

A polity's sorrow revealed

WHAT TO DO WITH POLITICAL SADNESS AND OTHER ESSAYS ON DEATH, DESTRUCTION AND HAUNTOLOGY
By Ghazala Jamil,
Simon & Schuster/
Yoda, ₹499



Ghazala Jamil's book takes as its problematic a question that has long circled but perhaps has not been named outright: what becomes of a polity's precarious affective life when the machinery of injustice grows so egregious and yet so routine that it ceases to be read as emergency? The question falls squarely within the ambit of what the book sets out to do. It avows its allegiances ahead of any argument, being dedicated "For those who named oppression and were criminalised for it." More than a Preface, this line functions as a site of inscription in its own right, mapping the moral coordinates within which the essays that follow are to be read. Comprising nineteen essays, the volume is, in many ways, a journey from praxis to gnosis, tracing an incorrigible plurality of foreclosed futures.

Jamil's recourse to Derri-

dean hauntology is mobilised to explain how the present is persistently haunted by futures once promised and never realised. "It was just a matter of crossing logical epochs and stages of development to reach these futures," she writes, "but these futures do not arrive." The sentence's flat declarative belies the theoretical weight it carries; progress, on this account, survives its own capricious failure to materialise, buoyed less by evidence than by the discomfiture one would otherwise have to sit with. Jamil

observes that "... the dream of a secular plural democracy haunts our increasingly exclusionary polity."

Throughout the book, there is a lilting lyricism to Jamil's prose, a cadence that tempers without diminishing the severity of her claims, nowhere more evident than in her description of contemporary spectacles of suffering as "... horror without catharsis"; violence rendered available for consumption as a kind of bacchanalia, albeit withheld from the narrative resolution that would grant

it meaning. This concern is developed at length in the chapter, "Consuming Horror", where Jamil observes that "... human history is rife with real atrocities and macabre events that have been treated as spectacles for public consumption."

The cover, too, proves uncannily relevant to the book's preoccupations. Against a wan green backdrop reposes the image of a desiccated rose, bereft of its bloom. The dried flower becomes an apt motif for the book's central conceit: that loss is

never neatly consigned to the past but is always sedimented within the present, yielding new meanings among the ruins of what remains. Even in withering, the rose retains the contours of what it once was — much as Jamil's polity — for all its exclusions and betrayals, remains tethered to the form of the democracy it was once promised.

It is in the penultimate chapter, aptly named after the title of the book itself, that Jamil's argument reaches its apogee, and the curtain, so long held taut, finally falls. Political sadness, she writes, surfaces "... when no one is pretending things are okay", when the stretched fiction of composure can no longer hold its shape. It conjures up a world stripped of the fragile theatre of normalcy. Sadness, in Jamil's for-

mulation, does not mark the precipice of political exhaustion but the threshold from which collective feeling can be reclaimed.

Even at its most polemical, Jamil's prose remains touched by elegy, refusing both the consolation of certainty and the desolation of despair. There is no *deus ex machina* in these pages, no external hand to descend and resolve the accumulated grief of the preceding chapters. Her solution is exacting: "We have to name a loss and mourn it fully to find the courage to live differently or at least with a different attitude." To pick up this book is, in some sense, to pick up a sadness that is not entirely one's own and to set it down again only once it has been fully named.

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