



We Are All Indians

Teaching the literature of 9/11 in an American classroom

I had been asleep when the first plane hit the World Trade Center's North Tower. What woke me was the sound of my wife sobbing. A phone call had come from India, from an editor, asking me to write. So, that is how we learned about what had happened.

The piece I wrote that day had some anger in it, anger not only at the hijackers, but at the Americans. This was the kind of thing that would be called "the chicken coming home to roost" argument. A few days later, in *The New Yorker* issue dedicated to September 11, with its famous black cover designed by Art Spiegelman, I read a piece by Amitav Ghosh. His brief essay told the story of a man, an engineer involved in the design of the Twin Towers, staying back in the building to help people escape. The man and his wife, both of whom worked in the destroyed buildings, were Ghosh's neighbors. And Ghosh's piece was filled with a kind of sad tenderness that made me feel ashamed about my rage. I felt as if I had arrived drunk at a funeral.

That feeling would change. It would change around the time the first bombs began falling on Afghanistan. Or maybe even before, when I read pieces by writers like Arundhati Roy, offering sympathy for the victims of the attacks, but not flinching from offering a critique, including of the role that the Americans had played in funding the Taliban in their strategic fight against the Soviets. The change had certainly come by the time I read another piece in *The New Yorker*, this one by Akhil Sharma. Titled 'Bonus', this brilliant piece only briefly invoked the attacks but so deftly did it portray their appearance and disappearance amidst financial calculations in the mind of a Wall Street executive, that it served as a reminder that the necessarily sentimental piece written by Ghosh wasn't the only way to represent September 11.

So, right from the beginning, the attacks and the question of one's proper response to it had been a problem for me. I began teaching a class that I'd call the 'literature of 9/11.' I wanted to understand the different responses to the attacks and the fateful consequences.

An important part of the impulse behind this has been my search for other voices, voices from India and Pakistan, for instance. I have used books like Mohsin Hamid's *Reluctant Fundamentalist* or H M Naqvi's *Home Boy* to, well, provincialize the monumental sense of grief that Americans often have about the attacks of 9/11. We need to ask ourselves about the other lives that were destroyed by the attacks, not on that day, but through the changes that followed.

In recent years, my course has focused on linking what happened on that bright September morning to everything else that has followed, for example, the image of a man in an orange suit kneeling in a cage in Guantanamo. Last semester, when I taught this course, I included in the syllabus a reading of two excellent works of reportage from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: David Finkel's *The Good Soldiers* and Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War*. From this perspective, what happened on that Tuesday a decade ago seems impossibly distant. We are now stuck in the quagmire of war and intolerable suffering.

When I was an undergraduate in Delhi three decades ago the prescribed reading for us was Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel wasn't very good. I think it was in the syllabus because it hit you over the head with the image of rural suffering — poverty, flood, famine, you get



Detainees, watched by military police, at Guantanamo, January 11, 2002

intact world of the Indian middle class, to the fact that it was in touch with the daily life of the planet but not necessarily in a way that disturbed its inertia. I tried to write about that world in my first novel *Home Products* (which was published in the United States under the title *Nobody Does the Right Thing*).

But, like Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the 'literature of 9/11' draws us back to the pathos of distant suffering. In fact, I believe it represents a new low definition of bare life. We read accounts of incarcerated men in Guantanamo, or American soldiers with amputated limbs, or the death of children from drinking mud, and we see how much of life's terrain, the realm of individual subjectivity, is subject to the brutal will of the state. Which is to say, for me, the 'literature of 9/11' is an ongoing exploration of the ways in which life and liberty — or their absence — are authored by the military state.

There are several artists, including the Bangla-American Hasan Elahi, who have responded with great inventiveness to the new regimes of surveillance introduced after the attacks of September 11. Toward the beginning of the semester, I ask my students to read the 9/11 Commission Report but I always follow it up, sooner or later, with a presentation of the work of the artists like Elahi, Trevor Paglen, Martha Rosler, and Jill Magid.

In a week, my new class will meet. This time I will use an essay that I just read last night. It's by Pico Iyer and has appeared in the latest *Granta Magazine*. Iyer writes of his experience of being stopped and subjected to interrogation at airports in Japan. This happened to him after the 9/11 attacks. He writes of how his American friends assured him that this was happening to them too. In other words, it wasn't just his brownness that earned him this scrutiny. Maybe. The point that Iyer wants to make, however, is that brown folks had always found it difficult to cross borders. They were always suspect.

I'm not sure I want the tragedies of September 11 and its aftermath to be reduced to the matter of travails of travel. The airport isn't a battlefield; nor is it a quiet village suddenly erupting in fire because of a drone strike. Nevertheless, the conclusion that Iyer offers is stark and eloquent, and I'd like my students to consider what he is saying: 'I understand why my friends feel aggrieved to be treated as if they came from Nigeria or Mexico or India. But I can't really mourn too much that airports, since 9/11, have become places where everyone may be taken to be guilty until proven innocent. The world is all mixed up these days, and America can no longer claim immunity. On 12 September 2001, *Le Monde* ran its now famous headline: WE ARE ALL AMERICANS. On 12 September 2011, it might more usefully announce: WE ARE ALL INDIANS.'

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the idea. I'm skeptical of middle-class people talking at great length about the lives of the lowly. I'd rather deal with their — our — calm complacency instead.

A few years ago, when I was staying in a friend's *barsati* in Delhi's Defense Colony, my host came home one evening with a painting. The canvas showed a work done in Kalighat style, but the subject was modern. It showed a *bhadralok* couple sitting together, drinking tea; behind them, on a table with a blue tablecloth, stood a big television set showing the World Trade Center. Smoke was coming out from one of the towers. On the edge of the screen, on the right, another plane was visible in the sky. The image spoke to me.

The artist's name was Kalam Patua, and I can only guess at his intentions for doing the painting. But what his remarkable work communicated to me was the complexity of a world in which disaster gets consumed as easily as a cup of tea. And that wasn't all. I was also drawn to the