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# "Divine Violence" After the Kharotabad Killings

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**Abstract**

In 2011 the law enforcement agencies of Pakistan killed a group of foreigners traveling across Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The agencies then tried to cover up the incident by calling it a potential suicide-bombing attack. However, they could not succeed in the cover-up plan primarily due to a photograph of one of the killed aliens—a woman—that appeared on local media. In this photograph the alien woman is shown lying on the ground near a sandbag-covered check-post waving for mercy/justice. The photograph becomes viral on both electronic news and social media and impels the government to order an inquiry. In this article, I engage the concept of "divine violence" and explore the photograph's politics of aesthetics, which I argue contextualizes the photograph's meaning during a creative moment for human rights.

**Key words**: Kharotabad killings, Divine Violence, Politics of Aesthetics, Security law.

## Introduction

On May 17, 2011, breaking-news regarding a potential suicide bombing attack began to flash on local TV channels in Pakistan. The law enforcement agencies claimed that a group of five possibly Chechen suicide bombers, including three women, were traveling toward the city of Quetta, Baluchistan. The agencies further claimed that the group was stopped at a Frontier Corps (FC) check-post in the town of Kharotabad on the outskirts of the city Quetta. The agencies projected that the group, seeing they could not make it into the city, planned to attack the check-post instead. However, the agencies went on to say that the check-post had already received a radio warning from another check-post about this group of alleged suicide bombers. So just as the group disembarked from their cab, and tried to rush toward the check-post, law enforcement officers gunned them down.[1]

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Suicide bombings are not infrequent or unusual in Pakistan. Therefore, many such operations are believed to be a relief. However, this time something was different: the appearance of a photograph of the last alleged female suicide bomber taken just before she was ultimately killed. In the photograph, which would soon become iconic, the woman can be seen lying on the ground near a sandbag-covered picket of the check-post stretching her arm upward and apparently pointing to the sky. The photograph presented such a powerful gesture of the injured woman that it called into doubt the official claims that the operation was, in fact, a successful prevention of a suicide bombing. The photograph disrupted the security narrative before it could be consistently constructed and sold to the public. Over the next few days, the operation remained one of the top stories of the local media, and demand for more information about the concrete circumstances of the incident increased. Soon more photographs, short video clips, and interviews of witnesses began to surface. These supplemental accounts proved convincingly that the alleged suicide bombers were not Chechens—four of them belonged to Dagestan and Russia, and one to Tajikistan—and that they had earlier traveled to Iran from where they made their way into Pakistan. Moreover, they were all unarmed and, shockingly, the last alleged suicide bomber to die—the woman in the photograph—was eight months pregnant.

For their part, the police and the FC personnel did whatever they could to stop the gathering of further information about the operation. The police doctor who performed the autopsy on the dead bodies was first threatened, then physically assaulted, and eventually killed by unknown men. The photojournalist who took the photo that would become iconic, as well as other photos and clips of the operation, was run out of Quetta, and forced to seek refuge in the capital city of Islamabad. Despite the arbitrary and violent efforts to cover up the operation, the police and the FC personnel could not ease the popular pressure on the government for carrying out an inquiry. On its part, the government, which had initially lauded the operation, felt embarrassed by what soon turned out to become a security scandal, and therefore announced plans to set up a judicial inquiry commission, while parliament formed a fact-finding committee to investigate the event.

**How to Read the Gesture in the Photograph?**

What do we make of the photograph in question and what does it make of us? To put the question in other words, how does the photograph affect our political responsiveness? Our first impression of it might be quite simple: it captures a helpless injured woman's call for mercy. However, this impression is entangled in a passive or negative frame of meaning-making. However, interpreting it as a call for mercy only reduces the larger political problem of violence to a singular, and hence fixed, event, and threatens to rob the photographed woman of her agency in the face of the spectacle of state violence. Put another way, our first impression is doomed to accept her as a bare sacrificial life—a *homo sacer*—unless (the state) decides otherwise.[2]

However, the *affective field of vision* created by the photograph, to borrow Judith Butler's words,[3] especially as the injured (but not necessarily helpless) woman stretches and waves her arm in the fusillade of firing AK-47s, impels us to move beyond our first impression—the call for mercy. We begin to discern the figure of violence in the photograph and experience the affective shock that at once makes us aware of a wave of revulsion, protest and resistance generating within us. Our first impression, the mercy-sympathy-singularity equation, is displaced. We are impelled to ask ourselves: Is she calling for mercy or justice, possibly divine justice? I suggest that it is surely a call for justice or, at least, the affects this photograph generates reveals the possibility for us to treat it as a call for justice. We only need to see how she struggles to gain and assert agency in the face of violence and extreme vulnerability. The photograph captures this final moment in the act of killing, the moment when the victim registers her last expression of agency in an ambiguous and polysemic, yet simple and powerful gesture. Hence just before her death, which she sensed was coming (perhaps because she was already fatally injured), she transcends her state of helplessness to the state of sovereign subject's agency—and becomes a form of resistant life aimed at challenging state power by exposing the anarchy and anomy resident in it.

It is equally possible that some of us (the viewers) are not touched by this affective field of vision, and hence are unable to move beyond our first impression or discern the figure of agency-resistance and the call for justice. However, even if we fail to see her as a form of resistant life, we cannot fail to notice that in her iconic

gesture, as she stretches her arm and points to the sky, the victim invokes a referent (of justice)—God and His divine justice. This invocation of the divine referent places her gesture in at least two related, but mutually exclusive, fields of meanings: a) have mercy in the name of God, and/or b) fear His wrath and justice. In other words, her gesture is an imploration-warning not to underestimate the sovereign subject's agency and simultaneously begs the question of how an invocation of the Divine referent relates to, and enables, sovereign subject's agency in our profane world.

In order to give a plausible explanation of the relationship between the invocation of the Divine referent and the profane agency, as well as to move to our more central concern regarding political responsiveness, I wish to engage Walter Benjamin's concept of Divine violence.[4] Benjamin introduced this concept as the nemesis of state violence, which he also sometimes refers to as the "mythic violence," and argued state violence includes two kinds of violence:

a) violence used for making or constituting law, hence called "law-making violence" or "constituent violence," and
b) violence used for preserving the (constituted) law, hence called "law-preserving violence" or "constituting violence."

On the other hand, Divine violence is the violence that destroys law (and the forces on which it depends as they depend on it), and along with it its capacity to reconstitute itself. Although Benjamin's concept of Divine violence has not yet submitted itself to a complete understanding, there are important insights that his interlocutors and interpreters have made, which I intend to engage to a) extrapolate the gesture in our iconic photograph and b) illustrate the concept itself through such extrapolation, especially with the purpose of putting it in operation against the mythic law of security.

Any initial extrapolation of the photograph, just as that of Benjamin's concept, essentially begins in eschatology/theology, even as the task of the photograph and concept is to prevent either from falling into that domain. From a purely eschatological perspective, I think, like numerous members of the Pakistani public who called for an investigation and justice, the gesture in the photograph is an imploration to God to witness her forced abjection and killing, and to avenge her on the Day of Judgment. Hence, as she implores, the symbolic force of her gesture is directed at her perpetrators. However, in alignment with the theological dimension of Benjamin's concept, an alternative reading sees the victim imploring God to send

His wrath (violence-justice) on her perpetrators, here in this profane world. Both these readings come to face the dilemma of (an indefinite) wait in the dispensation of justice. Despite a Muslim believer's faith in the Day of Judgment and in divine miracles of wrath, we also know that Divine justice either remains infinitely suspended, or its moment of arrival is objectively unknowable. From the theological dimension then Divine justice is, to use Derrida's phrase, a "justice-to-come."[5]

However, some recent interpreters of Benjamin inform us that, unlike Derrida's justice-to-come, Benjamin's Divine violence/justice does arrive. It is rather in the state of being already here. It strikes out of nowhere, and it is pure means (without ends).[6] This interpretation might sound absurd, but as Slavoj Žižek explains and illustrates, Benjamin's concept makes more sense today than ever before. Benjamin borrows the theological and linguistic structure of the purely eschatological notion of Divine violence (especially the one in the second extrapolation I give above), and replaces the Divine referent, the big Other, with a profane referent—the people. In other words, he replaces transcendence with immanence, while the concomitant theological symbolism is not completely given up, just as the name is not given up. Perhaps Benjamin knew, as Žižek conjectures, the value of "theological dimension without which…revolution cannot win."[7]

Just as in Benjaminian justice, the Divine justice that the victim in the photograph calls for is in the state of being already here, primarily because her ultimate referent is also the people. Let us once again focus on the structure of the field of vision of the photograph. When we replace the Divine referent with the people, then she appears to be pointing to the sky, but even in this pure visual dimension, we notice that the sky does exactly what the Divine would do: it sends down the image (in this case the atrocious image) to affect our responsiveness, or as Benjamin would say, affects us in our solitudes such that we would wrestle with it and take upon ourselves the responsibility of the event. Now should we borrow Lacan's notion of "mirror stage," as Žižek does while explaining Benjamin's concept,[8] then the sky would appear to act as a grand mirror stage, where events are staged and sent down in the form of their mirror images. The victim points to this mirror stage, wherefrom the Divine violence will (*have*) descend(ed) in the form of atrocious mirror images. These images are, in a sense, created outside our world—somewhere on the transcendent stage—and, visually, outside the

frame in which victims, perpetrators, and witnesses encounter each other. The images enable them to step out side the frame, and see their mirror image speak to them. Put differently, the focus on visual dimension teases out the dimension of immanence in the victim's call for justice, just as it puts to test our own political responsiveness.

In extrapolating the victim's gesture in the photograph, and engaging the concept of Divine violence, I do not intend to limit our task to mere conceptualization and theory. Rather I take the task further to praxis, and identify, or perhaps project, a course of action for our political responsiveness. To be sure, I want to identify a site in the *dispositif* of state/mythic violence, which I think needs the attention of our political responsiveness, and/or where the Divine violence *will have* struck. The hint to this site is given in one of the passages of Benjamin on Divine violence:

> …on the breaking of this cycle that plays out in the sphere of the mythical form of law, on the destitution (*Entsetzung*) of law with all the powers on which it depends (as they depend on it), ultimately therefore on the destitution of state violence, a new historical epoch founds itself.[9]

The site in the *dispositif* of state violence is this relationship between law and law-preserving forces. The former captures, as Agamben informs us, the anomy and the latter the anarchy which together form state power/violence. Benjamin tells us that should we want to herald a new historical epoch then we need to reckon with the possibility of destitution of law, especially the destitution of the relationship between law and law-preserving forces. And Benjamin further assures us that: "If the rule of myth is broken occasionally in the present age, the coming age is not so unimaginably remote that an attack on law is altogether futile."[10]

Almost a century since Benjamin's time, we need to ask, do we live in that unimaginably remote age in which an attack on law, to be sure security law, is altogether futile? Given the War on Terror, has the rule of myth not expanded, strengthened, and become pervasive, such that we now live under what, Agamben terms, a global paradigm of security? Is this the paradigm that Benjamin had warned us against? Answering these questions depends on our ability to pose another question: Is an attack on the law still possible? This is the question of the immanence of Divine violence and of the right to justice.

Despite the fact that the modern security paradigm, which began during Benjamin's life time and has now reached its high point of

penetration, we can still identify ways to depose the security law/paradigm. In this paper, I suggest that in order to depose the paradigm we need to identify and depose its key linchpins: a) alienage or the juridical category of aliens, and b) indemnity or the provisions of indemnity for the law enforcing agencies. My assumption is that alienage and indemnity provisions enter into a vicious relationship with the notion of security and create the *dispositif*/apparatus of security in which justice is excluded/externalized. Accordingly, the law-preserving violence of law enforcement agencies remains beyond the purview of state justice system.

My above assumption prompts the question why I think alienage and indemnity provisions are at the heart of the security paradigm. Here are some of the reasons: a) aliens are individuals who are juridically most vulnerable and they have no immunity from the right of the state to juridical derogations, b) they cannot register claims against a state or its law enforcement agencies and are left to the mercy of international human rights, which are dispensable and non-justiciable, c) anyone can become alien depending on his/her territorial location, d) alienage is only increasing in a globalizing world, partly due to increased unrest in many countries, and e) law enforcement agencies (including military and para-military) are often shielded by indemnity provisions against any claims of aliens.

The Khoratabad incident is exemplary for its spectacular display of force on the one hand and vulnerability-agency on the other. We notice in a video recording of the event as well as from the statement of a journalist who saw the incident that the victims could have been apprehended, but the operation commander ordered his soldiers to finish them off. The commander's order is clearly extrajudicial, a decision on the life and death of aliens. The concern in the wake of this incident centers around how law enforcement agencies have come to exercise this power over life and death, and how they have come to usurp this power from the judiciary. What emerges is a vicious relationship between identity (here alienage) and indemnity. It is this aspect of the identity-indemnity relationship that is at the heart of the exercise of power over life and death. The operation officer knew well that he was dealing with aliens (who have hardly any justiciable rights). The operation officer also knew that indemnity provisions will shield his actions, and that his colleagues and higher-ups will stand by him (the *espirit de corps* will prevail over justice). This makes justice external to the security

*dispositif*/apparatus. Justice is not allowed to penetrate the law enforcing organization. Instead, it is thought as a divisive force causing mistrust and eventually weakening organizational coherence and functioning. Now justice lives in the interstices between different organizations and institutions, between law enforcement, prosecution, executive, legislature, and the judiciary itself.

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**Notes**

1. For details see Zahra-Malik, "Kharotabad Killings and the Cover Up."
2. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.
3. Butler, *Frames of War*.
4. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence."
5. Martel, "Waiting for Justice."
6. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*.
7. Ibid., 168.
8. Ibid., 176.
9. Agamben, "What Is a Destituent Power," 70.
10. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 284.

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