



## Contextualising the events of 9/11

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### *Abstract*

*America awoke on September 11, 2001, to scenes of tragedy and devastation. Four aircraft were commandeered and turned into missiles. The World Trade Center's twin buildings were struck by two of the 19 hijackers directly, the Pentagon was hit by another, and a fourth was dropped in Pennsylvania's fields. There were roughly 3,000 fatalities. But, following the events, America was compelled to learn who planned the strikes and why. This essay attempts to address the queries raised by the onslaught. It attempts to interpret the events in their true context by incorporating the viewpoints of thinkers like Noma Chomsky, Aijaz Ahmad, Arundhati Roy, and others.*

**KEY WORDS:** 9/11, Event, Context, America, Afghanistan, Chomsky, Arundhati Roy

As per the *9/11 Commission Report*, with the beginning of the assaults on September 11, 2001, America was described as "a nation transformed". Four aeroplanes were converted into rockets. At 8:46, the first plane (Flight 11) struck the WTC's North Tower. At 9:03, the second one (Flight 175) smashed the south tower. Both of these towers fell 90 minutes after the attack. There was nothing but flames and smoke everywhere. Ash, steel, glass, and people all tumbled to the ground (6).

Another airliner (Flight 77) crashed into the western side of the Pentagon at 9:37 in the morning of the same day. At 10:03, a fourth and final plane (Flight 93) crashed in a field in southern Pennsylvania. The airliner had been aimed at the United States Capitol or White House. But once passengers learnt that America was under attack, the plane was forced down (6).

The attacks resulted in around 3000 fatalities. In the twin towers alone, 2600 died. The four planes killed 256 people, while the Pentagon killed 125. The attacks were allegedly carried out by 19 Arab hijackers who were

armed with box cutters and tiny knives. They were thought to be affiliated with the extremist group al-Qaida, having its headquarters in Afghanistan (6-7).

For America, the attacks were shocking but not unexpected. Considering that the US had already been attacked several times, for instance, in 1993, a truck bomb was used to assault the World Trade Center; in 1996, the Khobar Towers were attacked; and in 1995, a car bomb exploded outside the office of the US programme manager for the Saudi National Guard in Riyadh (7). All of these operations, which were allegedly carried out in opposition to the "American takeover of Islam's holiest sites and aggression against Muslims," were either directly or indirectly linked to Osama bin Laden and his associates (8).

George W. Bush, the country's then-president, made two significant speeches to contextualise the attacks for his nation. "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world," he said on that evening of September 11. He termed the assaults "evil" ("Statement").

Nine days later, he spoke about the strength of the union and the public's growing awareness of danger in his "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People" on September 20. He referred to the assailants as freedom's enemies who "committed an act of war against our country." "Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution." He stated that wars have been fought in America, but that for the past 136 years, with the exception of one Sunday in 1941, they have all been fought overseas ("Address"), thus drawing a parallel between the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 attacks.

He claimed that what was being attacked was freedom itself. He also attempted to address the issue of who America's enemy was on the same day by claiming that al Qaeda was responsible for the attacks and that its "objective is not making money; its goal is remaking the world—and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere." Bush added, "al Qaeda is the beginning of our battle against terror, but it is not the conclusion. It won't be over until every major terrorist organisation has been located, neutralised, and defeated. Furthermore, the attacks that "we are not immune from attack." ("Address").

He referred to the "War on Terror" as both an American and a global struggle and made an unnegotiable demand on the Taliban: "deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide on your soil." He said, "Americans are wondering why foreigners dislike us." Replying, he said, the detestation lies behind the "democratically elected administration we can see in this chamber" ("Address"). "They hate our freedoms: our

freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (“Address”).

Bush made a declaration towards all countries on the earth: “every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Invoking every US agency, including the FBI, to prepare for the attack, he addressed his soldiers and asked them to make their nation feel proud (“Address”).

On the 20th anniversary of the attacks, George W. Bush again gave a speech at the Sept. 11 memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In it, he attempted to reinterpret the attacks for the American people. According to him, the assaults “changed lives forever.” He remarked that there was astonishment at the brazenness of “evil” and admiration for the bravery of rescue workers. He paid special tribute to the crew and passengers of Flight 93, the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania. Many Americans, according to him, found it difficult to comprehend why an adversary would vehemently dislike them. He tried to define the security precautions in their daily lives as something that served both consolation and a reminder of the US’s fragility (“Full Transcript”). He directly addressed the veterans in the following words:

The cause you pursued at the call of duty is the noblest America has to offer. You have shielded your fellow citizens from danger. You have defended the beliefs of your country and advanced the rights of the downtrodden. You have been the face of hope and mercy in dark places. You have been a force for good in the world. Nothing that has followed -- nothing -- can tarnish your honor or diminish your accomplishments. To you and the honored dead, our country is forever grateful. (“Full Transcript”)

George W. Bush spoke these words when the “War on Terror” that became the sequel to the 9/11 attacks in 2001 had been almost called off by America. However, during the course of the 20 years following 9/11, a number of authors and intellectuals attempted to contextualise and analyse the 9/11 events. Their views are almost contrary to what George Bush says in the above speeches. These writers try to convince the reader that 9/11 was anything but a disarticulated and disjointed event; it does not stand alone as a singular event without any precedent example of violence and destruction. Therefore, these responders have tried to understand the attacks in the context of the Cold War and, in particular, the disturbed historical scenario in the Middle East region prior to 9/11. Some of these writers that will be discussed briefly are Noam Chomsky, Ward Churchill, Aijaz Ahmad, Mohsin Hamid, Arundhati Roy, Amra Sabic El Rayees, Hamid Dabashi, and Deepa Kumar, etc.

In his important response to the attacks, *9-11: Was There an Alternative*, Noam Chomsky tries to understand the attacks in a larger perspective. He tries to shed light not only on September 11 itself, but also on the events leading up to and following it. For instance, he claims "the horrifying atrocities of September 11" were new in world affairs "not in their scale and character, but in the target" (57/234). Furthermore, although he says that it was only after 1812 that America had been attacked on its own soil, he disproves the analogy of 9/11 with the Pearl Harbor attacks in 1941 on the ground that the latter was "not the national territory... but it was in effect a colony" (57/234). Therefore, neither does Pearl Harbor qualify as national territory, nor could the 1941 attacks on it be termed as an attack on the interior of America.

Chomsky also tries to reevaluate the belief that the attacks were in part an effect of the "clash of civilisations": the phrase was initially popularised by Huntington, who proposed that western civilization, after the fall of the Soviet Union, had a new enemy emerging in the garb of "Islamic and Chinese nemesis" (Dabashi 10); in addition to him, Bernard Lewis' writings also "systematically depicted Islam as a fundamental threat to the uniquely lofty ideals of the West" (Dabashi 11). Chomsky says adherence to such a belief system "is fashionable talk, but it makes little sense" (139/234). Revisiting the ongoing geopolitical scenario, he argues:

The most populous Islamic state is Indonesia, a favourite of the United States ever since Suharto took power in 1965, as army-led massacres slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people, mostly landless peasants, with the assistance of the U.S. and with an outburst of euphoria from the West that is so embarrassing in retrospect that it has been effectively wiped out of memory. Suharto remained "our kind of guy," as the Clinton administration called him, as he compiled one of the most horrendous records of slaughter, torture, and other abuses of the late 20th century. The most extreme Islamic fundamentalist state, apart from the Taliban, is Saudi Arabia, A U.S. client since its founding. In the 1980s, the U.S. along with Pakistani intelligence (helped by Saudi Arabia, Britain, and others), recruited, armed, and trained the most extreme Islamic fundamentalists they could find to cause maximal harm to the Soviets in Afghanistan. As Simon Jenkins observes in the *London Times*, those efforts "destroyed a moderate regime and created a fanatical one, from groups recklessly financed by the Americans" (most of the funding was probably Saudi). One of the indirect beneficiaries was Osama bin Laden" (139/234).

Chomsky also tries to disprove two important early interpretations of the attacks as an assault on the ideals of globalisation and the American values of freedom and democracy. He says this sort of belief system absolves

Western intellectuals and political leaders "of the responsibility for the actions that do lie behind the choice of the World Trade Center" (80/234). And "what happened on September 11 has virtually nothing to do with economic globalization" (Chomsky 85-86/234). Putting a disclaimer that "nothing can justify crimes such as those of September 11," Chomsky adds that "we can think of the United States as an "innocent victim" only if we adopt the convenient path of ignoring the record of its actions and those of its allies, which are, after all, hardly a secret." (Chomsky 85-86/234).

Thus, Noam Chomsky believes that the attacks were borne out of the "reservoir of bitterness" towards America due to its offshore policies. He gives an example of an interview published in the *Wall Street Journal*. In the interview, the opinions of the "moneyed Muslims," who live[d] in the West itself, were sought. These people "expressed dismay and anger about the United States' support for harsh authoritarian states, as well as the barriers that Washington places in the way of independent development and political democracy through its policies of 'propping up oppressive regimes'" (59/234). More importantly, Chomsky relates, "the CIA did have a role... but that was in the 1980s when it joined Pakistan intelligence and others (Saudi Arabia, Britain, etc.) in recruiting, training, and arming the most extreme Islamic fundamentalists it could find to fight a 'Holy War' against the Russian invaders of Afghanistan" (65/234).

Additionally, Chomsky reveals that the World Court condemned the US for the "unlawful use of force" (71-72/234). The US also vetoed the "Security Council's resolution calling on all states (meaning the US) to adhere to international law" (71-72/234). Moreover, Chomsky claims that the 1980s attack on Nicaragua by the US that killed thousands of people was accompanied by a devastating economic war, which a small country isolated by a vengeful and cruel superpower could scarcely sustain" (72/234). According to him, the Reagan administration had set off a terrorist bombing in Beirut in 1985 outside a mosque, which killed 80 and almost wounded 250. He quotes the Washington Post as saying among them were women and children (96/234).

In particular, Chomsky emphasises the destruction of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, which provided fifty per cent of Sudan's medicine; this dilapidation also resulted in the shortage of "coloroquine, the standard treatment for malaria," as he quotes Patrick Winter from the Observer, December 20, 1998 (102/234). He also quotes Dr Idris Eltayeb, who compared the casualties of Al-Shifa to the killings of 9/11, saying the former was worse than the latter. "Al-Shifa: the crime," in Eltayeb's words, was "just as much an act of terrorism as at the Twin Towers—the only difference is we know who did it. I feel very sad about the loss of life [in New York

and Washington], but in terms of numbers and the relative cost to a poor country, [the bombing in Sudan] was worse." (107/234). Chomsky implicates other things as well that may have added to the "reservoir of bitterness" towards America. For instance, a U.S.-backed army control "in Indonesia in 1965 [which resulted in] the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly landless peasants... a massacre that the CIA compared to the crimes of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao" (124/234). Later, in the "War on Terror", Washington "demanded [from Pakistan] a cut-off of fuel supplies... and the elimination of truck convoys that provide much of the food and other supplies to Afghanistan's civilian population" (159-160/234). Many hurdles were faced by World Food Program officials in delivering the supplies. It had to halt all food convoys and all distribution of food by its local staff because of the air strikes of October 7. "The nightmare scenario of up to 1.5 million refugees flooding out of the country moved a step closer to reality" after the attacks (163/234).

Specifically, Chomsky sees a lingual contortion in the vocabulary used to describe the different off-shore operations by the US. He says that the bombing in Kosovo was called a "humanitarian intervention". The "War on Terror" was first called a "crusade," which was later changed into "Operation Infinite Justice" and thereafter to "Enduring Freedom," Chomsky quotes Arundhati Roy (166/234 [Roy 227]). The latter seems to be ironically exposing the 'Orwellian newspeak' in the American nomenclature when she says that "witness the Infinite Justice of the new century. Civilians starving to death, while they are waiting to be killed" (qtd in Chomsky 166/234 [Roy 227]).

However, she (Arundhati Roy) also joins Chomsky in demanding to map the attacks into the context of a pre-9/11 scenario. In fact, in her book *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, which was published back in 2002 by Penguin, she said, "it will be a pity if, instead of using this as an opportunity to try and understand why September 11 happened, Americans use it as an opportunity to usurp the whole world's sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own" (223). She claims that it seemed unlikely in such an environment that the world would know about the motivations of the particular hijackers who flew "planes into those particular American buildings" (223). Revising that the attacks were understood as an attack on American values of freedom and democracy, Roy asserts:

If that were true, it's reasonable to wonder why the symbols of America's economic and military dominance—the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon—were chosen as the targets of the attacks. Why not the Statue of Liberty? Could it be that the stygian anger that led to the attacks has its taproot not in American freedom and democracy, but in the US government's record of commitment and support to exactly the

opposite things—to military and economic terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry and unimaginable genocide (outside America)? (Roy 222)

Besides, insinuating the US support of guerrillas in Afghanistan against the USSR in the 1980s, Roy says the two countries are "old friends" (227). The seeds of jihad that were sown by America in Afghanistan against the USSR spread to Chechnya, Kosovo, and eventually Kashmir (228). However, "the irony is that America was equally unaware that it was financing a future war against itself," Roy continues (228). In addition, this mutual interaction between these countries had various other effects at the receiving end. Due to the CIA's straddling, the "borderland [between Pakistan and Afghanistan] had become the biggest producer of heroin in the world" (228).

In his well-received essay, "Why Do They Hate Us?" Mohsin Hamid echoes Roy about the drug addiction across the Durand Line emanating as a by-product of the Cold War. He says that Pakistan went from having "virtually no addicts when I was 9... to having more than a million by the time I completed high school, according to a lecture that a U.S. drug-enforcement official gave at my school." According to him, the virtual Cold War exchange changed the entire scenario of his country: "With the help of the CIA, jihadist training camps sprung up in the tribal areas of Pakistan." Moreover, "secular politicians, academics, and journalists were intimidated, imprisoned, or worse". Besides, Hamid is of the opinion that these developments, though "minor footnotes in U.S. history, are but the chapter titles of the histories of other countries, where they have had enormous consequences." He claims that "most people... in the United States are astounded to learn that the period ever occurred," but in Pakistan, it is vividly seared into the national memory. Indeed, it has torn the very "fabric of what... was a relatively liberal country with nightclubs, casinos, and legal alcohol."

Hamid's claim that most people in America do not have a sense of what took place in the Middle East region during the Cold War or Gulf War seems to be partly contradicted by the opinions of American author and political activist Ward Churchill. In his essay "'Some People Push Back': On the Justice of Roosting Chickens", he says the citizens of America "greeted [the] revelations" about the deaths in Iraq, for instance, "with yawns". According to him, "one needs only recall the 24-hour-per-day dissemination of bombardment videos on every available TV channel, and the exceedingly high ratings of these telecasts, to gain a sense of how much they knew" about the US and the 'prosthetic reach', to use Michael Rothberg's term, of the US. He accuses the workers at the WTC before and after 9/11 of "forming a technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire – the 'mighty engine of profit' to which the military dimension of US policy has always been enslaved -

and they did so both willingly and knowingly." Additionally, he compares them with Nazi supporters and controversially calls them "the *little Eichmanns* inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers." (Emphasis added).

Perhaps, after Chomsky, Churchill has been most critical of US foreign policies. He refutes that the "terrorists" on 9/11 initiated a war with the US. In turn, he cites the American support of Israel as the new starting point of the war in the Middle East: "Lyndon Johnson first lent significant support to Israel's dispossession/displacement of Palestinians during the 1960s, or when George the Elder ordered "Desert Shield" in 1990, or at any of several points in between" ("Some"). Moreover, he recalls the statement Malcolm X gave after J F Kennedy's assassination, that the murder was a case of "chickens coming home to roost". In Churchill's opinion, "a few more chickens – along with some half-million dead Iraqi children – came home to roost in a very big way at the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center" and Pentagon ("Some"). He claims that the Iraqi children died as a result of the US "surgical" bombing which destroyed the country's "water purification and sewage facilities" and other infrastructural targets "upon which Iraq's civilian population depend[ed] for its very survival". According to him, the US aerial bombing was a "Class I Crime against Humanity," involving "countless gross violations of international law, as well as every conceivable standard of "civilized" behavior." In his essays, he also recalls the resignation of two UN humanitarian aid workers in Iraq as a mark of protest against the US surgical bombing in the country and how Medline Albright, the then Secretary of State, termed the "allegations" as something "'worth the price' to see that U.S. aims were achieved."

In *Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Imperialism of Our Time*, Aijaz Ahmad discusses that it is impossible to draw any political understanding of 9/11 unless seen in the context of American militarism in Iraq and Afghanistan (40). In particular, he argues that Saddam Hussain's Baath party rose to power, helped by the US to interrupt communist advances in Iraq. However, the tide turned against Saddam when he attacked Kuwait. According to Ahmad, the US decision to turn against Iraq was based on the reason that Saddam Hussain was "hostile to the Saudi monarchy [a true US ally] and saw itself as an adversary of Israel as well as an emerging giant in the [Middle East] region" (85).

Hamid Dabashi, in his *Brown Skin, White Masks*, discusses the difference of treatment received by "death and destruction" in Baghdad, Kandahar, Beirut, or Gaza City versus in Mumbai, London, Tel Aviv, or New York, where it causes "loathing and outrage when it takes place"(6). He says the answer to this disparity "cannot be



sought in the sandy domains of malice and malevolence. It must be carefully cultivated in the immediate historical vicinities where the politics of despair and the economics of domination combine to create a moral mandate to divide and rule—where some are perceived as more human than others" (6). Dabashi contends that the western media industry is far from impartial when Muslims are victimised by western attacks and onslaughts. He says when the perpetrators are Muslims, a huge outcry is made around the globe, but not when they are victimized: "What could account for this discrepancy—outrage at criminal acts when the perpetrators are Muslims, yet complacency toward far worse acts when they are aimed against Muslims?" (5).

Furthermore, he implies that the overlapping of Muslims, Islam, and different orientalist pigeonholing has been a recurrent feature of overall western discourse. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani implicated Islam in the attacks of September 11, because "the assumption of collective Muslim guilt is a common staple of the American mass media" (3). On this scale, Dabashi is also joined by Deepa Kumar and in her book *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, she argues, anti-Muslim "prejudice was consciously constructed and deployed by the ruling elite at particular moments" (17–18/479). However, Kumar debunks the preconceptions in one of her chapters, "Image of Islam in Europe," by "locating the image of [the religion] in Europe in its proper historical context." (18/489; for details see *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*).

Like Kumar, Amra Sabic El Rayees, professor at Columbia University's Teachers College, also reverberates the concerns raised by Dabashi about the lopsided attention provided to Muslims when they are victims. In her essay "The US did more to radicalise Afghanistan than Osama bin Laden", she discusses that radicalisation "is the result of a desperate and misguided search for a pathway to empowerment by people starving for a sense of belonging, recognition, and basic respect." She further argues that "as a survivor of genocide [in Bosnia] and an academic studying the ways that education can resuscitate broken countries and people, I have repeatedly seen how even the most tolerant Muslims can end up being radicalised under the right set of conditions." She claims that America left Afghanistan "worse." "Far worse". Therefore, she seems to have the following message:

Exposure to violence is a critical risk factor for radicalisation. Trauma triggers an internal transformation in a person who is desperately looking to make sense of their pain, loss, exclusion, and shock....Today, the conditions in Afghanistan check every box on the radicalisation checklist: Afghans have suffered trauma and violence. They feel betrayed by an external force that allegedly came to "help" them, but ended up

leaving them worse off. They live in economic deprivation with one million children at risk of starvation. They also have very limited educational opportunities – millions of Afghan children are unable to go to school and have little hope for the future. . . . If there is one lesson the West should learn from its many interventions in Afghanistan, it is this: people with no hope or support network to help them deal with their trauma become easy targets for radicalisation as they desperately search for a path to empowerment, justice, and dignity. (Amra)

Considering the views put forward by the above discussed authors, it can be concluded that any event of violence or otherwise necessarily needs to be viewed in context whatsoever. All humans are corporeally susceptible and so inexorably, unavoidably, and irreversibly interdependent, making violence, trauma, and pain in whatever corner of the world require equal attention. Literature has always been at the forefront of recognising and elevating this connection. Post-9/11 novels, for instance, interrogate the media and the government's perspectives by drawing attention to the material realities of September 11 and the "War on Terror". They provide readers with strategies for resisting and undermining the oppressive force of the spectacle. Therefore, literature might be termed as the greatest and only reliable source available to incorporate the experiences and realities of the pre and post-9/11 world. However, the pursuit of literary responses to 9/11 can be pursued in a separate discussion.

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