

The Muslim Village

A Reflection on M. Night Shyamalan's The Village

By
Zeno

Movies need not be a flight of fantasy to gratify us with cheap thrills and wishy-washy love moods. Movies can be a powerful medium for social instructions and reflections. As critics pointed out, M. Night Shyamalan's latest movie, *The Village*, is indeed 'a sociology project disguised as a horror flick'. I cannot agree more.

Yes, it is strange how some movies can be a powerful tool for social reflections. Take for example M. Night Shyamalan's recent movie, *The Village*. I must say that there are more allegories in the movie than one might suspect. I am not, of course, trying to belittle Shyamalan's gifted ability to evoke fear through the use of clever cinematography. I am also not implying that the superbly twisted plot itself is not worth the attention. But apart from these, what is so mesmerizing about the movie is the thought-proving theme it carries – that of social idealism in the midst of a degenerating world.

I am almost certain that there is an uncanny resemblance between the theme and what we can find in contemporary discourse on Islam. In fact, I had a sense of *déjà vu* when I watched *The Village*. Just 3 years ago, a popular visiting preacher told a multitude of Singaporean Muslims to purchase land in Indonesia and run their own micro-economic system. (To some, it may be childishly ridiculous but I'm sure to many of his followers, it must have been an edifying instruction.) And this is pretty much similar to Shyamalan's portrayal of an 1897 Pennsylvanian community, named Covington, which was totally cut-off from other communities because of the idealism that the elders carry within them. The elders had all experienced some form of pain, misery and disillusionment in their previous home town that they resolved to build a community deep in the forest, away from the degenerating world that they knew. In both – Shyamalan's Covington and the preacher's "Muslim Village" (as he himself called it in his preaching) – it is a form of escape disguised as a utopian idealism.

Translated to a wider discourse, the Muslims' equivalent to Covington can also be arguably similar to the romantic call for the return to the idealized Caliphate system. And like Covington, there is nothing truly ideal in the conception. Crime can still occur in Covington as much as three of our Rightly-Guided Caliphs were murdered despite what present-day Islamists will like to paint of the so-called Golden Age image of early Islam under the Caliphate system. In truth, one still has to contend with human weaknesses – that of jealousy, envy and hatred – regardless of the idealized social setting one tries to envision. Covington's response is to isolate their community from contact with the outside world. To what extent can we do so? Instead of adopting an isolationist position, should we not confront the world and our own self, *with* the world? In *The Village*, the strength and courage to confront reality is portrayed in the characters of Ivy Walker and Lucius Hunt – two youths who represent the future of Covington – for, as Ivy's father remarked, "You are fearless in a way I will never know." Do we have such youths amidst us?

The Village had portrayed to us an ironic truth: that as much as we want our youths to pursue the utopian way of life that we envisioned for them, they cannot be continuously (and systematically?) isolated from the real world – more so, to create and re-create ‘monsters’ for them. In Covington, the elders thought it was necessary to sophisticatedly invent the myth of evil, lurking ‘monsters’ in order to ‘protect’ their community from the real ‘evil’ of the outside world. I can only think of how our contemporary Muslim discourse had taken a similar slant. When we observe Muslim writings and speeches, we find continuous peppering with the demonization of ‘The Other’. In short, we are too happy to create and re-create our own ‘monsters’ – be it the evil, conspiring Jews or the decadent, atheistic and secular West – in order to buttress the case for our ideological ‘Muslim Village’ (i.e. Islamic State). At least the Covington elders were kind enough not to name the ‘monsters’; they called them ‘Those We Don’t Speak Of’. The truth is, these ‘monsters’ are nothing but a reflection of our own fears; a fear that our own traditional (and purportedly ‘superior’) way of life will be eroded under the onslaught of change and modernity. Despite what we can say about the ‘evil’ Other, the real situation is that we fear our own self. And it does not help either that this fear is due to our own inadequacies that comes into conflict with our painful memory of being the beacon of civilization at one juncture in history. If we choose to detach ourselves and build our own isolationist village based on differentiation with everything ‘non-Us’, then we will become a ghetto of this world. This should be our greatest worry and fear. And let us share this concern with our youths. For a start, maybe we should encourage them to catch *The Village*, if they have not.

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