



Forced into War: An Arendtian Analysis of Aditya Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike*

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Abstract

The present paper seeks to question the legitimacy of violence in acts of war and terrorism through an Arendtian analysis of Aditya Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019). Insightful reflections and inferences are included from Hannah Arendt's concepts of power and violence. Her significant contribution to the study of the decline of the nation-state in Europe coinciding with a rise of nationalism, lying in politics and futility of war offers theoretical underpinnings to the present paper. In order to address the issue of territorial disputes, the paper also examines Arendt's advocacy of the principles of equality and human plurality.

Keywords: Legitimacy of Violence, Terrorism, Equality, Territorial Disputes, Human Plurality

... warfare—from time immemorial the final merciless arbiter in international disputes—has lost much of its effectiveness and nearly all its glamour.

Hannah Arendt (*On Violence*)

The dynamic destructiveness of the concrete practices of domination emphasizes the fragility and hypocrisy of civilized life and invites a critique of the world separating man from nature. This world manifests both—the most tangible expressions of human freedom and the dreadful forces of cultural barbarism and capitalist intensification: freedom for its subjects to move across the socio-political milieu and barbaric because it demands solidarities, sacrifices, preservation of hegemonic structures and hierarchies by applying the force of violence. National ideals and ethnic ties are often rendered obsolete after witnessing the devastating impacts of colonialism and imperialism as extreme forms of state violence

during Nazism and the two world wars. However, surprisingly these discredited racist ideas have survived through the anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa during 1940s and 1950s and the Black power movement in America during the 1960s and 1970s.

A re-emergence of these insurgent ideologies snowballed into the liberation movements inspired by Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse Tung, and Che Guevara witnessed in Angola, Somalia, China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam and Kampuchea. Also, the demands of “ethnic autonomy” in the regions of Quebec, Scotland, and Catalonia undermine the general perceptions of a transnational, global world and democratic ideals of equality and plurality. The Indian sub-continent has its own share of Pandora’s box with long-standing border disputes of India with the neighbouring countries. The vital and pressing issues of safeguarding boundaries, respecting the lines of control, diverting huge amounts of money towards maintaining security forces on borders while fighting poverty and hunger within the respective territories leave the governments on each side in a precarious political crisis. The nationalist inclinations cause a stir-up of violent exchange among the states and the non-state actors. While the people suffer unprecedented losses of life and property, the power groups keep busy ensuring their dominance.

With this pre-text, one would like to investigate the legitimacy of violence while bringing to justice the acts of terror and a reconsolidating the monolith of ideology in the film *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, directed by debutant Aditya Dhar. The film can be interpreted as a sight for upholding valour and a chivalrous display of duty, unarguably. However, it navigates in another direction, which can only be noticed with a sharp eye of critique, highlighting how the film disallows the pleasure of attributing any lasting solution to a long-standing territorial dispute. The rebels encounter their rightful fate, the enemy from across the border is vanquished, sometimes the lost territories are reclaimed and at others a strong message is conveyed that the authorities are alert. At yet other, the status quo is maintained through non-consequential skirmishes. Thereby, we are left with a vagueness that serves the purpose of those in power thriving on the fears and affiliations of ordinary citizens undermining the general perceptions of a transnational, global

world— such scenario ushers in a flurry of discourse which entails a deepening division of opinion among intellectuals. Moreover, violence as a violation of the public sphere in contemporary times emerges to be an aleatory tool in reasserting the state dominion through available ideological apparatuses, leaving us to grapple with the questions: could we realistically predict any depletion of nationalism in near future? Can we reimagine the world without physical boundaries? Addressing these questions, let alone attempting a full account of the importance of maintaining the lines separating states is a gigantic task. This article endeavours to answer a tiny part of the colossal issue by defending the moral grounds for taking into cognizance territorial boundaries, by inferring that such moves can contribute in creating ethically desirable, diverse and tolerant international ties. By drawing on Arendt's (1998) pluralistic approach, one is convinced that human existence is intrinsically diverse, in her elaborations: "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live" (Arendt 8).

We live in times where violence prevails. These are the times of utter unrest and fanatic adherence to clashing ideologies. These are the terrorizing times of mutual distrust, the rise of xenophobic tendencies and ethnoreligious violence. The post-truth world where certain nations are more capable of exhibiting valour and preserving their boundaries and particular people are considered worthier of inhabiting a territory, insinuates a conspicuous case of vulnerability versus survivability. As Judith Butler (2015) suggests, a schism exists between righteous assault and unthinkable horror at self-destructiveness. Butler's assertion carries the undercurrents of a necessity to look from the perspective of the other. Those who enthusiastically adopt extreme violent recourse to subdue others, do they themselves accept the violence meted out to them with equal readiness? The reference point here is the US interventions abroad, a tendency to use force in order to increase control in the Middle East and the treatment of the Arab hostages at the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. Apart from the violent means, Big Brother can neatly pull the rug from under the feet of the opponents by imposing sanctions. As the proclaimed world leader, the US offers a shaky role

model to other democracies in the world, given its excessively violent policies. Implementation of the global war on terror after 9/11 poses serious concerns regarding use of violence by authorities in silencing dissent. These developments encourage an invocation of the Arendtian principles of human plurality and toleration and her analysis of the interrelation between power and violence. Hannah Arendt, as one of the leading political theorists of the twentieth century, takes the issue of violence in the public realm head-on.

A holocaust survivor and a Jew forced into exile from her native land by Nazi authorities, Arendt advocates a polity of shared responsibility between the Arabs and the Jews, with these differences she separated herself from the Zionist movement. She is more of a spectator with global outlook whose thinking is necessarily rooted in her Jewish experiences. Her global outlook is manifested in her reservations against homogeneity and retaining the unique cultural identities guarded by geographical borders. Apart from the personal tragedy of the Jewish people, the world wars and the practice of imperialism shaped Arendt's standpoint on the violent world around her. Unlike many other concepts in her political thought, the concept of violence is systematically developed and consistently followed in most of her works. Using Hannah Arendt's theory as a template, the present article attempts to examine the political crisis in Kashmir as portrayed in the film, *Uri: The Surgical Strike*. Undoubtedly, Arendt would find the suspected links between Pakistan and various insurgent groups including Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and many others, problematic. But it would be interesting to notice and imagine her reflections on the involvement of the Kashmiri youth in fueling cross border terrorism. *On Violence* (1970) is Arendt's treatise on nature and implements of violence where she proclaims that as distinctive from strength, force, and power, use of violence is no guarantee for attaining sustainable peace.

Violence is the absence of the "political" because it eliminates the possibility of debate and persuasion. With the availability of nuclear weapons of mass destruction, avoiding wars will be no mean feat, argues Arendt. While investigating into the 'origins of totalitarianism,' Arendt observes an unprecedented violation of the "political" by criminal violence of the Nazi system of bureaus. In

addition to voicing the past suffering, pain and loss, her theory of totalitarianism is distinctive in the manner that unlike other theorists she ventures to look into the psychology of the perpetrator along with the victim. Her explanations of violence suggest that Nazism was more than mere evil to be castigated, as an unprecedented totalitarian force it attracted her attention to mark the failure of the “political” and the constitutional. The tension between the standards to assess the political institutions and their credibility as justful instruments in safeguarding the rights of individuals has an ethical and political significance. Arendt approaches this issue in her survey of modern politics as a system of bureaucratic dominance. The largescale genocide and torture in the extermination camps carried out by perfectly “normal human” beings typified the “banal evil” emanating from an incapacity to think about the enormity of the crimes they were committing in the name of performing their duty. Having cynically scrutinized different aspects of violence, Arendt’s conclusive remarks are obviously against the use of violence. Far from being an object of glorification, violence is a dangerous tool in the hands of the powerful that can destroy both the victim as well as the oppressor.

Surprisingly, despite reproaching Sartre and Fanon for glorifying violence, Arendt does not completely reject the use of violence. Violence used to overthrow the tyrants, win freedom for people and initiate revolutions for “new beginnings” is justifiable to her. In *On Revolution*, first published in 1963, her analysis of prominently French and American revolutions is a detailed account of the outcomes of dissent. To her, revolutions are not only necessary to disturb the status quo but mandatory in sowing seeds of change; revolutions imply a change greater than merely shifting power from one authority to another, albeit her conclusive remarks do not favour violent uprisings (Arendt 1990a). Moreover, her later observations are more inclined towards the Gandhian peaceful methods of Satyagraha and Asahyogⁱ. The dual pattern of violence evinced in Arendt’s discussion, namely the violence of the state and the violence of the revolutionary militant who considers the state a tyrant and is supposedly fighting for the freedom of his people, are relevant to the situation dramatized in *Uri*.

Undoubtedly, *Uri* fits in the exemplary Bollywood masala action film where violence meted out to the dissenting voices, and the enemy are most earnestly justified. However, looking beyond the cursory glance, one can trace many layers of sacrifices and the political failure of subverting the transgressive acts of the Naxalites in the Northeast and the militants in Kashmir valley. The film opens in the green grandeur of district Chandel of Manipur on June 4th, 2015, one year before the Uri attack. A convoy of the 6 Dogra regiment, carrying soldiers—full of life and hopelessly trained to kill or be killed, these soldiers lull their vehicles through the rocking cradle of the greens. Within seconds, the serene scene metamorphoses into a gory slaughterhouse, and the lifeless pawns are strewn around on the crimson mat. In this attack carried out by the United Liberation Front, a separatist group functioning in the Northeast of India, reportedly 18 soldiers were killed, and 15 were seriously wounded. The counter-action in Myanmar by the name of “Operation Hot Pursuit” as claimed by the authorities, destroyed the launchpads of the Chandel attackers by killing the terrorist handlers from Manipur and Nagaland. This occasions a pertinent question—Are the pre-existing ideological strains of state dominance and exhibitionism more pervasive in the film than the presence of the protagonists and the antagonists as agents of change? Manifestly, the circumstantial necessities of reactionary undertakings are significant to depict, which is why the scene portraying fight between the soldiers and the Naxalites ends at a triumphant note for the army.

The film exposes the clashing ideologies of democracy and dissent, by rendering the tenets of both inconsequential, flawed and insufficient in ensuring a positive enduring change. The incidents of terrorist attacks keep repeating. The martyr soldiers and the *fedayeen jihadis* are trapped in an endless abyss of violence. The latter is blinded by religious fundamentalism whereas, the former is committed to protect the life and property of the civilians and de-escalate the tension in the region. Such an exchange between power, ideologies and violence could be detrimental to the social ties. Zizek in his book, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, borrows Marshall Sahlins’ idea to explain that “the reciprocity of exchange is in itself thoroughly ambiguous, at its most fundamental, it is destructive of the social bond, it is the logic of revenge, tit for tat” (Zizek 25). In *Uri*, “Chapter

Three: Bleed India with a Thousand Cuts (Kashmir),” on 18th, September 2016 at 5.22 a.m. four ISI-supported Jaish-e-Mohammed militants attack Indian Army Base Camp in Uri, Kashmir, killing 19 Indian soldiers, as many as 30 soldiers were injured. Unarguably, such insurgencies are traumatizing and the audience is reminded of the wars imposed on India by Pakistan since partition: the wars of 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999. One is left with little choice but fight against such adversary. At the same time, one is compelled to think whether wars could be the “final arbiters” of disputes among states in an extremely technologically advanced world guarded/threatened by nuclear weapons? Wars as Arendt (1970) examines, hold no place in contemporary world.

Demands for a separate state based on the faith of the dominant population in the region is as much problematic as the violence applied to suppress such demands. The unfortunate religion-based Partition of India in 1947 left the providence of umpteen citizens on both sides of the border in utter jeopardy. Could we afford one more such partition by separating Kashmir without taking into account the long-term repercussions? What could be done to foil the Pakistani ploy of a much-prolonged proxy war in the valley? In his article in *The Tribune*, Rahul Bedi (2019) claims that the empty ultimatums to Islamabad leave India invariably hostage to the benevolence of other states whose intervention is whiningly sought in the situation, ensuing an impasse that would only serve to worsen bilateral relations. This requires an investigation into the burden of frenzied inclinations of war-mongering that sets the states into an eternal geopolitical rivalry, to examine non-violent procedures rather than succumbing to provocations, to circumvent the hijacking of national hysteria for sabotaging human plurality and the capacity to think from the viewpoint of the “other” that underscores Arendt’s political thought advocating the creation of “public sphere” reiterating the ineffectiveness of violence in perpetuating the political.

Arendt’s emphasis on the importance of coming together and interacting by creating the public space offers a foundation for developing relations based on mutual trust, initiating dialogue and resolve political deadlock by accepting the principle of plurality. In Arendt’s (1990b) interpretations: “...community is not made out of

equals, but on the contrary of people who are different and unequal. The community comes into being through equalizing....The political, noneconomic equalization is friendship...just as eating is not life but condition for living, so living together in the polis is not good life but its material condition” (Arendt 82-83).

Reposing faith in the unique identity of the “other” in diverse societies is fundamental to developing an understanding of how the “other” perceives the world. In the common world inhabited by individuals of varying identities and diverse backgrounds, the capacity to unite and think from the perspective of their counterparts endows the individuals with a quintessential insight. This is the condition for the “plurality of men, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs” (Arendt, 1990b: 103). The public realm is the world of appearances where individuals come in contact with other fellow humans. It is in the presence of multiple perspectives that the individual identity acquires meanings. It is in this worldly political arena that fallible human beings own their voices of hatred, fears and prejudices. It is here that conflicts are considered and acknowledged to be addressed head-on. Arendt’s advocacy of diversity is insightful in comprehending the importance of territorial borders and the fine lines drawn by time to separate cultures, simultaneously asserting a need for differences to be respected and a commonness to be maintained to ensure a peaceful international community. Cognizance about the significance of diversity guides towards a politics of tolerance, a far more understanding international community promising solidarity and reciprocity of goodwill, and a world community enabling incessant discourse to promote egalitarianism and fight against intolerant, violent repression.

Arendt constantly favours the role of difference in generating meanings from the life experiences of individuals. Her Jewish identity is shaped by her life experiences during the Holocaust in Germany and later as a German Jew in exile. Expressing her disapproval of the Nazis for rejecting the identity of people other than themselves, Arendt (1983) writes: “those who reject such identifications may feel wonderfully superior to the world..., but their superiority is ... the superiority of a more or less well-equipped cloud-cuckoo-land” (Arendt 18). Her capacity to embrace varied

view points and uphold the fair judgement even if it involved an assault on her own racial identity proves her a thinker beyond prejudice. The vast appeal of her political thought can be credited to her genuineness and originality. Arendt's involvement with the problem of violence in American cities, the Black Power movement, the anti-Vietnam War moves and the civil rights movement establish Arendt's "profound political egalitarianism and moral universalism, her distaste of any kind of groupthink, her deep dislike of nationalism, and her insistence on the disjunction between nationalism and the rule of law in the modern state" (Benhabib 61).

In an attempt to draw conclusions for lasting peaceful solutions to the territorial dispute as depicted in *Uri*, the paper utilizes Hannah Arendt's political theory as an alternative to an implicit but more common liberal understandings of the possibilities of international conflict resolution through dialogue. The concept of toleration is deeply embedded in Arendt's reflections on the significance of diverse societies. Tolerance is the key to acceptance. Though preserving peace is significant, at times tolerant attitudes might give way to bigotry, as in the case of Kashmir. So far, India has adopted the policy of restraint and avoided any initiation in escalating violence between the two countries. However, lately, there has been a paradigm shift in India's dealings with the irksome neighbour. The film pronounces these changing undercurrents in the following proclamations: "Yeh naya Hindustan hai," "yeh Hindustan ab chup nahin rahne wala," and "hum dushman ko ghar mein ghus ke marenge." As the film depicts, a plan is laid out to execute the "surgical strike" to avenge the Uri attack. From September 28th till the wee hours on 29th of September, the Indian Army troops, including the commandos from other para forces, attacked the launchpads of the major ISI-funded terrorist organizations: Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. One prominent accomplice in handling the Uri attack has been the Sirat-ul-Jannat terrorist group operated by Idris Khan and Jabbar Firozi, Idris is from Sialkot and Jabbar is from Gilgit. Major Vihaan's killing of both the terrorists culminates in a loud scream: "Indian Army!" An emphatic assertion of the courage of Indian soldiers and the efficacy of their actions, a harbinger of a changing attitude, a shift from tolerance to retaliation.

Similar overtones are present in the war cry delivered by Suhani Kashyap, the young daughter of martyr Karan Kashyap, during the funeral of her father. In her tear-jerking cry, Suhani screams: “Shauryam daksham yuddhe, Balidan parama dharma,” meaning “dexterity in war is valour, sacrifice is the ultimate merit.” The chant uttered by little girl, in the glorious setting of the state honour, intensified by the agony of a lost father must evoke the feelings of respect and pride in the audience. This glorious showcasing nonetheless, falls short in dodging the impending dangers of an unresolved contention. The Pulwama attack and Balakot air strikes have left Uri far behind, on top of that heavy shelling on the border continues. Such incidents leave little room for anticipating respite from terror. In early August 2019, Kashmir resurfaced as a flashpoint between age old political rivals India and Pakistan after the Indian government abrogated Article 370. Following the decision, the valley came under siege with heavy deployment of security forces, breakdown of internet services and complete surveillance of the leaders and dissidents in the region. These proceedings have further intensified the possibilities of clashes between the two countries as Pakistan feels cornered more than ever.

Hannah Arendt’s findings offer useful insights in this context. Arendt’s thesis on nationalism rests on her first-hand experiences as a member of the Jewish minority community in The Third Reich. In Her observations nationalism resulted from disintegration of the nation-state as an aftermath of the expansionist, imperialist tendencies of Europe, the seizing of the state by the nation. The inherently aggressive and expansionistic tendencies of the “state,” Arendt (1958) claims, are acquired by the “nation” in the process of nationalism which signifies “the conquest of the state by the nation” (354) and threatens the minorities and the naturalized citizens who fall out of the “national umbrella.” Hence, despite connecting the nation-state to the rule of law, Arendt rejects the “homogeneous society” as a foundation for a “well-ordered” community. On the contrary, Benhabib (2010) notices, for Arendt, “such homogeneity would prove politically disastrous and morally abhorrent” (8). Arendt’s political thought prioritizes humanity and plurality over national identities. By emphasizing a change in perception, Arendt advocates that dissent must neither be a permit to stigmatize nor an

apparatus to perpetuate hierarchical order but must be exercised as a praxis to deconstruct and restructure the establishment to embrace a peaceful coexistence. What Arendt (1970) inspires us to do is to critique violence even if it has “the ability to begin something new” (Arendt 82), because: “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world” (Arendt 80). The idea is to debunk the basic assumptions shaping the nation-state mechanism and enlarge the scope for understanding the discriminatory and suspicious character of nationalism triggered by the vested interests of power groups. For this reason, Wilfred Owen (1920) in part VI of his poem “Insensibility” published in 1918, curses the power-hungry war-mongers:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones.
Wretched are they, and mean
With paucity that never was simplicity.
By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears (Owen 14).

¹*Satyagraha* is Gandhi’s “truth-force,” first applied in South Africa for securing the rights of the people of Indian origin and later in the liberation movement of India. It stands for the power of persuasion in fighting for a “just” cause. For more visit: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274344783_Satyagraha_The_Gandhian_Philosophy_of_Conflict_Management

Asahyog is “non-cooperation” movement which included a mass boycott of the British, for more visit; https://www.academia.edu/18406164/M_K_Gandhi_and_Non_cooperation_A_short_Essay

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