

SEEING THROUGH THE DARKNESS: TESTIMONIALS OF REFUGEE WOMEN | 24 MAY 2001

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*I was carrying a mountain of burdens on my shoulders when I came seeking hope, seeking asylum in Australia. My expectation was Australia would remove the burden from me. Unfortunately, upon arrival, my burdens increased and my suffering led me to a new state of madness in Australia. - 'Amal'**

In 1991, during the height of the Gulf War, Liberal Party stalwart John Stone, openly wrote of his contempt for Arabs and Muslims in a mainstream Australian newspaper, the Financial Review, embracing an unashamed orientalist position. His intentions were clear enough in drawing attention to an 'important' lesson that ought to 'teach Australians something about the world'. That is, in Stone's words, 'because of our ill considered immigration policies and so called multicultural policies over the past 15-20 years, we now have many Arabs- and even more Muslims - in Australia' (February 1991).

Quoting heavily from a profoundly racist book by David Pryce Jones, the basic thesis that Stone reproduces in his article is that essentialist qualities like 'untrustworthiness, ruthless adventurism, brutality, irrationality, and subservience of everything else to power' are inherent and 'pervade the whole of Arab culture'. Stone goes on to wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone 'seeking to gain some insight into the Arab world'. I allude to this article not to demonstrate the in-your-face racism of a once prominent member of the Liberal Party, or even how this sort of racist articulation is so easily normalised in the mainstream of Australian English language media. Rather, what I am concerned with here is a question Stone puts to his assumed white readership. Before getting to this question though, Stone attempts 'to forestall the inevitable outcry of the ignorant', that is, those who disagree with him, that this has 'nothing to do with racism, [no!], it is simply being asserted as a matter of empirical observation'. Stone finally asks his question, a question that underpins all what brings us up to today: 'why have our governments permitted the entry into Australia of so many adherents to a culture so alien to the basic Judeo-Christian one which has always constituted the core culture of our society?'

To be able to unpack this question is to understand the pathology of the current Federal governments' immigration and refugee policies. These sorts of racist articulations are at the core of government discourse and are actively pursued through a racialised politics of negation and containment affecting all asylum seekers and refugees who are deemed in government terms 'unauthorised' arrivals. These policies include the regime of mandatory imprisonment of asylum seekers, and the imposition of temporary status on refugees as a means of restricting access to the most basic of services like housing, English language and income support, as well as barring access to family reunion provisions and from re-entering Australia should refugees need to leave, thus wilfully preventing contact with wives, children, parents and other family members for an additional minimum three years.

*I felt cold despite the heat in Port Hedland. I am unable to describe my feelings at this point. I felt I was diminishing and that I would die in this place. At that very moment I hated Australia. I hated Europe. I laughed at the state of human rights in Australia. I asked myself, how can Australia be a developed country and not recognise even the most fundamental of human rights of people? If a family has done nothing other than seek out sanctuary, other than escape suffering, how can that be a crime? - Samira**

In 1999, another unashamed racist belonging to the heartland of the Western Australian Liberal party, Senator Ross Lightfoot wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald that,

"It is a crime to enter Australia by boat or any other means other than with the permission of our Government. Therefore, [those who do] are criminals - worse, if they bring with them communicable, pandemic, epidemic or parasitic diseases (and they are from some areas where contagious diseases are rampant, then innocent Australians could suffer. These law breakers elbow their way to the front of the queue, and by invading our shores in such significant numbers, threaten the peace of mind and sense of security of many Australians, by way of their divergent lifestyle, culture, outlook and values." (November 24, 1999)

The ascendancy of the Howard government is the open face of this historically acceptable politics of demonising asylum seekers and refugees, especially those from Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The legitimacy of these views is found in the racialised policies of the tight white right of the current Federal government and in the tacit support of the Australian Labor Party. The body politic is heavy with ruthless populists who blatantly exploit the rampant racism that runs deep through the veins of white Australia and those assimilated into it. Phillip Ruddock, the Minister of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs leads the charge in this highly racialised discourse reinforcing these all too familiar views in his calmly cold dispassionate manner. Statements like 'whole villages from the Middle East are packing for Australia', and this is the 'biggest assault on our borders by unauthorised arrivals ever' nurture this racialised climate of hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers.

I remember hearing a question directed at the Minister of Immigration at Curtin. What is the guilt of our children if we the adults did the wrong as you are claiming and we came to Australia? What is the crime of our children that they have to suffer and endure this torture?

The Minister answered that you did the wrong and you did not teach your children the law. You crossed borders and this means you have to bear what you have done.

Does the esteemed Minister think we came to Australia leaving behind our families, our homes to seek punishment? Does he know that we did not have any choice? That we were forced to come despite our different languages and

*nationalities. We were never in a situation where we had options. We had no power to make a decision. Our circumstances forced us to leave our countries and head for a place that had a reputation of being free, peaceful and co-operative. We came seeking co-operation from a nation that we thought upheld human rights. We thought when we got here, Australia would maintain our dignity and grant us protection. - Layla**

So who is threatening the so-called 'outlook' of white Australia? Who so easily is penetrating this government's futile attempts at imposing fortress Australia? Who are the racialised others singled out for this hostile attention? We know it is mostly Iraqi, Afghan, Kurdish, Palestinian, Iranian and Somali refugees who are currently seeking asylum. The political contexts of these very specific groups of individuals and families seem lost on even the more critical of commentators. Both the Federal government and media have erased these contexts for political capital to ensure that there is no linkage to figuring them as refugees, but rather as bogus applicants gatecrashing the shores of Australia. Australia acts as if it lives in a political vacuum with no links to or agency in the political catastrophes and upheavals that are currently taking place in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Somalia. There is a deliberate attempt to separate individuals out from the ruptured worlds in which they have fled. And while the card carrying economic rationalists exhort the masses to embrace economic libertarianism in the conceit of globalisation, those very same hypocrites refuse to take any responsibility for the human effects of globalised war of which Australia is always more than eager to participate in - witness the Gulf War of 1990/91 - or in the imperium of US diktat to enforce genocidal policies like the economic blockades imposed on the civilian populations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Instead, Ruddock enacts his government's overtly racist policies, actively deploying an all too familiarly coded language intent on demonising and criminalising asylum seekers. Refugees and asylum seekers are figured in popular discourse as illegal, as wealthy queue jumpers, as criminals, as hordes, as law breakers, as invaders in active collusion with people smugglers. The familiarity of this vocabulary, together with the standard tabloid style of racialised images of the always undifferentiated mass of bodies in the act of outbreaks from Woomera, of riots at Port Hedland, of trying to penetrate the layers of barbed wire, razor wire and steel palisade fencing, of unexplained rebellion, this has much currency in the everyday consumer reality of an institutionally racist, and historically virulent anti-Arab, anti-Muslim Australian media. The ready acceptance of these portrayals allow for not only a collapse in humanitarian support of people fleeing persecution, war, torture and trauma, but has allowed for the unprincipled conduct by agencies to disengage from their ethical responsibilities to individuals and communities and instead deliver government outcomes by not assisting the so called subclass 785, the temporary protection visa refugees, because government orders them not to or they lose their funding.

So how does it feel for those who are hopeful and dream of a future in a foreign country? Do people really expect that you wouldn't feel depressed and desperate when threatened with deportation and therefore react in such a

way. - Amani

*I used to sit talking to myself or to my son and I made an effort to overcome my 'weakness' by playing half the time and the other watching TV with him. I made an effort so that he did not experience any pain in his mind regarding this prison or because of the isolation. I used to sing and teach him songs, anything to keep us both busy. When I needed to cry I used to take the opportunity when he was sleeping. And when I couldn't help it, I used to go to the bathroom and cry my eyes out. When he asked me what was wrong, I told him that I was not feeling well. He always asked why the Australians put us in this prison all alone? I fought against a total collapse and nervous breakdown during the periods of solitary confinement. I thought there couldn't be a worse place than this in Australia. - Layla**

In a Discussion Paper issued by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, temporary protection visas or TPVs are described as "one of several measures designed to make Australia less attractive to asylum seekers 'shopping' around the world for the most favourable asylum arrangements, instead of availing themselves of the protection of countries in their own region."

The wilful miserableness of this government line is all the more difficult to swallow in light of the current political realities for fleeing refugees, especially Iraqi, Afghan, Kurdish and Palestinian refugees. Iraqis and Kurds have experienced decades of political persecution and war, culminating in the 1990/91 Gulf War where massive loads of carpet bombs spread depleted uranium throughout the country, poisoning the water and soils, the children and people. And after ten years of a totalising economic blockade, of which Australia is an active perpetrator of, the Iraqi civilian population has been totally devastated. This genocidal blockade has caused continued deprivation, chronic hunger, endemic under-nutrition, disease, massive unemployment and widespread human suffering. As this grave humanitarian tragedy has unfolded, the most devastating effect as always has fallen on children and infants. Over one thousand children die every week; 70 percent of the population has little or no access to food. This economic blockade is a chronology of genocide. The principle that the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is illegal and ethically indefensible, and while the Australian government is prepared to be party to genocide, and they certainly have a history of it in the very racist policies and practices against Indigenous people that continue on today, then they must take responsibility and make reparations for the displacement of civilians and accept refugees with full rights and entitlements to social citizenship immediately upon arrival.

*Port Hedland is an unsuitable place for human beings seeking life and hope. It is a place full of fences and locks. It is a small place a person can walk from beginning to end in five minutes. How can I describe this place? It is a place where no human being can ever forget. A place full of agony, deprivation, despair and sorrow. Everyone that came to me at Port Hedland said I deserved to suffer because I chose Australia as a country of freedom to live. Australia for me is a country of torture. - Mariam**

Similarly, refugees fleeing political persecution and war in Afghanistan have been collectively incarcerated in the Australian refugee prison system with government refusing to acknowledge the depth of this humanitarian tragedy. Drought, famine and renewed civil war drive 300 Afghan families a day into refugee camps. According to the Afghan Women's Group in Sydney, 25 children died on Monday in the infamous Jelozaï refugee camp as they do every day but the indifference of western the world doesn't see fit ever to report on this. 80,000 refugees, mostly women and children live in abject poverty in this camp with no access to water. The United Nations has given the refugees little more than plastic bags to live under in 40 degree heat in the middle of nowhere. Meanwhile in Australia, Philip Ruddock carps on about legitimate processes for refugees to go through, and admonishes that they must get in the queue. Where is the queue for the war widows and the orphans in the camps, the most vulnerable of refugees? Who do they tell of their well- founded fear of persecution? How do they get through to the proper channels? What is the legitimate process for them when they can't even find food, water or shelter? Can the Minister please give directions to the nearest embassy queue from the isolated camps that are constantly under surveillance by Pakistani authorities, so that Afghan women and children can neatly fill in their application forms? And as for availing themselves of the protection of countries in their own region, it is universally acknowledged that Pakistan not only overtly supports the ruling Taliban, from whom refugees have fled, but Pakistani officials are openly hostile to the refugees barely tolerating their presence, refusing them the right to work and the right to education.

Where is the freedom and what is the difference between the countries we fled and the Australian detention centres? ACM attacked us and we have no right to speak. They put our children in places not suitable for animals and we do not have the right to speak. Some bashed our children as one of them did to my child and I could not speak. - Samira

And what of the Palestinian refugees in the detention prisons here in Australia, they who are the oldest displaced and most wilfully ignored refugee group in the world. For 53 years Palestinians have been forced to endure dispossession, war, poverty, massacres and displacement. The situation of Palestinian refugees is at once political and complex. The Australian government refuses to recognise the inalienable right of return as enshrined in international law through the Universal Declaration of Human rights (1948) and the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) and most importantly, Un General Assembly Resolution 3236 (1974), that is, the right to return to their homes and property if they so choose, yet when Palestinians seek asylum here in Australia, they are locked up like criminals. The hypocrisy of government and human rights advocates on the situation of Palestinian refugees is racist to the core especially when other groups get privileged over and above the rights and legal entitlements of silenced groups like Palestinians. Where will the Australian Government deport Palestinians? To further displacement? To be blown up by Israeli F-16 fighter planes supplied by the United States? To be reunited with poverty in the squalid refugee camps of Syria and Jordan? To

be sent off to Lebanon, where the Lebanese government refuses Palestinian refugees the most basic of human and civil rights. And what of the Somalis, the Eritreans, the Algerians?

*One sad day brought more pain to my heart. I awoke to witness another nightmare in this country. I found out that some of the people inside the prison were terrified for their lives as they were to be deported to Somalia having spent three years in this prison awaiting justice. They came seeking freedom to live without persecution, expecting to find that Australia was a freedom loving safe country. They came carrying a dream. After three years of mistreatment, the unfair judgement was to deport them. Three wasted years in the prime of their lives. What would become of them? This caused much anger amongst other detainees. - Amal**

*Families were watching as a number of ACM officers came into our block and took some young men away. As the men resisted, they were beaten by the officers. Two of the young men were the ones who sewed up their mouth during the hunger strike. As I watched, I imagined I was watching a horror film and the uniforms that the ACM officers were wearing looked like the cloth of the Ninja. After the young men were taken from us, the mothers started to throw food at the officers and rip the cloth that surrounded the fence. The children were all crying and screaming. A group of children tried to rip the fence down by undoing the wires one by one. I remember a young boy about eight years old who escaped. A female officer got hold of him by the jaw and belted him. This provoked the people more and more. - Mariam**

What we are seeing today is the total collapse of a humanitarian approach to refugees and a morally and politically bankrupt polity that allows this to continue with incidences of abuse and violence against children, men and women in a unregulated privately owned prison system, notorious for its expertise in racialised punishment. Being a subsidiary to a US corporation, Australasian Correctional Management or ACM specialises in physical brutality and bullying, racial intimidation and contempt for asylum seekers. Indeed, reports indicate that this company is a serial violator of human rights of those it so eagerly imprisons. According to reports in *The Australian*, the US parent company has appeared in 62 Federal Court cases since early 1999 (*The Weekend Australian* 25-26/11/2000). In most cases detainees have lodged claims against the owner and others for alleged breaches of their civil rights. In one case, the Justice department claimed guards were beating young boys, throwing gas grenades in their sleeping quarters and holding prisoners in isolation for long periods. We know from testimonials from survivors of the ACM regime here, that racist taunts, psychological trauma and abuse and physical assaults are widespread as is depression and long stints in solitary confinement for acts of rebellion like asking when will you be freed. Deprivation is rampant and there has been one suicide and many attempts in refugee detention prisons throughout Australia. Camera surveillance is used to intimidate and traumatise. This is not the virtual reality of Big Brother or Survival fast bucks television, this is the shock of a racialised reality for asylum seekers here in so-called democratic Australia.

I became a person who only could see the darkness. I thought of killing myself and my children to end this nightmare. I tried to make sense out of it; to remember that other people were asking the same questions. I reflected on my life, where I was and where I am now.

*Suddenly I felt a strong hand grabbing me by my arm and forcing me to the place they had allocated for me to spend the night. I refused and resisted. I felt someone grab me by the neck and press down hard on me. A number of ACM guards carried me out by force to that room and when I was no longer able to resist, I felt a slap across my face from one of the ACM officers. He was a well- built man and resembled a wild animal in his behaviour towards me. They took me to the room and I cried and cried. Then I decided I had to be stronger than them. - Samira**

The impoverishment and destitution of refugees condemned to temporary status is barely mentioned outside a small coalition of dedicated workers. Agencies have been silenced and instructed not to assist the refugees who are granted a temporary protection visa. Refugees have been deliberately cut off from communities and support services. The impotence of agencies to speak out against this regime of racialised punishment is testimony to the death of advocacy, activism and ultimately the community sector. It is also indicative of the racism inherent in the elitist politics of civil libertarians and human rights bodies who are more concerned with their own agendas than the rights of refugees and immigrants; and those who would rather assuage their white Euro guilt by supporting the most benign and meaningless manifestations of reconciliation and multiculturalism than engage with divesting themselves of power and white skin privilege to provide support and resources to facilitate the empowerment of communities of refugees to speak and act for themselves. This utter lack of action has forced refugees and asylum seekers to put their lives, their bodies and their futures in further danger.

*I decided to escape to the fence and seek help. I ran and ran quickly asking God to keep the ACM guards from catching me and that I wouldn't meet other guards on the way. I reached the fence in a miserable state and I screamed for the other detainees asking for their help. Five people came to the fence and demanded that I be let out or they will break the fence. My terror increased when they began to break the fence. - Mariam**

The breakout of refugees from Woomera prison was a potent symbol of how diminished activism has become in Australia. The fact that refugees are obliged to mass break out, to burn down their prisons, to sew up their lips in protest, to hunger strike and still no real action is effected to ensure that their fundamental rights are protected is damning. Passivity, impotence and indifference are the key features that herald in this campaign to end racialised punishment in Australia. It is the challenge of all of us to overthrow this regime of indifference, of impotence, to effect radical change and shake out this deadly inactivism.

I came to Australia carrying bleeding wounds and now that I am out of the

detention centre, I carry all kinds of other sufferings. I was released and there is no meaning for my release now that my mind can no longer function. Now I am outside, I am unable to think. I am frightened, terrified. I shake when I see an officer in the street. I know this will cause problems for me. But Australia says now I am free for three years. If I am free, does that mean I can speak? No, but what if something happens to me. I do not feel free. I am imprisoned. I am still in bondage because I cannot speak.

*Stand beside me so that I can tell you the truth about what happens in the detention centres. If you hear my story and still do not help me, then maybe I did make a mistake in seeking help from Australia. - Amani**

This paper is dedicated to the women, children and men who endure and have endured, and to those who have not survived the regime of racialised punishment in Australia.

*Excerpts from survivors of the Australian refugee detention prisons. All names are fictitious to protect the futures of the women who have spoken of the trauma and abuse they have experienced whilst being falsely imprisoned because they sought asylum in Australia. They have great fear to speak publicly about what they have endured because of the very real threat of intimidation and deportation by the Federal government. There are documented cases of retribution against and intimidation of those who have spoken out about the serious violations of human rights in the detention prisons in Australia.

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