



Refugees in Tribal Global Village in Habiburahman and Mohsin Hamid

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Abstract

In Habiburahman's historical novel *First, They Erased Our Name: A Rohingya Speaks* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, a semi-historical novel with elements of magical realism, I argue that refugees' dream of global village or cosmopolis is constantly frustrated or deferred in a tribally oriented roadblocks of borders due to the nation-state's sovereignty and its routine use of the state of exception; yet, these refugees do not give up their hope of founding a global village of sorts through the political space. To rephrase my claim, in these novels, the nation-state's sovereignty, which exclusively reserves the prerogative of the state of exception, biopolitically forces a certain section of its people into bare life, in Agamben's sense, forcing the refugees to flee their homelands and suffer during and after their numerous border crossings, denuding the presence of tribalism within the global village. Yet, largely owing to the occasional reception of individual hospitality, these refugees are able to keep alive their hope of belonging to a community through seeking the political, a space where they can negotiate and renegotiate their rights. I argue that their persecution is due to Myanmar's military government's biopolitics in that it has reinscribed the nation on the basis of religion and Sino-Tibetan race (tribalism) and rendered stateless the Rohingya Muslim of Indo-Aryan race. Nearly the same could be said about Hamid's protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, as they face a similarly tribalistic predicament in London, where the city is divided between the dark and light zones, occupied by migrants and nativists, again the state siding with the nativist.

Keywords: human rights, justice, biopolitics, racism, migrants, nativists, biopolitics

Despite facing state brutality or state's abdication of its responsibility and the absence of right to have rights, these refugees keep alive the hope of global village, and they are able to persevere because they do occasionally receive hospitality from a few good Samaritans; therefore, there remains some glimmering hope of cosmopolis or global village in an excessively tribalistic world they are forced to live, and it is this hope provides them energy to fight for their rights.

Initially situating the problem in general, I have deployed Marshall McLuhan's concepts of "global village" and "tribalism"; and as for fleshing out the problems of refugees in particular, i.e., their simultaneous acceptance and denial, I have relied on similarly articulated Derrida's hospitality, which postulates an inherent presence of hostility in hospitality. At the same time, I have used Derrida's cosmopolitanism in a manner that it is contiguous with McLuhan's global village, especially while discussing how the refugees are able to retain their hope of a political community and freedom from persecution. To identify the causes of displacement and out-right hostility of the nation-state, I have found instrumental Hannah Arendt's right to have rights, Michel Foucault's sovereignty and biopolitics, and Giorgio Agamben's bare life and state of exception, which results from the nation-state's excessive sovereignty.

Habiburahman and Hamid's critics have left unattended nation-state's sovereignty and state of exception, as if neither had any bearing on forced displacement and tribalism to exacerbate refugee crisis. To provide a swift overview of relevant critiques, Gay Alcorn limits his discussion of Habiburahman's novel to issues of the oppression and the struggle of the Rohingyas whose history is not written but only the stories whispered through generations to ensure they are not lost. Similarly, critic Delwar Hossain's focus is on the negligence of Rohingya's issue in the global assembly of United Nations General Assembly. He argues that geopolitics and power politics of the major countries and their policies have once again proven that the Western powers have disregarded refugee crisis in the global village. David McKechine reads Habiburahman's novel as a graphic portrayal of the state violence and atrocities that the Rohingya suffer, but the global world and the media generally turn a blind eye to their issues.

To look into some of views on Hamid's *Exit West*, Hannah van den Bosch depicts the condition of migrants in the world in relation to their identity where migrants are devoid of finding their true identity as they are always on the move without recourse to safe haven for any stability. Being always displaced, these refugees are in constant search of their identity. And due to their incessant movement, they always have "more than one home-

place” (6). Sercan Hamza Bağlama observes *Exit West* as a historical narrative of dehumanization of global refugees. It is due the dehumanization, “a distance between refugees, ‘them,’ and locals, ‘us,’ is created,” and refugees “are perceived only as numbers and commodified objects” (151). Hamid poignantly captures xenophobia when vulnerable refugees are seen as a security threat and welfare system drainage. Nayab Sadiq and his co-authors explore the issue of migrant subjectivity in that migrants are affected by the cross-cultural relations and, due to which, their hardships only intensify. The political power imposes its will over them, and that very power “is exerted over them to remodel their identities” (587). Unlike the existing literature, my research will hold responsible sovereignty of nation and state of exception for causes of displacement and tribalistic hostility that refugees experience during the arduous and life-threatening journey.

When Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village” in *Gutenberg Galaxy*, he referred to the phenomena of bridging the global gap and increasing global connectivity by the means of technology. In his own words, because “the electro-magnetic discoveries have recreated the simultaneous ‘field’ in all human affairs,” “the human family now exists under conditions of a ‘global village.’ We live in a single constricted space resonant with tribal drums” (31). In the context of the Habiburrahman’s Myanmar and Hamid’s some middle-eastern country (likely Syria), and other hostile countries along the escape route, the global village’s share imperfections are evident: Interconnected by electric circuitry for communication across the globe but isolated in other most crucial aspects of life. Looking at what refugees have to endure to stay merely alive, the world in the present can be described mostly hostile and isolating. McLuhan admits, “Life in the global village has a shadow side that is hostile” (“Violence”). Not substantially different from McLuhan’s vision of global village having tribalism only on the shadow side, Derrida’s cosmopolitan hospitality is simultaneously hostility and hospitality: They are complimentary as the latter can be realized only imperfectly and only conditionally (“Hostipitality”). It is Derrida’s this concept of hostipitality that captures the simultaneous hostility and hospitality that the refugees in these two novels encounter in their journey, though disproportionately.

Since I have identified nation-state’s sovereignty and its use state of exception as rule as the cause of hostility against refugees, it is relevant to briefly ruminate over the concept of sovereignty. As Balibar intimates, when the state became nation-state after Westphalia Peace Treaty of 1648, the nation-state usurped the popular sovereignty, thus allowing it to assert state sovereignty, which eventuated the bifurcation of citizen and human in the very

Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen (Balibar), which rendered human rights as non-judicial, thus putting refugees outside the safety net of law (Agamben "We Refugees"). The ramification is that refugees are left with the status of statelessness, devoid of what Arendt calls the public life, i.e., outside the juridico-political right to have rights. The same state sovereignty Foucault evokes when he elucidates its biopolitical power ("State control of the biological") to "either have people put to death or let them live" (*Society* 240). And he adds, "The right of life and death is always exercised in an unbalanced way: the balance is always tipped in favor of death." Agamben extrapolates thanatopolitics from this very expression of Foucault's in that the sovereign, the one who can suspend the law and rule on the basis of state of exception, either kills or abdicates its responsibility by abandoning people to die (*Homo Sacer*). In its abdication, the nation-state uses its sovereign power to turn the stateless into bare life, which is a politicized form of zoe that is exposed to death, and this is even truer in the case of refugees (Agamben "We Refugee").

Having established the conceptual history of sovereignty and its ramifications, let me turn to the major events of these two novels, beginning with Habiburrahman's. In its very opening lines, the novel describes the extra-constitutional status of the Rohingya that "to retain Burmese citizenship, you must belong to one of the 135 recognized ethnic groups, which form part of eight 'national races'. The Rohingya are not among them" (1). This sovereign law enacted under the state of exception makes the Rohingya "ethnic group officially" erased, but the repercussion of the erasure is such that they are rounded, persecuted, and killed in mass. Since the military takeover in 1962, Myanmar has become one thanatopolitical state in that it has assumed the role of determining which lives are worthy to live and which are not, therefore declaring the Rohingya Muslim both foreigners and "terrorists" (153), not worthy of living, only nuisance to the creation of pure race-based nationality. Once rendered stateless, the Rohingya lose the "right to have rights" and access to "the public life" or the political space (Arendt 298, 301). The state's biopolitics operates on the state of exception, allowing the elimination of what it considers to be unworthy life to be part of the pure Burman nationality, and the nation's purification project of creating ethno-nationalist, Sino-Tibetan Myanmar marches on with impunity.

Going back in time, Habib's family has been displaced from his home since his grandfather's time, since the 1978 ethnic cleansing operation. His family and other Rohingyas have been always on the run: "Fleeing. Always fleeing" (15). Habib summarizes the generational flight: "I never knew my own grandfather, who used to live with my grandmother and father in nearby Arakan State, before our family were chased away... my grandfather was

arrested and tortured to death... The rest of the family went into hiding while they waited for the manhunt to end” (27). Habib is only three years old in 1982 when the military dictator Ne Win excludes Rohingya from the 135 national races and bans the word Rohingya, all to create a fictional enemy in opposition to Burmese national identity based on Buddhism, Sino-Tibetan race, and the color of their darker skin: “They say that because of our physical appearance we are evil ogres from a faraway land, more animal than human (1). Turned into bare life, tribally because of the state use of race, the Rohingya are hunted and are always on the run.

Being refugees in their own home country for three generations, Habib’s family lives in a border village “between Chin State and Arakan State” (Habiburahman 16). Obviously under the interminable state of emergency, the law is what the military junta says it is or whatever it does is the law, in both Syria and Myanmar. For instance, one soldier tells Habib's father in his face, “We are the law here!” (67). Following Foucault and Agamben, it can be said that Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya is an example of the state’s biopolitics based on the state of exception, displaying the sovereign’s right over life as right to kill any subject it considers unworthy of life.

Both of Habib’s grandfather and grandmother had to flee in 1978 in an ethnic-cleaning operation; if they did not, they would be “slaughtered” (Habiburahman 15). After zoning them, putting the entire Rohingya community into an internment camp, now the military confiscates their home: “Kalar, your house is on land that is required by the state. It will be demolished to build the extra toilets that we need” (42). The Rohingya have been rendered outside the law and outside justice, completely turning them into politicized form of bare life, in Agamben’s sense, to be sacrificed as unworthy of living (*Homo Sacer*). The very idea of Myanmar nation has been built around Tibeto-Burman (Mongol) race, Burman language, and Buddhist religion, stressing on purification and homogenization of the nation (Wade 29-34). This has largely to do with the nation's racist, xenophobic biopolitics degrading into thanatopolitics, the major cause behind the refugee crisis in Myanmar.

Reduced to bare life, the Rohingya’s statelessness are open to the worst forms of persecution, including brutal public execution, by any state sanctioned entities like the military, border patrol, and even Rakhine or Burman Buddhist nationalists. The Rohingya can be inflicted any amount of violence with impunity, without accountability. Habib's father is beaten, his home and business robbed by the soldiers in daylight, and mother is obviously raped, likely gang-raped by soldiers: “She looks distraught, there are bags

under her eyes and her hair is a mess. Her blouse is torn, and there's a big red mark on her neck" (50). In another operation in Habib's village, the soldiers ask his family to surrender their home or be killed. The Rohingya are not even allowed to leave the village, again because of the state of exception. Their options are: either live in "prison-towns" without means (57), serve as slaves without rights to ownership and free movement, or flee if they are lucky to be not caught and shot to death.

In 1994, Habib is fifteen when his village is burned down, and "all that remains is a huge pile of ashes" (61). To get out of the village, the family needs a dozen of permits simply because of being Muslim, and his father has to pay everything they have. As they know they can be killed for leaving their village, and they know that "this is a journey of no return. Whatever happens, this enforced departure does not bode well" (62). When they reach the grandmother's village, it is already ransacked, and now she lives in another prison town. Habib's family lives in Sittwe, where both the military and Rakhine Buddhist extremists harass, torture, and kill the Rohingya at free will (65), with the help of the state's thanatopolitics.

In 1997, Habib tries his luck in Maungdaw, a majority Rohingya town, but moving without proper immigration documents within their own country is forbidden for the Rohingya since they are declared stateless in 1982: "Now that we are foreigners in our own country, this is where we have to report" (90). But his father warns that "Maungdaw is a prison-town where they are gradually trying to concentrate" all the Rohingya. The only choice that is left for the family is help Habib get out of Myanmar. Unless invisible, he will be taken away and imprisoned or killed: "My visa expires. I am still in Maungdaw. Anonymous, invisible, but hunted all the same" (92). After failure to get a job, Habib returns to Sittwe and embarks on another perilous journey: "I am leaving, and I am well aware of the risks. If I am caught by the authorities, indefinite imprisonment or death await" (97). Habib has to forge "a false identity card made that will help me to avoid arrest and pass roadside checkpoints" (100). Habib is no longer in the record any more as he is "an outlaw everywhere in my country" (102). The state, with its xenophobic overemphasis on its racially pure nation and its sovereignty, by suspending the law and justice, both at the same time, has created a predicament where the Rohingya in Myanmar and other innocent refugees in the Middle East or North Africa have to constantly stay invisible if they want to stay alive.

When arrested in Irrawaddy, his teacher warns Habib: "Leave the country... and don't come back as long as the junta remains in power...If you are identified, you will be killed" (127). With no place to take refuge, it is a day-to-day survival for Habib, "It is a question of survival" (137). Hunted and

forced to leave Bangkok, he finds it difficult to be invisible: “To my right are the Malaysian authorities, and to my left the Thai authorities” (143). Despite his efforts, Habib gets arrested and beaten by the Malaysian border guards for no reasons other than being a Rohingya refugee, and now they could be sent back to Myanmar to be imprisoned or killed (144). When he escapes to Malaysia in 2001, Habib has to constantly “between a couple of boulders on the beach or lying on a bed of moss in the depths of the jungle” and on one occasion “in an enormous water tank for several days” (150). Six months pass as Habib goes through “the endless cycle of arrests, detentions, deportations, nights disturbed by the fear of raids,” and finally in 2001 the UNHCR grants Burmese refugee status to a few thousand Rohingya, “after a long struggle” (151). After all the sufferings, now UNHCR’s acknowledgement gives him an official refugee “status,” i.e., the status of being stateless (153). This is the crux of the paradox of UNHCR’s hospitality. This is far from over as Habib knows: “The letter from the United Nations grants me a status, but does not afford any real protection. In 2004, after being arrested and held several times in immigration detention centers in Malaysia, then [he is] sold” again to become “a slave in the Andaman Sea” (153).

Habib’s father is jailed a dozen times and is tortured to the brink of death in Myanmar. He eventually dies because he “never recovered from the torture that was inflicted on him in prison” (154). After his father dies and he escapes from the Andaman Sea to return to Malaysia, Habib comes out of his invisibility in 2006: “Through relationships with NGOs and journalists, I demand my rights” (155), which means through media outlets, as if McLuhan’s electronic circuitry were momentarily working to build a global village. However, now, Habib is more “under threat of arrest,” not only because of his being “illegal immigrant but also under the Internal Security Act (ISA)” of Malaysia (Habiburahman 154). The ISA act—which “is used by the state to silence anyone considered a security threat. It allows the police to detain suspects without trial or criminal charges” (155)—is another instance of state of exception that goes against the very idea of justice and the polity. As a state of exception, the act allows the security apparatus of the state to persecute people that it finds threat to its national sovereignty, and it punishes them with impunity.

Vaguely reminding us of McLuhan’s connection between global village and “electronic magnetic discovery” (*Gutenberg* 31), Habib acts in a BBC documentary at the end of 2009, in which he lays bare and denounces the violence inflicted against the Rohingya. Having angered the Malaysian authority, he knows he has to leave the country overnight, with the only option to flee to “Australia by sea” (Habiburahman 156). Along with nine other

Rohingyas, he embarks on a refugee journey to Christmas Island, Australia (157). This is “a long and appalling journey,” facing the constant risks of being “swept overboard” by the “raging, stormy seas” and “drowned in the depths of the ocean” (157). Here, too, we are reminded of McLuhan, who revised this prediction later: “The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village” (*Gutenberg* 31). When he was reminded of his early 1950s prediction of global village, his response in the 1977 interview was not zealously optimistic: “We are going back into the bicameral mind that is tribal, collective, without any individual consciousness” (“Violence” 1). When asked if the tribal world is friendly, his answer was, “No, tribal people, one of their main kinds of sport is butchering each other.” And he adds, “The global village is a place of a very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations” (2).

When the Australian Navy patrol rescues Habib and other Rohingyas by hauling them aboard, they feel, “For the first time in our lives, the authorities treat us with dignity, respect, and compassion” (158). Taken “to detention centre on Christmas Island,” Habib is “given a new identity,” and he feels reborn, but this does not last long, either. Soon Habib and his Rohingya friends realize bitterly that “there is no peaceful place on the planet for us Rohingyas,” as they are “transferred to the immigration detention centre in Darwin, which is much less spacious than the one on Christmas Island” (159). In Australia, it is the struggle for political rights, for the right to have rights, that Habib and other fellow refugees will have to continue. As a protest, Habib decides to “begin a hunger strike” to draw the attention of journalists and humanitarian agencies to his and his people’s “agony and suffering” in Australia and elsewhere (159). Having spent four years in Darwin detention center, Habib is finally released in 2014 but remains stateless until this day.

To switch to Hamid’s *Exit West*, Nadia and Saeed’s city is already filled with refugees. In its opening scene, conflicts between various factions and the state are about to escalate at any time: “some shootings and the odd car bombing, felt in one’s chest cavity as a subsonic vibration like those emitted by large loudspeakers at music concerts” (Hamid 4). In the next scene, internally displaced refugees are “pitching tents in the greenbelts between roads... sleeping rough on sidewalks and in the margins of streets” (Hamid 26). The first major incident impacting the protagonists’ life takes place when some eighty-five innocent people along with Nadia’s cousin are killed: Her cousin “was blown by a truck bomb to bits, literally bits, the largest of which, in Nadia’s cousin’s case, were a head and two-thirds of an arm” (Hamid 32). In another incident, the state military massacres around hundred innocent workers in the crossfire (Hamid 43). The state imposes curfews routinely with

“hair-trigger zeal, not just sandbagged checkpoints and razor wire proliferating but also howitzers and infantry fighting vehicles and tanks” (Hamid 51). Air strikes shatter Saeed’s bathroom (Hamid 54). The state’s “antiterrorism measure” disrupts communication among people (Hamid 57). Obviously, the state is abdicating its responsibility in its biopolitical management of people. The entire country is run under the state of exception. Soon, Nadia finds her family’s home “crushed by the force of a bomb,” and she has no idea what has happened to her folks (Hamid 69). And the worst thing happens to Saeed’s mother: “[A] stray heavy-caliber round passing through the windshield...taking with it a quarter of Saeed’s mother’s head” (Hamid 74). Saeed, his father, and his relatives could mourn the passing of the mother only furtively. Under the state-sovereignty’s thanatopolitics, even death rituals are forcefully contracted to rush the process so that mourners cannot grieve properly.

Finally, Nadia concludes that the city is no longer a place for an independent woman to manage living (Hamid 74). In the city, one can encounter scenes of “bodies hanging from streetlamps and billboards” and sometimes teenagers playing football even with “severed head” of “a human being” (Hamid 86-7). These are the major causes that compel Saeed and Nadia’s displacement from the city of their birth. But their right to movement is violated by the nation-state’s territorial sovereignty. The tent city of Mykonos, Greece, resembles a prison house without proper sanitation and food. The refugees in Mykonos are tribalized on the basis of their country of origin, language, ethnicity, religion, or some other shared attributes. The refugee camp fails to accommodate all color spectrums, “from dark chocolate to milk tea” (100). Without a sense of normalcy, the camp looks like another biopolitical apparatus, a place to be organized and panoptically surveilled for control.

Nadia and Saeed’s next stop, London, is divided between Light and Dark, between natives and non-natives, respectively (Hamid 123-24). This is where we see the clash between the global village and tribalism. Local newspapers portray the refugees as “black holes in the fabric of the nation” (130), dehumanizing them and mischaracterizing their plight, thanks to media for engulfing the rift farther. When “their street was under attack by a nativist mob,” Nadia’s eyes also get “bruised.” (133). White Nationalist movement is flaring in the UK: “Britain for Britain” (134-35). Just as in Myanmar, native extremists are in consort with the State (135). The so-called global village is sealed from the refugee access. The refugees are ordered to “vacate the area” (163), by government. Migrants more than two hundred are incinerated alive inside a cinema. Even children are not spared. Nativists destroy migrant

dwellings and beat them severely for straying away from the camps. As Saeed and Nadia take stock of their living arrangement of time tax, they decide to abandon this place and look for a door to another city, which happens to be “the new city of Marin” in California (191). None of this would have happened had it not been for the excessive use of the state of emergency and its turning of the refugees’ lives into bare life.

What makes these refugees’ journey possible is the hospitality they occasionally receive from a few good people. A volunteer teenage girl from the town not only tends to Nadia’s wound but also helps Saeed and Nadia find a door for their journey out of Mykonos to London (Hamid 118-19). This volunteer works at the “outskirts of the old town” and risks her life when serving others. In Marin, a preacher runs a charity organization where Saeed serves as a volunteer. The preacher’s work is not merely to preach but to “feed and shelter his congregants, and teach them English” (198). On the surface, it may appear that the preacher is being hospitable to his congregants, but such hasty conclusion does not justify the rigor a hospitable act requires. If we pay close attention to the color of his volunteering staff who are “all Saeed’s colour or darker,” it is evident that the preacher’s sovereignty is never threatened by his congregants.

To understand the presence of hostility in hospitality, or tribalism in global village, we will have to read closely the individual hospitality in both novels. When Habib escapes to the Thai border, there is an instance of individual hospitality from Htut, a poor man from different Wa ethnic community, who offers Habib everything he could, “Thank God for putting such charitable people in my path” (131). In spite of the poverty, people here “have big hearts.” This does not last long as hostility to foreigners shortly reappears in Thailand: “We don’t want any Burmese here” (132). In Bangkok, he finds everything oppressive as he neither knows the place, its language, traditions, nor legal system. As a total foreigner, he seeks “human kindness” but “no one to be found” (134). In the midst of hopelessness, another instance of individual hospitality comes from a “woman pushing a food stall,” who “offers [him] a bowl of noodles” (135). A Thai woman of “Indian descent takes pity on me and leads me to a Hindu temple where I can spend the night.” But when he goes to the American Embassy, he is told that “Rohingya rarely make it onto the list of Burmese refugees...and it’s very unlikely that they’ll even let you into the camp” (137). If hospitality and hostility oscillate between two events in Habiburahman, they simultaneously happen in Hamid’s figure of teleporting door, which can be elucidated by following Derrida’s notion of threshold.

Derrida’s ideas of threshold could be summarized the following

words: When it comes to welcoming foreigners or strangers, the door or threshold can neither be dispensed with nor relied on for hospitality: What awaits the other side is uncertainty of the hospitality it promises, thus aporetic. On the one hand, the host, nation, institution, community, or individual, can only welcome strangers and foreigners from a threshold; on the other hand, the threshold perverts the very welcoming by claiming sovereignty of its master's home. The door obviously symbolizes hope in Hamid, a threshold or entry point to another world, which "opens the at-home" (Derrida, *Adieu* 26). Door is "pre-originally declaration of peace" (48). Door "opening" and "hospitality" are at once "associated and dissociated" (19). Door "calls for the opening of an exteriority" (26). It opens the prospect of hospitality, of welcoming the other as infinity. Door is a borderline, frontier, and passage, all at the same time. On the one hand, hospitality requires a door. Without a door, there would be no place to welcome the other. "But as soon as there are a door and windows," says Derrida, "it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality" ("Hospitality" 14). The conditions, or any conditions, pervert true hospitality. In contrast to invitation, "In visitation there is no door...there are no custom checks for the visitation. But there are customs and police checkpoints with an invitation. Hospitality thus becomes the threshold or the door" (14). It is from the threshold or door one grants the right of asylum or welcomes the other to cross a threshold (frontier of a city/country/etc.) what has not been crossed" (10). Hospitality is always at the door, from the outset (14). "What is called hospitality" is "what is called, "or summoned to respond to the other (11). Significantly, crossing the door is "like dying and like being born" (Hamid 104). This is how Nadia and Saeed feel when going through the door. It is "[e]qually like a beginning and an end," both sides of the door. It does not "reflect what is "on this side and doesn't reveal what is "on the other side" (103).

In Derrida's *Adieu to Levinas*, the door in particular conditions hospitality, at once welcomes the other and perverts the welcoming (19). In Derrida's reading, hospitality faces a paradoxical situation in that its ideality, when it confronts its reality, must have to deal with the possibility of its perversion, even hostility (76, 96). In a hospitable city like Marin in Hamid's work, when Nadia and Saeed cross the threshold and start putting together their life together, or when Habib has to fight for his right to have rights in supposedly welcoming city of Melbourne, all three experience both hospitality and hostility in their struggles to put together a dignified life and search for the political space, suggesting tribalism is always already present in the global village.

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