

The following statement was given by Rashmi Varma, UNC Professor of English, a panel member at the Teach-In, "Understanding the Attack on America: an Alternative View," held at the UNC-Chapel Hill campus on Sept. 17, 2001.

Just as I had resolved for myself that there would be something obscene in talking of a backlash against a few when so many lay dead in New York City and Washington, DC, news came in of the death of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man from northern India, shot by a white man in a black Chevrolet in Mesa, Arizona. Nothing was stolen from his gas station; the perpetrator simply ran away. While the thousands of people killed on September 11 were victims of a dastardly and retrograde act of terror, Balbir Singh Sodhi was the victim of an image. His turban and his beard became a terrible marking of Otherness that could only be contained by the shot of a gun.

In the furiously circulating image of that ultimate personification of evil, it is Osama bin Laden's turban and his beard that have become the visual signifiers of the absolute antithesis of American civilization. And we, egged on by media-sanctioned ignorance, have become arrogant and appallingly poor readers of cultural difference. But Osama, who lives in a "cave", and who our leaders threaten to "hunt down", to make him "crawl out of his hiding hole" is no Caliban, singing of an "end to tyranny" and this is no clash of civilizations, however much we might want to take comfort in single, simple images. Because there is also the clean, white, antiseptic image of Timothy Mcveigh, eyes reflecting an insane vacancy of emotion. These pictures enter our intimate spaces, our consciousness, and colonize our imaginations, mocking the limits of our thinking and feeling. If Fox news were to define our reality, no person of color died in the horror of Tuesday -- that is left up to "community" news sources to cover. Perhaps a more inclusive coverage of the loss of people from all over the world might have softened the hatred. People from 37 nations lost their lives in the World Trade Center.

Hollywood already prepares us for the destruction of our most cherished cities, so that when real-life destruction comes, our eyes are already cynically trained to receive them in rehearsed modes of apprehension. How many times had we already seen the destruction of the World Trade Center? Our anger, too, then follows an over-done script. It's the same old villains -- the devil in the cave, or the alien amongst us. Grief is all that is fresh, though when the pile becomes too high, the pile of bodies in New York city and Jerusalem, in the west bank, in Karachi and in Bosnia, in Belfast and in Rwanda, grief, too, begins, as Bertolt Brecht put it, to "fall like rain in summer".

And then there are the 12-year old Palestinian children waving Palestinian flags, with the media voiceover telling us that they are celebrating America's grief. How bankrupt are we to respond with anger at that image? This is the same media that reports with horror the use of children in war in different parts of the world, but thinks nothing of using children in this war of images. Somehow we never see the images of the 50,000 Iraqi dead children. What kind of anger would that evoke?

Meanwhile, on Indian television, images circulate of Indian Americans being attacked -- a South Asian woman beaten up in New York city, a Sikh man in Providence being handcuffed and taken away. The phone rings, and it's my mother on the line, pleading with me to come back to her, what was I doing "living like a second-class cit"; her voice stalls because I haven't even obtained my green card yet, and because I cry back to her, "in our own nation we treat people worse than

second-class citizens, for centuries we have called them untouchables". Still I promise her I'll be back home soon to see her, but with the knowledge of the thousands of Afghan refugees being displaced from their homes even as we speak.

What then is to be done? What can we do as teachers and students at a public university such as UNC? I have learnt so much today, and perhaps we will all take back our own resolutions with us. But as an English teacher, I can only offer ways to read images that will not imprison us in boxes of cultural ignorance, that will help us see the systematic production of negative images of the Other that have produced this unleashing of hatred today. And I can remind us of poetry, which might be the other side of the silence we observed in honor of all those who died on September 11. One of the great dissident writers of the twentieth century W H Auden once wrote "poetry makes nothing happen"; he is the same poet who wrote elsewhere that "we must love one another or die". So in the end, I offer you the words of a Pakistani poet who transcended nationality in his work with workers and poor people, who routinely gathered audiences of 50,000 people as he spoke out against war and oppression of every stripe. His name is Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and he wrote this poem in a jail cell where he was imprisoned for betraying his nation for the love of humanity. I dedicate this reading to my students.

Evening Be Kind
Faiz Ahmed Faiz

"It was a ferocious afternoon
that came with whips of persecution,
pain that didn't dare
make a sound; with sorrow and anger
whose lashes traced rainbows, arch over arch,
on every part of our bodies.

You must have something in your treasure cache,
gauze, a magical salve.
Spread it over the limb
that is most wounded. O evening be tender.

Life is wasted by pitiless hatred,
petty quarrels erupted into spikes,
eyes sharpened to shards.

Our country is mapped by abandoned highways,
fields that echo with screams of the dying.
We have trodden over all this,
our feet blistered, cut to shreds.
The future shrivelled to this one place.

Unfold the velvet of your clouds
under the travellers' aching feet,
comfort our broken hearts.
O evening in the city of friends,
be kind to us."