

The first time I saw The Vagina Monologues being performed, was at a women's day event in Yorkshire in 2009. Some phenomenal women spoke of their vaginas-angry and emotional, and they blew my mind. I thought, how would people react in Bangladesh if a bunch of women took the stage, and spoke about their bodies and womanhood so liberally yet rightfully? I was one of the first to get my tickets to the show in 2013, and turns out it was being performed in Dhaka since 2010. I knew one thing as soon as I saw the show - I had to get involved!

In May 2015, It's a SHE Thing, a local collection of stories of everyday women from Dhaka was launched for the first time, inspired by Eve Ensler's The Vagina Monologues. This year, the second production of the show was staged on 19 and 20 August despite security concerns. The turn out proved once again that a cause worth fighting for does not go unnoticed. This year, the play was staged under the banner of Bonhishikha, an organization that believes that gender roles constrain the potential of individuals by holding them back, and that an ideal world is one where who you look like, how you are treated and what role you play is not determined by the sex organ that you are born with. Topics covered in the show were as diverse as emotional abuse, to the many coveted roles of the orna, to ideas around consent and what it means to be a "superwoman". Funds raised through ticket sales and donations will go out to Leaping Boundaries, an organisation that works with a vision to break social barriers where every child is treated equally. The project is girl-focused aimed at increasing visibility of madrasah students on mainstream national platforms where they are traditionally underrepresented.

According to Tasaffy Hossain, founder of Bonhishikha, "It's a SHE Thing highlights stories about women and issues they face in every sphere of life, every single day. It takes a satirical stand on society so as to bring about changes in the nuances, and simply indulges you to think about the kind of role they may play in the lives of women and yourself". Mayeessa Azhar, coordinator, Bonhishikha said, "It's a way for me to begin expressing, talking about the frustrations I feel around gender

AIMING FOR VISIBILITY

SYEDA SAMARA MORTADA

PHOTOS: COURTESY

restrictions in my life, instead of internalising it and letting it fester into bitterness."

Nazia Jabeen, who had seen this stage show for the first time this year said, "Ofcourse some of the topics covered were hard to listen to. You must understand we have not grown up talking and hearing of these things. My mom said that girls shouldn't. But ultimately, as you have rightly pointed out through your show, all women ask for, and also deserve is equality. This, for me, is the main message of the show."

For me, the highlight of the show was when an audience member got up and spoke about her experience of being abused and when a father stood up to talk about his daughter being called names simply for not wearing the hijab. I felt that I had served a purpose-by helping to provide a safe space for people to talk about how they had been subjugated, denied their rights and judged, at some point in their lives, and this is simply a start to a wonderful initiative.

So the next logical question definitely would be- after two significant productions of women's stories, what's next? And the most reasonable answer to that ofcourse will be to talk about men and masculinity! In November, Bonhishikha will bring out its first ever production of tales of males: stereotypes and issues that they face through their lives and how it is time to be challenging them. Auditions will be announced soon on our Facebook page, so stay tuned!

The writer works as a Coordinator in Bonhishikha.



Syeda Samara Mortada



Tasaffy Hossain



NUMBERS

71+

71+ is the number of people killed in Yemeni city of Aden. An explosives-laden car rammed into an army recruiting centre in 29th August, 2016 and the explosion killed more than 71 people and injured another 98 people. It is the deadliest terrorist attack on any Yemeni city in over a year.

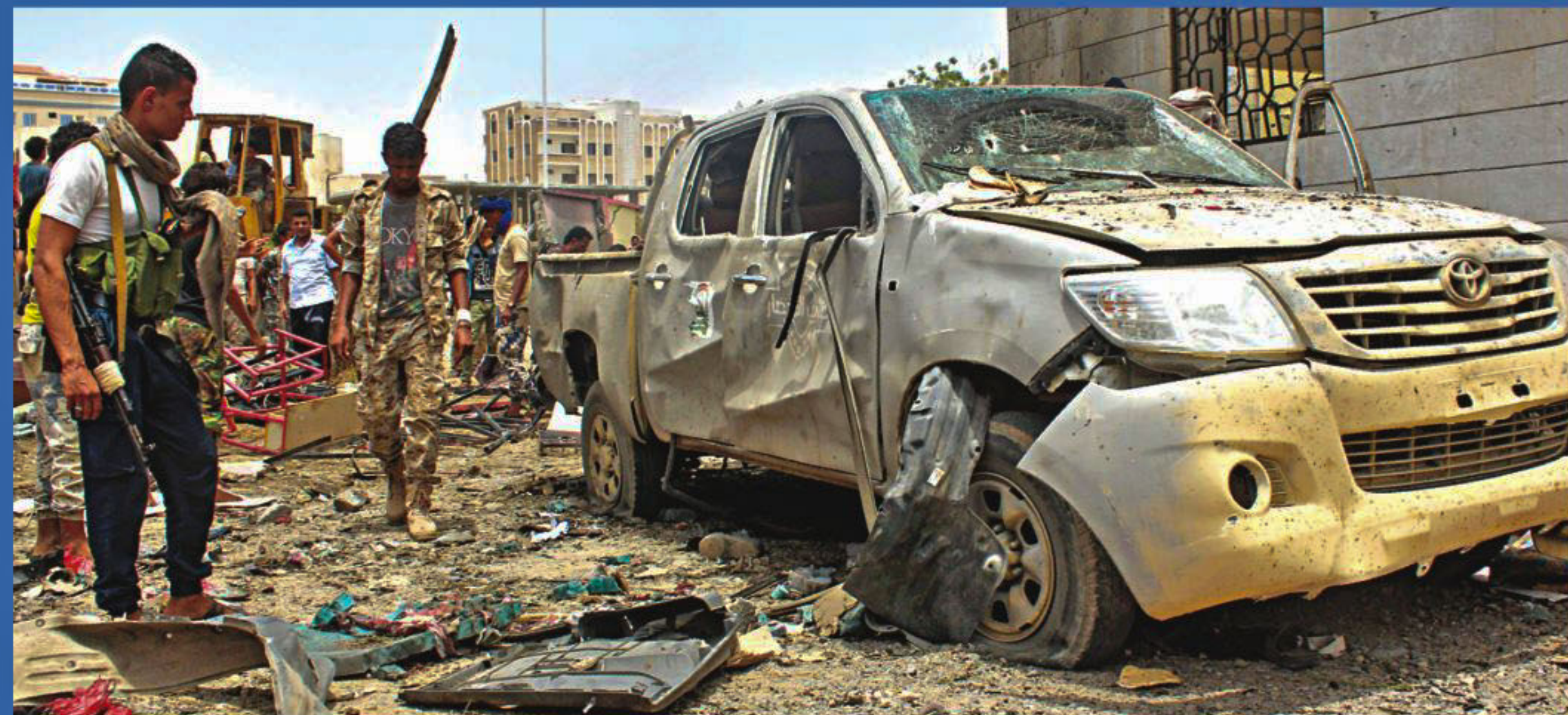


PHOTO: AFP



There's this absolutely brilliant ad on TV, that starts with a girl taking her mother out to a fancy hotel after getting her first salary. The mother hesitates because she isn't used to such high standards but the daughter tells her she can more than afford it. Problem is when they get there, they get stopped by, who I assume is, the hotel manager who rudely remarks "look at their clothes! They are probably here for the first time." At that moment, the girl removes an obviously dirty shawl to reveal a blindingly white, excellently washed, piece of garment. What bothers me isn't the fact that she was discriminated against because of her clothes. It is why this very fancy hotel hired a terrible terrible manager who does not understand customer relations at all. Why not spend some money and get a better, customer-friendly manager? Every taka is a taka after all. And speaking of takas and clothes let's address the burningest issue of the month: The Burkini Ban.

Firstly, the entire ordeal of labeling a very regular surfer suit must have been a tedious one. What on Earth is a Burkini anyway? Some say it is a bastardized cross between a Bikini and a Burqa, but the inventor of the Burqini, Aheda Zanneti, explained that it was more about marrying Australian culture with an Islamic one. She stressed that nowhere in the holy book is the Burqa mentioned and nor the pre-requisite to cover one's face and she's absolutely right. However, end of the day, it is still a loosely-fitting glorified swimsuit, playing at modesty. In Israel, they have a similar kind of garb for hitting the beach and they call it "modest swimwear", because some people actually do not want to be almost wholly naked when swimming and I doubt much of it is to do with an oppressive culture. It seems, the West and most Westerners don't understand modesty and cannot fathom why a woman would willingly choose to cover herself up and not show her pseudo-feminist powers. The ruckus over the Burkini ban is also a confusing one. If the Burqa ban is rightfully in place, shouldn't the Burkini be banned too? Or is it a way of targeting muslims? In reality, the 2010 French ban on any type of concealment of the face was very much too a move against Muslims and the Burkini ban is no different and three months away from elections, these desperate times always call for desperate measures. The fourth Reich rises in Europe and there isn't much anyone can do about it.

Of course, radicalist rightist aside, it is always fun to have a target, although we are more prone to focus on other's problems, to distract from our own. It's why some people conspired, in the heart of Bangladesh, to sow the seeds of yet

WHAT WERE WE TALKING ABOUT?

PHOTOS: AFP



another classist discord. As if rightfully and 2000 percent legally acquiring all land wasn't a slap in the face enough, some thought of rubbing salt in the faces of those they had wronged, or rather those of their "kin" by banning the lungi outright. A security issue or a classist one because when a terrorist den was unmasked in the area most protected from all Lungi Party, they weren't found be wearing lungis. Although even if they did, they'd probably change. How ridiculous would it be to be shot in a lungi? And let's face it, shot would be the only proper way to deal with terrorists. Question them? Hell no. We asked politely and said please come out with your arms in their air but they didn't want to and they called us bad names. Then, they literally dropped bombs in response. So we went in chewing gum and doing what we do best, Duke Nukem 3D style (classic. 90s kids shoutout).

And guess what they were wearing? All black everything. Which tells us that hell yeah what you wear tells us a lot about you so articles of clothes should be banned without question. In fact let's extend that to other fashion things. Ban matching your pants and your shoes unless you match your shirt too, ban jeans with a shirt tucked, ban the disrespectfully disturbing flip flops back to the beaches and can people without gang-affiliations please not sport bandanas? No it's not a metal thing you freaks; get back to your torn-broke-looking tweener jeans and your shirts with nonsensical signs and band names.

So this wasn't really about the Burkini Ban but the 27th of August wasn't about Rampal and illegal detentions actually happen so cool your jets because things change, it's time to move on, she never loved you to begin with. The world we live in is a chaotic place and none of us have the attention span any longer to focus on any one issue. We take up arms and own every cause but mostly for the feel good factor. Of course, there are noble people around us but they are the ones who live their lives with honesty and not mired in pushing their own agendas and labels during every national or international tragedy. And on this note we end with one final thought: As long as we have puppets bought by businesses who we call our world leaders, the world will never change and the Burkini Ban is just the start. ■