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**Race and Visibility:
In the Shadow of September 11
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When I crossed the border into USA in 1988, after teaching in Canada for two years, I had the curious feeling that my wife, my son and I, still brown-skinned and dark-haired, had somehow become invisible.

We walked the streets of Hamilton, Utica and Syracuse-each town predominantly white-without attracting any unwanted attention. The motorists did not gawk at us while we waited at the curb for the walk signal. At restaurants, there were no heads turning in our direction. The shoppers at stores did not greet our entry with a quizzical, perplexed look, following our very steps. Even our neighbors left us alone.

I was relieved at this loss of visibility. It was a signal change from my Canadian experience. The only time I felt comfortable stepping outside the Western Ontario campus was in the cold winter months, when bundled in jacket, hood, scarf and gloves, I became nearly indistinguishable from every one else. In summer, when I had to shed these sartorial covers, I ventured out only at night, under the cover of darkness.

I enjoyed this invisibility even at my teaching job at Northeastern University. Yes, there was a little edginess when I first entered a class, a mild dismay, anticipating the strange accents of 'another Indian professor'. For the most part, I managed to lay these fears to rest, and week after week, my students would concentrate on what I had to say, undistracted by who said it. But this invisibility proved to be fragile.

When I began to depart from the scripted texts, drawing attention to the ideological intent of economics, its Eurocentric biases and disregard for facts, not a few of my students began to take a harder look at me. My ethnicity and origins began to obstruct their view. I became proof against my own critique. This reminded me of the philosophic Kant's snub: "This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that he was stupid." Then, all of a sudden, September 11 introduced a new dynamic. The nineteen hijackers of Arab background, their planes crashing into the twin towers, had unleashed a fury that would rearrange many lives. This first massive attack on Americans on American soil had shaken America. And America shaken was America united against anyone connected to the perpetrators of this undeserved and 'unprovoked' act of violence. Almost instantly, I could sense that this anger, volcanic and intense, would reorder the world in a hurry.

And so it did. Almost as soon as I walked into the Attleboro station the next

day, I noticed a change. One by one, the heads turned to me, as they would towards a face you recognize from a poster for the most wanted. The commuters now felt uncomfortable at my presence. In their new-born sense of insecurity, they had sensed a connection between me and the hijackers. My Pakistani ethnicity was indistinguishable from the Arab background of the hijackers. A crust of visibility began to thicken around me. Was I back in Canada?

The events since have revealed a rigorous working out of the logic immanent in the attack of September 11. The world was quickly painted in two unmistakable colors, white and black. 'You are either with us or you are with the terrorists.' This would be a Manichaeian contest between United States, symbolizing infinite justice and enduring freedom, and Osama commanding the evil hordes of Islamic totalitarianism.

Instantly, Pakistan was given "a second chance". After that, the attack on Afghanistan unfurled: the mightiest concentration of force in human history deployed against a war-ravaged, famine-stricken country. The smart bombs, the cluster bombs, the daisy-cutters, the bunker-busters began to descend on Afghanistan. And not a few fell in the wrong places.

Two additional fronts were opened up. Osama would have to be starved of funds. Political parties, financial institutions, charities and individuals were accused of links to Al-Qaida: their assets frozen. More ominously, America began a quick descent into a Hobbesian state: where the liberties of some Americans and all aliens would be traded against the security of other Americans.

The attack of September 11 led to an instant boom in racial profiling of Muslims. The FBI was empowered to tap phones, to enter into homes without notice. Aliens, legal and illegal, could be held without trial for as long as a year. All aliens-some 20 million-could be tried in secrecy by military courts, and hanged without a unanimous verdict.

I am thankful in these dangerous times to be on sabbatical-away from any teaching duties. This had freed me at the right time from the unpleasant task of curtailing my own speech. Cloistered in my academic cell, I could become invisible.

I did, however, in the first weeks after September 11, put up a flag on my office door. When a colleague commended me for my patriotism, I answered that I was only exercising my right of free speech-or what was left of it. It was a comic gesture-attempting to regain what I had lost in the aftermath of September 11. My invisibility.