is false and obscene and if anyone sees, hears or reads it having regard to all relevant circumstances, its effect is such as to influence the reader to become dishonest or corrupt, or causes to deteriorate or creates *possibility to deteriorate law and order, prejudice the image of the state or person or causes to hurt or may hurt religious belief* or instigate against any person or organization, then this activity will be regarded as an offence" (*italics added*). Before the amendment, maximum punishment for offences under the section was 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of Tk 1 crore. The amendment increased the maximum jail term to 14 years and crucially, empowered police to make arrests without a warrant. Between March and July 2017, at least 21 journalists were sued under section 57 of the ICT Act (Adhikary 2017).

ABSTRACTS

This essay complicates received understandings of violence against queer (and other) bodies in Muslim South Asia by re-visiting the 2016 killing of two Dhaka-based gay-rights activists. It challenges underlying assumptions of the relationship between violence and the secular through an examination of the different meanings assigned to secular/state violence (enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detention) as opposed to religious violence (the public-execution-style murders of bloggers, gay men, and others). The essay also explores the tensions and contradictions generated within Bangladesh by the reification of gay and transgender violence. The conclusion considers the consequences of the current political climate in which some killings are unmoorable and queer bodies are politically useful in selective ways.

INDEX

Keywords: Bangladesh, Islam, Holey Bakery, secular violence, Roopban

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