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The United States, the Country of Jekyll and Hyde

By: **Tabish Khair**

Two Americas exist—“US Jekyll” at home, sympathetic to personal identity claims, and “US Hyde” abroad, ready to sell bombs to uphold sovereignty. Both reject political sovereignty demands, prioritising identity over politics, which undermines public democracy.

At the end of my two-month-long stay in the United States in 2024, I was asked to talk of my impressions of America, along with other invited writers. This was about a week before the US presidential election, which, as commentators kept telling us, had divided the country into two Americas, both largely unwilling to converse with one another.

In any case, politics, it appears, is a very private matter in the US. No one seems to talk politics, and if you bring up the topic, people lower their voices. The world’s view of Black Lives Matter and Gaza campus protests is misleading—they are only cracks in the stolid “apolitical” wall of America.

I spoke to some lovely, genteel people in Iowa City. They were staunch Democrats and supported Kamala Harris, and they claimed that they did not understand how anyone could vote for Donald Trump. When I replied that though I would not vote for Trump, I could totally understand why some people would vote for him, they simply let the matter drop. This was the closest I came to a political discussion on the looming elections in Iowa City.

I spoke to others too—from the other end of the social scale. Iowa City does not have the kind of disturbing poverty that some other American places have. You will not find many homeless people there, and you will not see a drug addict collapsed on the pavement, with people gingerly stepping around him, as you would in New York. But there were a few homeless people there too.

One of them sat outside my hotel, holding a placard that said, “Bet you don’t have a dollar to spare!” I often dropped him a dollar, joking that he had again lost the bet—but even such people had nothing to say about the election. An African American taxi driver told me that he did not really think of the election at all, but suggested, when pressed, that he would vote for Trump if he had to, because of the high cost of living in recent years. There was no real political discussion. Nothing like what I would get in India or even Denmark.

This could be seen as political maturity, but as vicious online debates showed no sign of any such maturity, it was probably something else. My conclusion was that politics is kept off the streets of the US, as it is largely a matter decided by interest groups, power PACs (political action committees) and super PACs, most of them controlled or influenced by people with money. I knew this explanation would not be acceptable to my American hosts, who put sincere faith in the traditions of American democracy.

My other explanation, I suspected, would sound just as churlish. The US, with its tendency to turn everything into a private matter, had essentially defused politics by turning it private too. Politics, by any definition, is a public matter. What seemed to exist instead in the US were essentially personal matters being discussed publicly, and political matters perhaps being discussed privately.

Avoiding both these explanations, which I thought would be too churlish coming from a guest, I also decided to avoid the question, and I had another good reason to do so. After all, my earliest impressions of the US must have been formed in childhood, decades before I went to there. It is one of the unremarked indexes of US privilege—like those endlessly green lawns that consume more piped water than many populations of Third World countries get to drink—that Americans can largely form impressions of other countries in adulthood, while most citizens of other countries are born into impressions, good or bad, correct or false, of the US.

This is particularly true of those of us who are educated in English—we read US literature and history too. But even those who are not educated in English already have impressions of the US from childhood—ranging from Coca Cola and Walt Disney to bombs and food parachutes raining on them. There is always a deluge of America out there.

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Brought up on Superman and Batman comics, Nat King Cole and Doris Day LPs discovered in the family collection, Laurel and Hardy, and Charlie Chaplin, and then, from teenage onwards, all the great American writers, and the American music that we bartered in pirated cassettes, not to mention Hollywood films, there was never a time when the US was not with me. But my perception of it, as an adult, changed—from the hopeful years of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, through hesitant support of the US-led United Nations (UN) intervention against the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, to growing alarm and suspicion when the US–United Kingdom combine, largely ignoring the UN, went in to depose Saddam, justifying it with blatant lies about his (non-existent) chemical weapons, and causing the death of more than a million civilians in the process.

Looking back, I realise that the Cold War mentality never really died out in the US, because it was the mentality of world hegemony, and the American power brokers could not imagine a world that was not under their hegemony. There was a long tradition behind it. It even went beyond the US—when Rudyard Kipling had urged in his famous poem to “take on the white man’s burden” and rule the coloured world of people who were “half devil, half child”, it was the US he was addressing. He was urging the US to take on the racist British colonial enterprise.

In recent years, it has become impossible to repose faith in the claims of the “free world”, as the US, increasingly, finds a plethora of villains to fight all over the globe. In essence, this repeats the pattern of the Cold War—when the monsters of communism and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were used by the US and its allies to throttle every democratic socialist movement in Asia, Africa, and South America, often installing Central Intelligence Agency-enabled rightist governments and dictators in those places.

Islamist groups rose gradually to power in most Muslim countries largely in this Cold War bid to fight socialism. Then with communism disappearing as a threat, a different monster was required. Unsurprisingly, the monster of “Islamism” started being used in a similar way. Genocidal violence can now be employed against any popular movement for national autonomy, no matter how justified, as long as it can be labelled “Islamist”. Gaza today is the most obvious example of it, but not the only one.

Bubble of International Writing Program

So here I was, just a few weeks before the US presidential election of 2024, travelling across the US, but mostly based in that beautiful, cultured, literary university town, Iowa City. I was a part of the University of Iowa’s famous International Writing Program (IWP), which was itself a branch of one of the earliest creative writing degrees established in the world. I had been lucky to be selected, and more so because I had been selected more than a decade ago, when my youngest child was born. Unwilling to leave my wife alone with an infant, I had postponed my stay.

Then I had postponed my stay again because of the death of my parents, and accruing responsibilities in India. It had taken me a decade to find a semester when I could be free of both work in Denmark and family responsibilities. The IWP, and particularly its erudite and cultured director, the poet Christopher Merrill, had kindly waited for me, and here I was in Iowa City. It was a privilege. It also displayed the courtesy and generosity that is one of the heartening aspects of Americans—inside the US.

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I had come to Iowa City aware of the fact that the IWP had a reputation of being a Cold War creation—something set up primarily to encourage dissident writers, particularly from Chinese regions, in the 1960s and 1970s. But that had been decades ago. The Cold War was over, I thought, despite evidence of a war going on in parts of the old Soviet Union, between Russia and Ukraine. Back in Denmark, I had participated vigorously in pro-Ukraine demonstrations.

Interestingly, Ukraine-Russia was the only bit of politics I heard in Iowa City. There were two writers from Ukraine, and both were, with good reason, concerned about what was happening back home, to their land, their friends, and their families. They brought it up on every occasion. It was their right and their duty. They also refused to collaborate in a translation class with a sympathetic Russian student there, which disturbed me.

One of them was particularly nationalistic. She did not just speak up for Ukrainian independence, which I would do too, but posited a total divide between Russians and Ukrainians as peoples. Her attacks were not just on the Russian regime, which I dislike too, but on Russia—that vast culture, those many peoples, and that rich and contested history. I was shaken by the simplicity and vehemence of her extreme nationalism.

This kind of “identity” politics was lapped up by audiences in Iowa City. Or at least it was accepted without query. This was partly because all of us, including me, were silenced by the weight of having to defend Ukraine. What was interesting was that no other political matter was ever discussed in public. The Trump-Harris matter almost never came up for discussion, and the genocidal violence unleashed by Benjamin Netanyahu, with US weapons, on Gaza and other Palestinian regions was not mentioned even once.

In some ways, this was the closest I had experienced to living in the Soviet Union—only certain things entered the public discourse in Iowa City and its famous creative writing traditions. Maybe if this had happened a few years ago, all my American inheritances would have induced me to find excuses. But that is no longer possible after Gaza. And neither can one parrot the answers that Americans and their apologists want us to give. We need to find our own answers. The next part of this essay lists the answers that I found, and if they seem to be a bit harsh on the US, let me add that people like me have often been too soft on the US in the past.

Two Americas

The media talk of two Americas—Republican and Democrat—and this is only correct inside the US. Outside it, it makes no difference, except to some crony white nations in West and North Europe. But, in fact, two Americas do exist, except that they are not Democrat and Republican. They are “America inside the USA” and “America outside the USA”. For reasons of precision, and also other reasons, let me refer to them as US Jekyll and US Hyde.

The suavity, decency, and accomplishments of US Jekyll are often underestimated in circles outside the US. While admiring many other aspects of the US, such as its shows of pomp and wealth, we do not, for instance, consider Americans as a people who read much. This notion is dispelled the moment you step into American public libraries, university campuses, and museums. While this differs from state to state to an extent, US public libraries are surprisingly well endowed—even in small towns. And some university libraries are better than national libraries in European nations.

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The University of Iowa library, for instance, was better than anything in Denmark that I had encountered, and Denmark has a reputation for the state funding such institutions. Many museums in the US, unlike most museums in Denmark or England, are free. Town and city councils—though this again differs from state to state—are surprisingly responsive. A Bangladeshi immigrant in a small town in Illinois recounted, with justifiable admiration, how a single letter to the town council about a damaged pedestrian path had led to almost immediate repairs.

These are truly democratic aspects of US Jekyll, and they should be acknowledged. They combine with the vast wealth of the higher classes in the world’s only superpower to create an experience of life that is superior to anything anywhere else in the world—for those classes, the classes whose children come to study in places like Iowa City or work in high professions there.

On the other hand, US Hyde seems to be another animal altogether, as Palestinians and many other peoples have discovered. But it is not really another animal at all—after all, Hyde only exists because of Jekyll, as we all know.

Take, for instance, the lack of party politics on the streets in the US. It can be seen as a kind of ethos of civility and considered admirable from that perspective. But there are other sides to it. For instance, historically, it is based on a certain erasure of what has happened to other Americans. The assumption is that the system is capable of taking care of its mistakes. Hence, any “excessive” public protest or agitation is unnecessary.

This, in its turn, is rooted in the myth of the American Dream, which so many Americans still believe in—the fiction that if you work hard enough, you will succeed in life and achieve affluence. Most Americans, who work hard enough, do not become affluent, but they seldom question the dream or the system. They put the blame on other minority groups (“immigrants”) or see it as a temporary historical aberration.

But their notion that the American Dream was possible in the past is itself based on a long history of lying and of blindness to what happened to Native Americans and African Americans. The American Dream was an American Nightmare for the Native Americans, who were exiled and murdered, and for African Americans, who were brutally enslaved.

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Many Americans are yet to face up to these aspects of their own history. This is most clearly illustrated by what is happening in Gaza. It is a mirror copy of what happened to Native Americans in the past. You oppress and regulate a people, and when one of them retaliates with anger and brutality, you send in the troops to murder and exile them some more. Every crime that a settler commits is just an aberration, but every crime by the other—Native American or Palestinian—has to be avenged on the entire community and, it appears, almost endlessly.

Today, in liberal circles in the US, it seems that people feel it sufficient to stick a Black Lives Matter or rainbow sticker on their car windows. Iowa City was full of such stickers. But Iowa City was also largely empty of African Americans and totally empty of Native Americans—except late at night or early in the morning, when the street cleaning crews came out. They were predominantly Black or coloured. Of course, there were some coloured students—they were from elsewhere and rich enough to afford the fees or on privileged scholarships.

One of the great and enabling myths of accomplished US Jekyll has been its celebration of personal identities. This is part of its ability to keep politics off the streets, because when politics does enter the streets, it does so as some easily containable version of personal politics. This prevents any kind of political solidarity from being formulated. It is perfectly OK in US Jekyll to come up with stories relating to identity matters. That was one of the reasons the audiences in Iowa City listened approvingly or sleepily to the rhetoric about Russians and Ukrainians being totally different.

US Jekyll has a lot of sympathy with you if you claim to be different (which, of course, is not a bad thing), and US Hyde is perfectly willing to sell you a few bombs if you base your claim to sovereignty on this difference. But both US Jekyll and US Hyde do not even begin to understand you if you make a political demand for sovereignty—it has to be a personal and identitarian demand. This position undercuts politics as a public and democratic matter.

I would add that it does serve a democratic purpose, when identity—sexual, racial, whatever—is inserted back into the public sphere. That is why this is resented by conservatives and reactionaries—and, increasingly, Republicans. But as this insertion seldom builds up to a political solidarity in public, in the general run it is used to “defuse” politics as a public, not a private, and hence as a democratic, matter.

For instance, I support Ukrainian independence because enough Ukrainians desire it in a public and democratic space—not because Ukrainians are “totally different” from Russians. Many Americans—even in genuinely decent US Jekyll—will fail to see this. Any demand based on public politics—a politics of solidarity that does not ignore differences but also does not make them the main basis of political action—is anathema to them. They can only see “communism” there. They are still caught in the Cold War to that extent.

I will be harsher and add that US Jekyll, despite all its good intentions, still has a racist mindset. I am not talking of Trump supporters. Racism, after all, is a pseudo-demarcation based on notions of absolute difference.

And they fail to see the contradiction in what US Jekyll claims internally—“US is a melting pot”—and what US Hyde, given its own interests, encourages externally—“Here are the bombs or the dollars; Yugoslavia, Sunnis, Ukrainians, Taiwanese, Israelis, now go and fight for your identity as a nation, because you are and need to be different.” This has happened time and again—and it will keep happening until US Jekyll stops taking that self-medication of historical blindness that it has been administering itself.

But I will be harsher. As I said, I have stopped making excuses for US Jekyll; I never made excuses for US Hyde. I will be harsher and add that US Jekyll, despite all its good intentions, still has a racist mindset. I am not talking of Trump supporters. Racism, after all, is a pseudo-demarcation based on notions of absolute difference. US Jekyll, even many of those who vote against Trump, has never fully overcome this mindset. This is deeply rooted in the identity myths of America.

As James Baldwin noted in a talk to teachers working in the New York public school system on 16 October 1963, “What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s heroic ancestors. It’s astounding to me, for example, that so many people really appear to believe that the country was founded by a band of heroes who wanted to be free. That happens not to be true. ... Yet we have a whole race of people, a whole republic, who believe the myths to the point where even today they select political representatives, as far as I can tell, by how closely they resemble Gary Cooper. Now this is dangerously infantile, and it shows in

every level of national life.”

This kind of loaded identitarianism—with its internalised racism (which Baldwin captures in the image of representatives who resemble ‘Gary Cooper’)—informs the vision of US Jekyll. It has enabled the “privatisation” of politics in the US. Now, the privatisation of politics is not the same as the privatisation of religion, which, one can argue, has been one of the strengths of European Christianity since the 18th century, when it first happened extensively—god was moved from the church into “nature”.

This is so because religion attempts to connect humans to some deity or divinity, which is never actually present in any public space—church, mosque, temple, or whatever. Any claim to represent this divinity in public is essentially anti-democratic. It establishes an unquestionable hierarchy of power—pundit, priest, clergy, maulvi. When religion is moved into the private sphere, it frees the public space for potentially democratic activities. No one can now tell you to do something because “god” wills it.

However, politics does not connect humans to divinity; it connects humans to other humans. As such, it needs to be conducted in public and cannot be turned into a private matter. Turning it into a private or even a personal matter actually empties politics of its democratic potential. It turns politics into something else.

This is what has happened in the US. Trump is not the reason for it; he is the final symptom. Despite all his demagogic performances, Trump and his acolytes are not willing to discuss public and political issues, and they tend to move power into some kind of cronyism—a situation where power operates between coteries, while the public are kept enthused with large and populist statements.

What Trump wants to do is take power away from some of these elites and pass it on to his cronies, and to privatise politics even further, reduce power to a personality cult, a kind of public return of religion.

But this cronyism is just an intensely “privatised” version of what has existed in US politics for decades—politics by power PACs and super PACs, politics by a kind of elite. The Democrats have done this as much as the Republicans. What Trump wants to do is take power away from some of these elites and pass it on to his cronies, and to privatise politics even further, reduce power to a personality cult, a kind of public return of religion. That is why he is just an extreme symptom of a greater rot.

However, the US being the only superpower in the world, offers different experiences of power—that is why there is a US Jekyll and a US Hyde. US Jekyll wants, and gets, its lawns with piped water, and can often get a pedestrian path repaired with a single letter to the city council. US Jekyll has lovely university campuses, museums, and public libraries. Much of the money for all this is being raised by the millionaires and corporations who actually fund power PACs and super PACs, and it is not being raised inside the US—it is being raised in and from other countries.

US capital needs the entire globe as its playing field in order to make available to US Jekyll the life of courtesy, decency, and privilege that it leads, a life based on myths that obscure the past and present of violence, exploitation, and racism. This is what creates US Hyde, with its jackboots, its 700 military bases in other nations, its military-industrial complex, its interventions in other regions, always with a good slogan and always with an eye to its own financial interests. US Hyde cannot be stopped elsewhere, and the racist bludgeoning of Iraqis or Palestinians cannot be prevented by talking to it.

It is US Jekyll that will have to stop taking the pills with which it has been dosing itself. And what are the chances of that happening? If Harris had won, it would have been good for US Jekyll; there is no doubt about it. But neither Harris nor Trump mean a change in US Hyde. We, especially those of us in the coloured world, can still expect jackboots for the sake of those impressively green lawns in US Jekyll. Meanwhile, in a hundred different cultured, decent, well-meaning, essentially apolitical Iowa Cities, writers like me will still get invited, and if we do not show too much unease, might even be feted.

Tabish Khair is an Associate Professor, Aarhus University, Denmark, and a Fellow, Royal Society of Arts, United Kingdom.