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## It's not ethnic cleansing, it's just a little ethnic dusting"

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/aung-san-suu-kyi-the-ignoble-laureate>

By Gavin Jacobson

9/20/2017

During her fifteen years under house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi—now the de-facto leader of Myanmar—found solace in the poetry and novels of authors such as George Eliot, Victor Hugo, John le Carré, and Anna Akhmatova. Another favorite, she has said, was Rebecca West’s “Black Lamb and Grey Falcon,” an epic travelogue about Yugoslavia written on the eve of the Second World War. West described a country that Aung San Suu Kyi would have recognized as being much like her own: a fragile mosaic of ethnicities, languages, historical backgrounds, and cultural traditions.

In a short essay called “Let’s Visit Burma,” published in 1985, Aung San Suu Kyi described the “colourful and diverse origins and customs” of her compatriots. Rakhine state, in the west of Myanmar, was something of a “mystery” in this respect, she wrote. Its population had originated from “Mongolian and Aryan peoples who had come over from India.” Owing to its geographical position, Bengal had also “played a major part” in its history and culture. Among the state’s numerous ethnic groups —Arakanese, Thek, Dainet, Myo, Mramagyi, and Kaman—others displayed “the influence of Bengali.” But she assured readers that while there are “more people of the Islamic faith to be found in [Rakhine] than anywhere else in Burma,” it had been “predominately Buddhist” for centuries.

By groups that “displayed the influence of Bengali”, Aung San Suu Kyi certainly meant the Rohingya, a stateless minority in northern Rakhine that most Myanmar people consider to be Bangladeshi immigrants. Since August 25th, when militants from the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked police posts and an Army base, as many as a thousand Rohingya have been killed and over three hundred and seventy thousand (more than third of the Rohingya population) have been forced into neighboring Bangladesh, human-rights groups estimate. Aung San Suu Kyi’s champions are now contemplating her fall from grace, appalled that the Nobel Peace Prize winner remains silent about and unmoved by a crisis described this week by the U.N.’s human-rights chief as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” There have been widespread calls for the Nobel Committee to strip her of the prize. But there is no statutory procedure for doing so, nor is it clear how this would end the murder, rape, and mass exodus of the Rohingya at the hands of Myanmar’s Army.

The most urgent and powerful appeals to Aung San Suu Kyi have come from her fellow Nobel laureates. The Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai, who won the prize for her advocacy of girls’ education, condemned the “tragic and shameful treatment” of the Rohingya. “I am still waiting for my fellow Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to do the same.” Addressing a letter to his “dear sister,” the anti-apartheid activist Desmond Tutu wrote of his “profound sadness” and called on Aung San Suu Kyi to end the military-led operations. “If the political price of your ascension to the highest office in Myanmar is your silence, the price is surely too steep,” he wrote. The Dalai Lama subsequently urged her to find a peaceful solution to the humanitarian crisis, saying that Buddha would have “definitely helped those poor Muslims.”

This is not the first time that laureates have spoken of their displeasure with Aung San Suu Kyi. In December last year, when the military conducted another brutal offensive against the Rohingya, thirteen Nobel winners, including Muhammad Yunus, Shirin Ebadi, and Leymah Gbowee, signed an open letter deploring the Army’s use of helicopter gunships, arbitrary arrests, and the rape of women. “Despite repeated appeals to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi,” they concluded, using her honorific, “we are frustrated that she has not taken any initiative to ensure full and equal citizenship rights of the Rohingyas. Daw Suu Kyi is the leader and is the one with primary responsibility to lead, and lead with courage, humanity and compassion.”

When Aung San Suu Kyi accepted her own prize, in Oslo, in June, 2012, she said that, under house arrest, “it felt as though I were no longer a part of the real world. . . . What the Nobel Peace Prize did was to draw me once again into the world of other human beings outside the isolated area in which I lived, to restore a sense of reality to me. . . . I began to understand the significance of the Nobel Prize.” Since becoming State Counsellor, in 2016, however, she has retreated into the solitude of her former life. Her husband, Michael Aris, died, of cancer, in 1999—she was prevented by the military regime from saying goodbye to him—and she rarely sees her sons. People close to her describe a life of morbid isolation, living alone in the administrative capital, Naypyidaw—arguably the dreariest city on earth—pouring over state documents late into the night. She rarely gives interviews, and is reluctant to delegate responsibilities (there is no obvious successor to lead her party when she’s gone).

There’s no evidence that the laureates’ chorus of indignation has any bearing on Aung San Suu Kyi, or whether their declarations can break the spell of isolation and bring her back to the

outside world. The only response she has made to the present crisis in Rakhine was a Facebook post, detailing a phone conversation she had with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In it, she criticized the "huge iceberg of misinformation calculated to create a lot of problems between different communities and with the aim of promoting the interest of the terrorists." While Aung San Suu Kyi has remained silent, the offices and ministries under her charge have not, describing the Rohingya as Bengalis and publicly advocating the use of force in certain situations. "If they are going to harm you, you can shoot them," Aung San Suu Kyi's spokesman, U Zaw Htay, said. The most egregious case of the recklessness of Aung San Suu Kyi's government came last month, when it accused international aid workers of supporting terrorists, prompting fears for the safety of thousands of people in Myanmar employed by charities and N.G.O.s. There have been demands that the U.S. government stop using the name "Rohingya", and when a Rohingya women gave details of an alleged gang rape, Aung San Suu Kyi's office dismissed it as "fake rape."

Aung San Suu Kyi's biographer, Peter Popham, writes in "The Lady and the Generals: Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Struggle for Democracy" that she "has become an object lesson in the slipperiness of the concept of heroism, and the folly of hero-worship." Indeed, the tenor of the denunciations suggests that Aung San Suu Kyi's critics are angered as much by a sense of personal betrayal as they are by her silence. She has exposed the artlessness with which many in the West reduced a complex personality into a Rapunzel of the East, emptied of her more illiberal traits, such as an authoritarian leadership style, and some potentially unsavory views on Muslims. The BBC correspondent, Fergal Keane, who probably knows Aung San Suu Kyi better than any other foreign journalist, has admitted that "we knew too little of Myanmar and its complex narratives of ethnic rivalries. . . . And we knew too little of Aung San Suu Kyi herself." In a rare interview with Keane in April, she denied ethnic cleansing was taking place in Rakhine, and resisted the cruder perceptions of her persona: "I am just a politician. I am not quite like Margaret Thatcher, no. But on the other hand, I am no Mother Teresa, either."

Unlike Thatcher, a consummate political operator, many have commented upon Aung San Suu Kyi's weakness as a politician. Her failure to act against the military operation in Rakhine, so the argument goes, is not a result of her bigotry but because she is unable to outmaneuver the generals in Myanmar's very own game of thrones.

Few can blame Aung San Suu Kyi for her political impotence. The constitutional arrangements of Myanmar would foil the shrewdest operative. Designed by the military, in 2008, the constitution gives the armed forces control of three ministries—the interior, borders, and defense—that are beyond the oversight of the civilian government. It bars Aung San Suu Kyi from becoming President, and allows the Army to veto any attempt at constitutional reform. The irony, then, is that if Aung San Suu Kyi once represented the power of the powerless, she is now powerless in power, taking the flak for the Army's unrelenting inhumanity in its fight against ethnic rebels on the borderlands, and the Rohingya.

Aung San Suu Kyi's powerlessness hardly matters on this issue, anyway: hatred of the Rohingya is one thing that unites Myanmar. Despite their political differences, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, and the military are in lockstep when it comes to the problem of northern Rakhine. Years of xenophobic, anti-Rohingya propaganda, pushed from the

late nineteen-seventies by the military government, endures in the nation's collective memory, and is stoked by the hate sermons of Buddhist monks like Ashin Wirathu. By speaking up for the Rohingya, Aung San Suu Kyi imperils her standing in the eyes of her fellow-citizens.

When she was thrust into the public eye, in 1988, it was her lineage, rather than her politics, that was the driving force. As the daughter of General Aung San, the nationally revered founder of modern Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi was at the mercy of activists who recognized the dynastic force that her name, and looks (she is the spitting image of her father), lent to their struggle against the generals. Responsible for negotiating Burma's independence from the British Empire, Aung San was assassinated by paramilitary forces of the former Prime Minister U Saw, in 1947, six months before its official declaration. Aung San Suu Kyi was just two years old at the time, but there's no doubting her love and admiration for him. In a 2013 radio interview with the BBC, she described her father as "my first love and my best love." This filial piety is perhaps the key to understanding Aung San Suu Kyi as saint and sinner.

Her father was an extraordinarily tenacious, even ruthless, man who navigated between the British and Japanese empires in order to achieve his objective—a unified, independent Burma. He was also a Burmese nationalist who cared little for the nation's ethnic minorities. Today, he is universally venerated in Myanmar, while few outside the country know who he is. This has almost certainly influenced Aung San Suu Kyi, who mimics his leadership style, moral code, and political priorities. The Rohingya are a distraction from her overriding ambition: to complete her father's dream of unifying the country and ending a civil war that has raged between ethnic rebel forces and the Myanmar government since 1948. As Rebecca West wrote in "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon," in a passage that Aung San Suu Kyi likely associated with her father when reading the book under house arrest, "it is the habit of the people, whenever an old man mismanages his business so that it falls to pieces as soon as he dies, to say, 'Ah, So-and-so was a marvel! He kept things together so long as he was alive, and look what happens now he has gone!'"