

# Reclaiming Life in Times of Death

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When I was invited by professor Salimullah Khan to give a public lecture at ULab, which I consider to be a great honor, and was most pleased to accept, I was left wondering what I should talk about.

Since it is a public lecture I felt it should not be something strictly academic, but instead, something which concerns us as members of the public. Disciplines, after all, are specialised bodies of knowledge, which means that one must know the tools of the trade, the history of the discipline, its theories and concepts, its mode of inquiry, how it has evolved toward studying what it does, how it seeks to apply the knowledge which it generates, and also, a working knowledge of its sister disciplines. Speaking from within the boundaries of a disciplinary (or even, a multi-disciplinary) framework would be restrictive I felt, so, instead I decided to speak about something which cuts across all disciplinary boundaries, something which concerns us all, equally, as members of the public. And what else could it be, but the matter of life and death.

This is what I want to talk about today, and, as you can tell from the title under which I have formulated my thoughts -- "Reclaiming Life in Times of Death" -- I do so with a sense of urgency.

I would like to place before you the words of two persons who I admire deeply, because their words help provide direction in these troubled times, they help remind me what life is all about, and how we should seek to understand it. They are: Begum Rokeya, the twentieth century Bengali Muslim feminist writer who lived from 1880 to 1932; and, Martin Luther King Jr., black American civil rights leader, who was assassinated in 1968 at the young age of 39, whose wife and children insist that US government agencies were involved in the assassination and the subsequent cover-up.

While giving a speech at the Western Michigan University in 1963, Martin Luther King, who was the first speaker in a three-lecture series titled "Conscience of America," whose own lecture was titled "Social Justice", said:

*Until you found something worth dying for, you're not fit to be living.*

Reflect on these words, "Until you found something worth dying for, you're not fit to be living."

The other quotation is from Begum Rokeya, from an essay written in 1905, called "Streejati Obonoti" (The Downfall of Women).

*আমাদের অবস্থা আমরা চিন্তা না করিলে আর কেহ আমাদের জন্য ভাবিবে না।  
ভাবিলেও তাহাতে আমাদের ষোল আনা উপকার হইবে না।*

I have translated this as, "If we do not think for ourselves, no one else will. Even if they did, it would not be of much use." "Sholo ana upokar" could also be translated as "not being fully useful" instead of "not be[ing] of much use" but Rokeya was famous for her satire, and I think this is how she meant it.

Now, the public is an amorphous concept. I say this for several reasons. If you think of the Bangla word, "jonoshadharon", it implies a sea of people, an undifferentiated mass of men, women and children. But, as we all know, life is not like that. Pre-existing social categories intrude into our thoughts, they divide up people, they box them into categories of same-ness and other-ness, ones which are powerful enough to regulate our thoughts and emotions, to direct our behaviour towards others. Much of it is unconsciously learnt, it is part of what is known as "growing up" into a class-differentiated society, into a society where other deep divisions -- those of gender, ethnicity, race, caste, religion etc., etc. -- co-exist and inter-weave with each other. These social divisions work within our mind and our senses, they help shape our subjective self and our public persona -- that which we present to others, or, that which we may be rightly or wrongly, known for. At times, these may conflict with each other internally. When our identity conforms to the existing social order, we are applauded, we are considered to be normal; when they conflict with social

expectations, when they go against the powers-that-be, we are reviled. In contemporary Bangladesh, for the greater part of the last two decades, if the government is Awami League and it doesn't approve of what one says, even though one may be equally critical of the BNP, one is likely to be branded as being a "BNP sympathiser" by ruling party hacks, and vice versa. Secondly, since the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment last July, if one thinks and says other than what our lawmakers decree, one is likely to be dubbed a "seditionist", one who has committed treason, which, as all of us know, is punishable by death if proven in a court of law.

Growing-up as a Bangladeshi also means, as it does for other citizens of the world, being inducted into the hierarchy of nation-states which structures the contemporary world. It also means being inducted into the ideologies of transnational forces which claim to speak for freedom and democracy, to speak for the good of all humankind, but in actuality, use these as a cloak to hide the profit motive, to distract our attention away from state terror and from war-mongering.

Now, an important question which confronts me when one speaks of the "public" and the "universities" in the same breath, is: where does one locate universities in a country like Bangladesh, one that was colonised by the British for nearly two hundred years, for nearly another quarter of a century by internal colonisers, i.e., the West Pakistani rulers, which gained independence after a 9-month long liberation struggle which was essentially a people's war, a country which has, since independence, been ruled by self-serving rulers, whether civilian or military, right down to the present where the ruling class in the neo-liberal present is visibly composed of political parties steered by an oligarchic leadership, the top brass of the 'national' armed forces who have close ties to security advisers in the corporate west and in neighbouring countries, top layers of the civil bureaucracy who owe their allegiance to partisan politics, an extremely greedy business elite, an NGO-ised, foreign-funded development industry, an increasingly corporatised media, and a caste of servile intellectuals both inside and outside the mainstream academia.

But of course, this is not how the ruling class represents itself -- neither as a collectivity, nor when individual members belonging to its fractions, speak about the state of

the nation and its people. They prefer to use the language of poverty instead, which veers between "too much" and "too little" -- too many people, too few resources, too little education, not enough employment, scarcity of housing, too many mouths to feed -- a language of power which serves to distract attention away from the fact that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer through the implementation of policies which have been planned and are being executed precisely to accomplish the enrichment of the few at the expense of the impoverishment of the many. Within the poverty/under/development framework, lies the idea that universities are "islands of enlightenment" surrounded by a sea of illiteracy, ignorance and superstition. You may not find this written down anywhere, which is not surprising because ideologies aren't exactly written down but, to return to my point, this idea is class-ed, it fuses into the *borolok-cchotolok* ideology of feudal times, and works as a cultural template to justify new and modern class divisions, which are starkly present in our society.

The notion that the university is an island of enlightenment prevents us from grasping a simple basic truth of life, namely, that all life is interconnected, or, as Martin Luther King puts it, "somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." Viewing the university as an island of enlightenment prevents us from grasping how in place of "mutuality" there exists exploitation and oppression, and what life -- as *lived*, on a day-to-day basis -- means for those who bear the burden of islands of prosperity. One such account is available from Kamamma, whose mother's grandmother was sold off in times of hardship for a measure of rice and a rupee to a Brahmin family belonging to the princely state of Hyderabad in undivided India.

I quote from '*We were making history.*' *Women and the Telengana Uprising*, which consists of autobiographies of women who had taken part in the uprising, an excellent piece of historical documentation undertaken by the Indian women's collective, Stree Shakti Sanghatana. This is what Kamamma says,

Although my husband was a grown man the mistress used to beat him and ask him to work. They would eat meat but find it difficult even to give him a little tamarind paste in the nights. That was the life of a bonded labourer. Graze the buffaloes, collect dung,

cook the food, one had to do everything. Go to another village and fetch so and so and he would go. Go and kick that fellow and he would do it. They even used him as a *goonda*. I didn't suffer like that but he suffered that way. My mother, sister and brother all had to do this kind of work. The mistress wanted to make me, my younger brother and sister also, into slaves but my father did not allow them to. Those *dorasanis* [begum shahebs, in Telugu] were really *dorasanis*! They sat on their fine chairs, and cots and we under their cots cleaning their vomit, cleaning shit and doing every possible chore for them." (New Delhi & London: Kali & Zed, 1989, p. 47).

So, to come to the present, when we sit on our fine chairs, our comfortable beds, our well-lit homes, travel in air-conditioned cars, enter into clean washrooms, into dusted and swept homes, buy groceries, take clothes off their shop hangers, do we pause to think of the labour which has made these things happen? Of the social relations through which labour has been extracted to ensure that a privileged few live in zones of comfort?

We may choose to think that things have changed greatly since Kamamma's days, we may convince ourselves that being a cash economy, labour is free to move, that the person is always free to take up another job, or, we may salve our conscience by thinking that if poor people were hardworking instead of being lazy, frugal instead of being spendthrift, they could gradually, if not in one generation then over 2-3, work their way up the social ladder, they could gain an education, benefit from secure employment and leave behind their *cchotolok* status. But, that is not how capitalism works, while both upward and downward mobility may occur, while individuals may cross frontiers in either direction, classes are social relations of exploitation that endure. This is integral to the process of capital accumulation, which as anthropologist Rayna Rapp explains, "generates and constantly deepens relations between two categories of people: those who are available and forced to work for wages because they own no means of production, and those who control those means of production." In other words, the *borolok-cchotolok* division, endures. It is a powerful value system which blinds us to inequalities which are socially constructed but made to appear as natural; to legitimise a system of injustice, to leave us free to pursue knowledge in narrowly-defined specialised fields.

The resistance to social injustice may take different forms, a person might join a collectively organised struggle, as happened in the case of Kamamma, who, along with other family members, joined the communist-led peasant rebellion (1948-1951). Or people, as individuals, might also devise means of resisting the unjust order. For instance, B. Traven, who is the author of the novel, *The Death Ship*, originally published in German in 1926, which present-day readers increasingly seek out because of its brilliant unravelling of surveillance, is a pen name. His real name, nationality, date and place of birth and the details of his biography are unknown and disputed. Traven wrote,

My personal history would not be disappointing to readers, but it is my own affair which I want to keep to myself. I am in fact in no way more important than is the typesetter for my books, the man who works the mill; ... no more important than the man who binds my books and the woman who wraps them and the scrubwoman who cleans up the office.

Obviously B. Traven, had not been taken in by the bourgeois system of rewards and honors. He had, as Rokeya advises us, thought things out "for ourselves."

Now, to return to the issue of universities and their being viewed as islands of enlightenment, does this mean that all universities operate from within the ruling paradigm? The distinction between public and private universities is a very important one in our history, it is deeply embedded in the history of class formation or, some might say, different stages of the history of Bengali Muslim middle class formation. Another important distinction -- in the present context, of the significance of public universities to political party rule, one to which the academia in public universities have largely surrendered -- is the public image of public universities as being "overly politicised", while private universities are viewed as being "apolitical", which enables them to run strictly according to the academic calendar. It is an image, I must add, that private universities have largely cashed in on; but to return to the point about universities and the ruling paradigm, not all private universities are equally elitist and I am reminded particularly of Gono Biswabiddaloy here. As regards public universities, it is important to remember that structural adjustment policies, which insist that student fees in public educational institutions be raised, have cleared the way for the intrusion of the profit-making ethos into public universities, an ethos which has been

popularised through slogans like "better value for money", this has helped to blur the previous lines of distinction between public and private universities. But I want to draw your attention to another aspect, where public and private universities have demonstrated a singular unity of purpose, most reprehensibly so, by failing to defend academic freedom. I speak of the Fifteenth Amendment which was passed last July, particularly to its clause related to nationality, which declares that all people of Bangladesh, as a nation, are Bengalis.

Now, the fact of the matter is that universities, whichever side of the public-private divide they may be located upon, are committed to the generation of new knowledge, and research is essential for the generation of new knowledge. As a matter of fact, MPhil and PhD degrees are awarded on the basis of original research. University teachers are expected to not only supervise research but also to conduct independent research. What will happen now, because of the Fifteenth Amendment? Will researchers, whether graduate students or teachers, belonging to a host of social science disciplines -- political science, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, economics, women's studies, media studies, law, and those belonging to the humanities, to literature -- will they now stop working on the topic of ethnicity and nationalism because obviously, all the people of Bangladesh are not, ethnically-speaking, Bengalis? Or, will they follow the dictates of the Amendment and build up their research on the basis of false assumptions i.e., all people are Bengalis? Will the universities then award them degrees? Will that degree have any value, in the real sense of the term?

The Amendment has made a mockery of the National Education Policy 2010, which says that the policy seeks to develop a "democratic culture"; that the aims and objectives of higher education is to "help in the unhindered practice of intellectual exercises and [the] growth of free thinking." It has also made a mockery of ULab's Mission Statement which says that, as an institution ULab is "devoted to developing young minds to their fullest potential through the free and creative pursuit of knowledge" . That, its unique curriculum of liberal learning aims to "build true leaders of the future." It has also made a mockery of the acts under which public universities have been established, to provide one instance, the Jahangirnagar University Act 1973 which states that the university is committed to the "cultivat[ion] and promot[ion of] arts, science and other branches of learning."

The particular clause which directly impinges on academic freedom, and warns of dire consequences if it does occur, states, if anyone "subverts or attempts or conspires to subvert the confidence, belief or reliance of the citizens to this Constitution or any of its article, his such act shall be sedition and such person shall be guilty of sedition" . And that, as all of us know is punishable by death by hanging. It is true that a handful of teachers have individually written and protested against the fascist nature of the Amendment, but the universities collectively, have not gotten together to protest against this gravest of assaults on academic freedom. What is one to make of such a situation? That the university leadership is incapable of "thinking for ourselves"? Or, that academic freedom is not worth dying for? If the latter be the case, then, according to Martin Luther King's line of reasoning, the universities are not fit to exist. But I don't think so, I think we not only need the universities that exist, we need even more universities and I'm sure King would also agree, but in order to prove that their commitments, as outlined in their Mission Statements and Acts, are worth more than the paper they are printed on, universities badly need to "think for ourselves." I think that would have other benefits as well, I think that members of the public, who, whether in Phulbari, or in the garment industries, have demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice their lives in order to continue living on their ancestral land, or that they be paid decent wages, I think they would be forced to develop a genuine respect for the universities, and for those who people it.

There are other instances from our national history where those we had expected to be able to "think for ourselves", failed to do so. But first I want to show you a photograph of a woman raped in 1971, and I want to relate the story to you, and the questions which have arisen in my mind, as they unfolded.



<http://shahidul.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/naibuddin-ahmed-woman-in-mymensingh-mw013723-600-px.jpg>

Woman recovered from Pakistani Army bunker at Mymensingh. 12th December 1971  
©Naib Uddin Ahmed

Many of you have probably seen this photograph, I have forgotten where I saw it first, whether in a book on 1971, or at the Muktiyuddho Jadughor, I am not very comfortable about showing it, or talking about it, the only thing I can say is that I never allow myself to forget this image. I interviewed the photographer who took it. Before I spoke to him I'd thought that the young woman whose name is unknown, was dead, but Naibuddin bhai, who is a well-known and highly respected photographer, who unfortunately passed away a year ago, had this to tell me when I wanted to know about the photograph:

She was pulled out. Dragged out from the Pakistani army's bunker. The Pakistani army had camped at the Bangladesh Agricultural University in Mymensingh. They had captured and occupied Mymensingh on April 19. When the army left in December, when they were forced to flee, people had rushed to the BAU campus. Looting began, army bunkers, storeroom, there was looting all around, everywhere. Common people were looting, they were all over the place. 'I do not know whether it was from rage, or what...', he had gently added.

That is when we heard the news. Girls had been discovered in the bunkers which were next to the university guesthouse. I went and found her, she was lying like that. People were milling around her, they were in front of her, they were behind her. I asked them to move, I made some space, and then I took photographs. It was the twelfth of December, that was the day Mymensingh became free. The Indian army had entered the town, they had entered the campus, they had taken control.

When I approached her, she seemed to be in a trance. There were others. I heard eight to ten girls had been found in the bunkers, some had already left. I found her alone. She did not respond when we called out. Her hands were raised. She was holding on to the pole behind her.

Of course, it was a *tamasha*, a spectacle. There were people, both men and women who had come in search of their daughters, and their sisters. But there were onlookers, as well. They had stood and stared. They did not share the pain and suffering of the girls, their helplessness. They looked on and thought, the military has done it to them. They have nothing left. They are finished.

He added, she might have found refuge in Mother Teresa's home in Kolkata later but he wasn't sure.

Now look at these pictures before March 25, you see women in training, preparing to fight for freedom. Just like their male counterparts.

#### Women marching in the streets of Dhaka. 1971



©Rashid Talukder/Drik



©Jalaluddin Haider/Drik

<http://shahidul.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/women-marching-in-streets-of-dhaka-in-1971-1152.jpg>

<http://insurgencyresearchgroup.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/rivingtonplace-womenfighters.jpg>



©Rashid Talukder/Drik

©Poster artists unknown

<http://www.sos-arsenic.net/images/mukti-joddha17-1.jpg>

<http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Ha6trsD6k0/S6whyIW7BQI/AAAAAAAAABwc/wmlb-iQ6sG4/s1600/MuktijuddoPosters1a.jpg>

But war is gendered; and rape, as feminists have repeatedly stressed, is a weapon of war. It is the most violent of all patriarchal acts, and, as a weapon of war, it not only targets all women simply because they are women, but the invading army commits rape expressly to demoralise the men of the society attacked, to dishonor them for having failed to protect the women members of the family. And, as we witnessed in 1971, male family members often do not accept the raped woman back because she is regarded as "soiled". War rape also tampers with the identity of the next generation because the birth of war children extends the oppressor's dominance into future generations.

Photographs of women taken before March 25, and both recorded and oral history sources reveal that the Bengali political leadership were totally unprepared for the gendered consequences of war. If they had been, surely the training would have been different? Now don't get me wrong, this does not mean that I am in any way belittling women's training in armed resistance, it was undoubtedly most significant, it challenged dominant notions of femininity and womanhood, it challenged the gender equation -- men are active, women are passive, only men can fight for freedom -- but as I look back at history, a question stares me in the face, and I can't shake it off. Does preparation for the impending struggle for freedom mean that patriarchy as a system of power and dominance, undergirded by sexual assault and rape, was unknown to our leadership? Does it mean that the social workings of power were utterly ignored by our political leadership as they concentrated on political and economic power, concentrated in the hands of the Punjabis? But now when I look back I see no

reason for patriarchal violence to have been ignored, because when the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into India and Pakistan in 1947, 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women were abducted by Muslim men, and 50,000 Muslim women were abducted by Hindu and Sikh men. The Indian Constituent Assembly noted that 12,000 women were recovered from India, and 6,000 from Pakistan. These women were known to have been sexually assaulted, or raped. Now, my question is, why did the Bengali political leadership, ignore this lesson from history? Is it because they didn't stop to "think for ourselves"? Hundreds of thousands of women, their family members, and a generation of war children paid the price most brutally and directly, while we others did indirectly ("Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly"), because a generation which had lived through 1947, had not bothered to learn any lessons from their own history.

There are more nuggets of wisdom in Begum Rokeya's phrase and I want to turn to those now.

*আমাদের অবস্থা আমরা চিন্তা না করিলে আর কেহ আমাদের জন্য ভাবিবে না।*

When Begum Rokeya says, we need to think for "ourselves," who is the us? Who defines the us? I had said earlier that powerful forces exist in the world who claim to speak for freedom and democracy, but actually this is doublespeak, these words serve to cloak colonial occupation, to mask the looting of other peoples land and resources, to hide the wreaking of havoc, death and destruction. In capitalist democracies garnering public support for wars, which means an inflated defence budget which affects peoples standard of living since it diverts funds from public spending, which means a loss of lives, since soldiers are also husbands and fathers and sons (women too), is a crucial factor which politicians need to calculate to retain their electoral popularity.

Now if we were to look at Israel, the Palestinians are the natural enemies of the Israelis. But not all Israelis blindly believe what the government and its allies, led by the United States, who provides Israel 8.2 million dollars each day in military aid (these are 2011 figures, this has increased in 2012) -- would have the people believe and behave accordingly. One of the most courageous Israeli dissenters is Dr Nurit Peled-Elhanan, the mother of Smadar Elhanan, whose 13 year-old daughter was killed by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem in September 1997, who is a professor of language and education at the Hebrew University in

Jerusalem. She was invited to address the European Parliament on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2005, and much to the anger of her government I'm sure, first of all, asked the Parliament why it hadn't invited a Palestinian woman to speak instead of her, since they "suffer [the] most" from Israeli violence, and then went on to dedicate her speech to Miriam R'aban and her husband Kamal, from Gaza, whose five small children had been killed by Israeli soldiers while picking strawberries in the family's strawberry field.

She declared her solidarity with Palestinian, Iraqi [and] Afghan women in her speech. Israeli, American, Italian and British mothers, she said, have been "violently blinded and brainwashed to such a degree that they cannot realize their *only* sisters, their *only* allies in the world are Muslim Palestinian, Iraqi or Afghani mothers" . Western mothers are taught to believe that while *their* uterus is a national asset, the *Muslim* uterus is an international threat, that little girls with head scarves threaten the French ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, that Muslims are "vile, primitive and blood-thirsty", that they are also "non-democratic, chauvinistic and mass producers of future terrorists." These are fake, they are false, they are meant to "enrich the rich and to empower the powerful." The problem is not little Muslim girls wearing headscarves in France, but the big imperialistic foot of the enlightened western world, it is Sharon, Bush and Blair and their clan of blood-thirsty, oil-thirsty and land-thirsty generals.

In other words, to get back to Begum Rokeya, the categories of "us" and "them", which lead us to view particular groups of people as being our natural friends and others as our diehard enemies, can often be cunningly crafted by the powerful to manufacture enmities which are then kept alive through propaganda and covert means. Being able to think these through critically, as Dr Nurit Peled-Elhanan does, is a matter of life and death.

I would now like to show a small section of a video which shows young women artists protesting against the control of all West Bank borders by Israeli security forces, which require Palestinians entering or leaving the territory to present an identification card or passport. <http://vimeo.com/39622389>



[http://b.vimeocdn.com/ts/273/412/273412860\\_640.jpg](http://b.vimeocdn.com/ts/273/412/273412860_640.jpg)

The Gate/Checkpoint! by Razan Akramawy Performance Artwork, Al-Quds/Palestine, 2011

There is another hidden nugget in Begum Rokeya's words.

ভাবিলেও তাহাতে আমাদের ষোল আনা উপকার হইবে না।

Even if they did, it would not be of much use."

One of the best examples of others thinking for us, is the foreign-funded, NGO-ised development paradigm. There is an "aura of self-evidence" about the word development, says Gerald Rist in his study, *The History of Development. From Western Origins to Global Faith* (1996, 2008). Development is a concept which is supposed to command "universal acceptance," thereby making us forget that it is specific to "a particular history and culture." Having an aura of self-evidence means that we forget to question the basic premise of development, namely: "economic growth is the prescribed means to universal improvement." We forget to question despite the impending climate change catastrophe. We forget to question despite the fact that development aggravates those very inequalities which it wants to reduce. For instance, the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Program, later replaced by the Poverty Reduction Program, created a paradox for many third world governments. The withdrawal of subsidies for health, education and food items deepened and feminised poverty, badly affecting women-headed households; research shows that in many African and Asian countries, daughters are being married off at an earlier age. However, despite this, international organisations insist that governments should take measures to redress the gender imbalance in education. But how can poor households, for whom subsidies are life-savers, afford to send their little daughters to school, once these are

withdrawn? It can only mean one thing, that the World Bank and its development partners are colluding in denying the inequalities which are aggravated by development programmes.

The minority who run the system, says Rist, profit from it, and they have no wish to challenge it. It is this minority who insist, despite all evidence to the contrary, that "wealth can be generalized to everyone on earth." Present injustices are presented as being a temporary state of affairs, which will disappear after *more* development occurs. Development practices, says Rist, basically boils down to the "global extension of the market." It turns everything in the world into "commodities."

Since I have mentioned the World Bank, I want to add a small note here, I do not wish to enter into the present controversy over the Padma bridge which is rocking the nation. The World Bank's allegations of a "conspiracy corruption" have been countered by party higher-ups, the World Bank is corrupt, they say. We know it is, but this is not a principled stand of the government but an attempt to deflect public attention away from the issue of government corruption. Neither the present government, nor the ruling class in general, have the intellectual capacity or the political will to fundamentally rethink the national development paradigm, despite the fact that concrete instances exist in these times, which are worth thinking about in all seriousness. I speak of Latin American countries like Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador who are said to be working out a "twenty first century socialism." Those who keep a close watch on the events as they unfold in these Latin American nations inform us of the differences from twentieth-century socialism: a tight-knit vanguard party in the Leninist tradition is absent here; orthodox Marxism's cult of the proletariat is rejected, instead, marginalised and semi-marginalised sectors of the population are incorporated in decision-making and in the cultural life of the nation; social movements are incorporated in the political life of the nation; frequent referendums, primaries and elections are held which means the government enjoys popular support for programs such as these, lessening the dependence on multinationals by signing contracts with state oil companies, reasserting control over the oil industries (Venezuela); pressuring foreign companies to sell oil and gas to the state-owned company (Bolivia), developing pride in national identity and sovereignty. Here I would like to mention Ecuador's president Rafael

Correa, whose campaign promise had been to close down the US military base in Manta after the 10-year lease was over. And he did. When asked by American journalists later, Correa said he was willing to extend the agreement if the US would agree to housing an Ecuadorian military base in New York!

Now, my point is that thinking for ourselves allows us to see through the facade that powerful forces continuously present before us to produce, maintain, and perpetuate their systems of domination. Thinking for ourselves leads us to figure out that academic freedom is being grievously assaulted although government policies claim that the objective of the NEP is to create a democratic society. Thinking for ourselves enables us to see through the claims made in the name of development, to figure out that the development enterprise actually seeks to extend the market the world over.

Does the development industry in Bangladesh, think for ourselves? I think not, and I now want to turn to Mr Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of Brac, the largest development organisation in the world, who was conferred knighthood by the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in early 2010. Prince Charles conferred the knighthood on behalf of his mother, known as Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second. Mr Abed is the first person of Bangladeshi origin since 1947 to be honoured with a knighthood. Sir Abed's new title is Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George, KMCG. I want to make it clear to everyone that my discussion of Mr Abed's knighthood is definitely not a personal attack or judgement, but an exercise in the Kantian sense of "free and public examination."



<http://bdnews24.com/nimage/2010-02-17-15-56-50-Sir-Abed-Knight-inn.jpg>

Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder and chairperson of BRAC, was knighted in a special ceremony at Buckingham Palace in London, February 16, 2010.

I think one of the first questions, one that is bound to occur to many is, what on earth is the British empire? For, as we all know, the sun has, fortunately, set on the British empire. Other questions can arise and I want to stimulate these by turning to what some British-ers who have turned down offers of knighthood or, damehood, in the case of women, have said.

-- The rock star David Bowie said: "I would never have any intention of accepting anything like that. I seriously don't know what it's for. It's not what I spent my life working for." Bowie added, he prefers specific honors which highlight his artistic talent, as opposed to the more general titles offered by Queen Elizabeth II.

-- The British stage and film star Albert Finney rejected it saying that it was perceived as "snobbery."

-- The British actress Vanessa Redgrave, who is the only British actress to have received the Oscar, Emmy, Tony, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild awards, apparently prefers to remain "a commoner."

-- The British physicist Stephen Hawking turned down the offer saying he "dislikes the whole concept."

-- And Benjamin Zephaniah, who is a British Jamaican writer and dub poet, who was included in the Times list of Britain's top 50 post-war writers, said: "I have been fighting against the legacy of empire all my life... Anybody who has thought of giving me this

OBE can't have read my work. It does not mean anything to me. I do not write poems to win awards or to get OBEs or laureateships. I write for people. I write to connect with myself and to connect with people."

Now, the nation's largely-corporatised media frames events such as these into a singular story line: "He has placed Bangladesh on the map, we are no longer a bottomless basket" -- and this, I think, is wearing thin. I find it surprising that no one in the media has asked Abed to respond to what some of those who have rejected the honor have said -- "It's not what I spent my life working for," "It is perceived as snobbery," "I prefer to remain a commoner," "I write for people (not the Empire). I write to connect with myself and to connect with people." Or maybe, it is not surprising.

I also wish to express my curiosity at the thought culture which prevails in Brac and in its sister development organisations. Was there no one to point out that "remaining a commoner" is not a bad idea for someone whose goal, as Mr Abed puts it, is to "eradicate poverty"? Mr Fazle Hasan Abed has said that he has accepted the award on "behalf of all Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Brac) workers across the world." But did he want to know from Brac workers before accepting the honor what they thought of it? Does everyone at Brac agree that submission and deference to the Empire, is a good idea? I invite you to take a close look at the photo, for this is precisely what it signifies to me.

Now, since there isn't any British Empire as such, instead, the British ruling class has pooled itself to the American Empire-building project, maybe we need to re-contextualise our questions to make them fit into the present reality. Maybe, Mr Abed's acceptance speaks of Brac's willingness to work in the interests of empire-building, i.e. American empire-building?

Let me explain why I think it is not outrageous to suggest this. Brac is fighting poverty not only in Bangladesh but in eight other countries in the world, including Afghanistan (2002) which is occupied by US-led forces. Brac's official website says, its aim is to "catalyse lasting change, [and to] creat[e] an eco-system in which the poor have the chance to seize control of their lives." Now, based on our experience of fighting for freedom in 1971, seizing control of one's life would imply, first and foremost, fighting to rid the nation of occupiers. But nothing indicates that Brac supports the Afghan resistance, and it is

most important to remember that those fighting against foreign rule in Afghanistan are not only the Taliban. Malalai Joya, the former Afghan member of parliament has repeatedly stressed "no democratic-minded and progressive group will betray Afghans by supporting the devastating U.S. policies in Afghanistan." She has said, the U.S. government knows that only warlords are ready to serve U.S. interests if money is poured into their pockets, so it "supports them because they are head-to-toe lackeys who agree to every command of their foreign masters."

Brac, by working in US-occupied Afghanistan, not only lends support to the occupation, but by choosing to remain silent on atrocities that have shocked peace-loving peoples the world over, it appears to silently support war crimes. I would like to list some of the atrocities committed by US forces in Afghanistan, which, from what I know, Brac has not condemned, at least I have not come across any such press release: the use of depleted uranium weapons which cause skin lesions, sudden deaths, spontaneous abortions, as well as birth deformities and multiple cancers; its use is against US and international law; torture of Afghan prisoners which includes waterboarding; deaths of thousands of Afghan civilians caused by American and NATO bombings; scenes of US marine soldiers urinating on dead Taliban fighters, burning of copies of the Quran, Panjwai shooting spree on March 11, 2012 in which 16 civilians were killed; US marines posing with body parts of dead insurgents, some of these were collected as trophies.

Brac has not taken any position on drone attacks either.

Now, I want to draw your attention to what I call a "conspiratorial silence." Think about these two instances, the one I talked about just now, Mr Abed's knighthood and Brac working in occupied Afghanistan, and the other incident, about academic freedom and not a peep out of either public or private universities. Well, why is it that no one talks about it? Does it mean that a group of men and women, top leaders in the development industry, in academia, the media (which is very important because that is how public opinion is formed and steered), and some of our servile intellectuals, sit in the middle of the night and plot secretly to make sure that these issues are not raised as public concerns, that so-and-so is not taken to task, is not publicly questioned about how such actions, or inactions, can be

defended? No, it doesn't work that way, it doesn't have to, because the concerned organisations and institutions are already embedded in networks of power and obligation. They are, in most cases, the offsprings and beneficiaries of these networks of power and profit.

A similar conspiratorial silence exists over 9/11, and this is the last issue that I want to talk about today.

First, let's quickly skip over what we have been told about 9/11:

-- 19 terrorists from the Islamist militant group al-Qaeda hijacked four passenger jets on the morning of September 11, 2001; two were piloted into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York City, both towers collapsed within two hours. A third plane was crashed into the Pentagon in Virginia, the fourth, intended for the United States Capitol Building, crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people died in the attacks including 227 civilians and 19 hijackers aboard the four planes.

-- President George Bush Jr called on all civilised nations to band together and fight terrorism. Osama bin Laden was declared the main suspect. The US-led NATO/ISAF forces invaded Afghanistan on October 7, 2001 because the Taliban government refused to hand him over.

What the media war, which was launched almost immediately as the planes crashed into the Twin Tower buildings, and has continued since, has either sidelined or chosen to blackout, or, brush off as conspiracy theories, are facts so significant that one can almost understand why the western mainstream media, which dominates the world media, and are propagandists of war, is behaving as it does.

-- 7 of the 19 suicide hijackers turned up alive. They claimed that they were not hijackers, that they lived elsewhere, had not been on any of those domestic flights, had neither armed themselves with box-cutters, nor flown hijacked aeroplanes headlong into tall buildings. One of them even said he had never been to the United States. The FBI did not investigate why suicide hijackers were alive and not dead, nor did it alter its list of 9/11 hijackers.



AbdulAziz Alomari    Ahmed Alnami    Khalid Almihdhar    Mohamed Atta    Saeed Alghamdi    Wail Alshehri    Waleed Alshehri

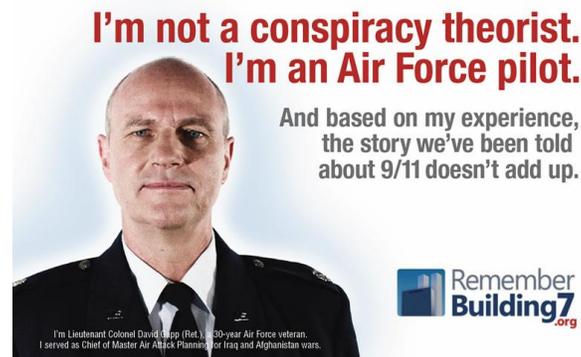
<http://www.shahidulnews.com/2009/12/30/911-suicide-hijackers-risen-from-the-dead/>

-- mind-boggling coincidences occurred: (a) the standard operating procedures of NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, the defense shield which normally protects the United States against all forms of airborne attack, including by hijacked aircraft was apparently suspended, because vice-president Dick Cheney was running several war games in the north-eastern side of the US. These had been scheduled for later in the year but Cheney brought them ahead, on September 11, all on the same day, leaving the American skies totally defenceless which is "unprecedented." (b) The day before 9/11 occurred, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in a speech to Pentagon employees disclosed that 2.3 trillion dollars could not be accounted for, but because of the attacks the next day, this was hardly mentioned in the major world newspapers. Imagine what the western media would have made of the story if it had happened in a Third World country!

-- Initially, president Bush had opposed an independent investigation into the 9/11 incident. The 9/11 Commission was created only after intense Congressional lobbying on the part of 9/11 family members; respectable researchers and analysts have cast serious doubts on the report's credibility.

-- Serious doubts have been raised over Building 7, also known as WTC 7, a 47-story skyscraper, and part of the World Trade Center complex. It collapsed at 5:20pm on September 11, 2001. It was not hit by a plane. It had suffered minimal damage compared to other buildings closer to the Twin Towers, Buildings 3, 4, 5 and 6, which were severely damaged by falling debris, and fires that burned for hours. But none of them collapsed. At the time of its destruction, Building 7 exclusively housed government agencies and financial institutions (IRS, US Secret Service, Securities and Exchange Commission). According to official explanations, it collapsed because of fires, if so, then it is the first and only steel skyscraper in the world to have collapsed because of fire.

9/11 family members along with architects and engineers who doubt the government's version, and want to create public pressure to compel the New York City Council and Manhattan District Attorney to open a new investigation, launched a public campaign on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. Let us watch their ad. <http://rememberbuilding7.org/10/>



<http://rememberbuilding7.org/10/images/poster-5.jpg>

-- what the western mainstream media quickly glosses over as well is that the Libyan opposition on the ground which was helped by NATO bombing to topple Gaddafi, includes al-Qaeda. what the media also glosses over is that al-Qaeda forces are now in Syria, part of the opposition which NATO supports, to remove president Bashar al-Assad from power.

Former high-ranking western leaders have not only cast serious doubts on the official narrative, they have explained why they think it isn't true.

-- Michael Meacher, former environment minister, UK says: "The 9/11 attacks allowed the US to press the "go" button for a strategy in accordance with the PNAC [Project for a New American Century] agenda which it would otherwise have been politically impossible to implement. The overriding motivation for this political smokescreen is that the US and the UK are beginning to run out of secure hydrocarbon energy supplies. By 2010 the Muslim world will control as much as 60% of the world's oil production and, even more importantly, 95% of remaining global oil export capacity. As demand is increasing, so supply is decreasing, continually since the 1960s." Meacher mentions that the PNAC document had suggested that false flag operations such as the famous Pearl Harbour incident, which president Roosevelt's government had made use of to drag the US into World War 2, would be helpful to get public support.

-- Former Italian president Francesco Cossiga, famous for his honesty and outspokenness, who had revealed the existence of, and his own part in setting up the false flag operation, Gladio, thinks that the 9/11 attacks were run by the CIA and Mossad (Israeli intelligence service). Cossiga says, it is common knowledge among global intelligence agencies that 911 was an inside job. The reason? To put the blame on the Arab countries. To induce western powers to take control of Iraq and Afghanistan

-- Andreas von Bulow, former German defense minister (in Helmut Schmidt's government), says he finds the official account 'totally incredible'. "The planning of the attacks was technically and organizationally a master achievement. To hijack four huge airplanes within a few minutes, and within one hour to drive them into their targets with complicated flight maneuvers! This is unthinkable without years-long support from secret apparatuses of the state and industry." He should know, he's a former minister, and Bundestag member who served on the parliamentary commission which oversaw the three branches of the German secret service. He insists that Mossad was behind 9/11. The reasons? To influence and brainwash the American people into a "long, long, ongoing conflict with the Muslim world," to get "the last oil reserves which we need for the next decades before the oil age" goes out. When asked, how could a government, one that leads the world's most powerful democracy, entertain the idea, let alone carry it out, of doing something as heinous, as immoral, and well, outright murderous? Bulow's words are chillingly clear, 'It's a form of war. In war, it's acceptable for people to die, even on your own side.'

But, despite a mass of evidence staring us in the face, we refuse to connect the dots. We refuse to think for ourselves, even though it could mean, in the eyes of Martin Luther King, that we are not fit to live.

Thank you.