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Nuclear Hallucinations: Fathima Nizaruddin in conversation with Iram Ghufran

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Abstract

Nuclear Hallucinations was screened in October 2019 as part of the AV PhD seminar events convened jointly by the University of Westminster and Goldsmiths. The documentary emerged from Nizaruddin's PhD project at the University of Westminster and is centred around the anti-nuclear struggle against an 'atomic power' project in India. The film examines how comic modes and irony could be employed to undermine authoritarian knowledge claims within documentary cinema.

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Figure 1: Fathima NIzaruddin, Nuclear Hallucinations, 2016. Screenshot. [courtesy of Fathima NIzaruddin]

Iram Ghufran: Hello and welcome, Fathima. I'm doing this interview on behalf of the Hyphen Collective at the University Westminster. Thank you for making time for us. To begin with, tell me briefly about your process arriving at a comic mode, to question the authoritarian claims in documentary cinema. Why did you choose humour and irony?

Fathima Nizaruddin: In my earlier work also as a practitioner, I was drawn to humour. In the case of this particular film and the PhD project, I wanted to respond to the pro-nuclear narrative in India which often borders on the absurd. My project responds to this narrative from the plane of tamasha. In my thesis, I expand on the term t*amasha* – it can be translated as a 'joke', but it is far more than a joke. The moment you look at anything as a t*amasha*, it loses its legitimacy in the order of things. So, I was trying to use t*amasha* as a way of engagement to work against authoritarian claims of pro-nuclear documentaries. Many of these pro-nuclear documentaries were produced by state institutions. As films, most of them are boring. But these

films were an important element in the performative practices around the nuclear. If you go against the pronouncement of the films and participate in protests, then you could be at the receiving end of police excesses. You could get shot, or imprisoned. So in certain ways, these films and violence work together. In such a circumstance, can humour offer a possibility of resistance? This was something that I was experimenting with.

IG: How does the film practice aspect of your PhD speak to the larger discourse on humour as an activist practice?

FN: I was looking at the theory of humour as part of my research. It is an emerging field in academics. But I have also felt that much of the notions and theoretical work in the field is Eurocentric. This was something which led me to look for t*amasha* and figure out a South Asian way of looking at humour and locating my work around it. And also, in terms of activist practice, humour as a response was already present in the anti-nuclear struggle at Kudankulam where I was working. So, when I started my project which uses humour and irony, people responded easily. I used to set up what can be called 'expert tables'. Anyone could sit in front of such a table and impersonate a nuclear 'expert', and I would film the impersonation. Many people responded to my invitation; they would take on the role of the prime minister, a top nuclear scientist or a bureaucrat. Often there will be an audience around these expert tables, and they will interact with the impersonators. I used to film all this in the 'documentary' way; nothing was scripted. The impersonations and the responses to them happened because humour and irony as a response was already part of the anti-nuclear movement at Kudankulam. I think that such a response gets accentuated in a practice like that of *Nuclear Hallucinations*.

IG: We are living in times of great turbulence and political upheavals in large parts of the world and a looming ecological crisis, and facing all of that are small and large anti-capitalist movements. These movements of intensity and excesses shape everyday life. Could you speak of the everyday life of the village in Kudankulam in the light of this?

FN: The idea of excess and excess consumption was central to the movement. For example, the villagers will say, 'you guys in cities, you are the ones who need more power; our own lives are simpler and we don't want a consumption-driven kind of life'. They would point to the windmills around the area which produced electricity and argue that 'this much amount of electricity is enough for us'. A consumption-driven idea of progress comes at a huge ecological cost; there are certainly other more sustainable ways of living. This was a central argument of the villagers who were part of the Kudankulam anti-nuclear movement. They are very much aware that only a few people will benefit from a consumption-driven economy. Such a consciousness is part of many environmental movements in India.

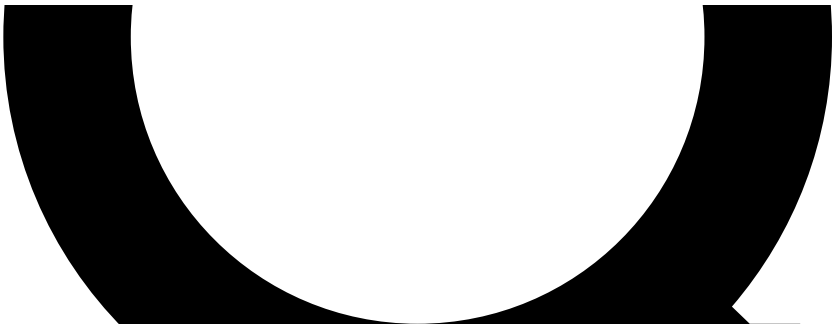

Figure 2: Fathima NIzaruddin, Nuclear Hallucinations, 2016. Screenshot. [courtesy of Fathima NIzaruddin]

IG: How has the experience of making this film shaped your relationship to the culture of protest?

FN: I was an outsider-insider in the protest in some way. The Kudankulam nuclear power project is roughly 90 kilometres away from my parents' home. And right now, I have just read about some kind of a cyberattack on the Kudankulam nuclear project, and the government is denying it. It worries me especially because my parents live in a nearby city. The project stands on a tsunami-affected coast; there are also allegations that the components used in the reactor complex are of inferior quality. Even before I started my PhD work, I was worried about the Kudankulam nuclear project. But neither I nor my family had gone out to protest against the nuclear project. In some ways, the whole task of resisting this huge nuclear complex was on the shoulders of a few villages near the complex. In that sense I was an outsider, and it was my first experience within a protest movement. However as a person from a neighbouring city, I was also an insider. I would say what Trinh T. Minh-ha says about Africa: you are not speaking about Africa, but speaking around. I wanted to align myself with the protest, but I was aware that my voice was not the voice of the protest. I was not an activist; I was a filmmaker and researcher. My career would benefit from the work that I was doing.

But I remember a conversation that I had with one of the protesters at Idinthakarai village, which is the key locus point of the Kudankulam anti-nuclear struggle. He said that while they are aware that my work is part of a PhD which will help me in my career, they also hoped that my work will help to circulate the message of the anti-nuclear struggle at Kudankulam more widely. So for me, it was more about aligning with the struggle. But there are certainly some problems as far as my involvement was concerned. Unlike the protesters who were constantly on police radar, I could afford to go away from the site of the struggle into a somewhat comfortable middle-class existence. Such problems and complications are there, and they need to be acknowledged.

IG: How do you see documentary film practice or rather myriad documentary practices? Speaking to the contemporary, what can the documentary's role be?

FN: I think we are now living in a post-truth society. In my PhD I argue that there is no documentary, instead there are documentaries. And every claim of documentary is a performative claim, because you are always going back to a tradition of truth-making. In a large part of the world, historically, this tradition was very much supported by the state. In *Nuclear Hallucinations*, I was working against the truth-making processes of pro-nuclear state documentaries. So for me, in my practice it was about complicating those simplistic narratives of the pro-nuclear claims. I feel generally there is a lack of complex thought around many issues; we often go for very simple narratives. I think documentary has a role in complicating narratives and putting forward complex experiences.

IG: I am very curious about your opinion on documentary as part of a PhD by practice project: how is it different from an ordinary documentary production?

FN: I really appreciate this question, and I think this particular work which I made, I could have never made it in a traditional documentary set-up. And for me, this process has also allowed me to think of this as a way of working. *Nuclear Hallucinations* is not a commissioned documentary film; I was very much based within a research environment. So I was not working on a specific template to please a particular audience. There was no commissioner sitting and giving directions about editing or shooting style. I think the market compulsions are much, much less in an environment like this. Because of the extensive research process,

you also end up with a rich array of material. Without the research scholarship that I received, I would not have been able to make *Nuclear Hallucinations* in that particular way. It allowed me a certain kind of freedom. In the current climate when technology is becoming cheaper, the cost of making a film is more about being able to sustain yourself while you are working on one topic for an extended period of time. You can manage to buy a cheap camera and might get access to editing facilities, but you still have to support yourself, pay the rent etc. For me that was the hardest part, and the scholarship was a real help. It freed me from the compulsions of a traditional documentary commissioning environment. At the same there was also a certain kind of discipline because of the PhD framework; I was clearly not doing a self-funded film which could go on forever. So this was a very good mode of working for me. I realised that the practice-based research practice is something which allows me to be an academic as well as a practitioner; both the academic research and the practice inform each other.

IG: What tips would you give to researchers or your students or people who are currently in their second or third year of PhDs?

FN: I have finished my PhD recently; I got the degree in 2017. One of the insights that I gained was that failure is a very key and important part of your work, especially in practice-based artistic research. Sometimes your initial thoughts and plans will fail; there is no need to become disheartened by that. For me, failure was very much part of the process. When you fail, it allows you to interrogate the practice more. So what you fail to do is as much an important part of your PhD as the things that worked. I have written extensively about what has not worked in my PhD; methodologically, I found it very useful. And then, there is life after PhD. Different people have different realities to go back to after the PhD. If you are a filmmaker, you might return to full-time filmmaking after the PhD. Or you might want to pursue an academic career. If you are looking for a postdoctoral fellowship, then I feel there is lesser funding for practice-based research at the postdoctoral level. I think this is an issue which needs to be addressed at the institutional level globally. As a practice-based researcher it is tough if funding agencies expect you to have a peer-reviewed publication record which is comparable to that of a researcher who follows the theory route. It is tough to publish while you are making a film. I feel that there is a need to create more recognition for practice-based art practice as legitimate academic work in the wider university system globally.

IG: Thank you, Fathima. I wish you all the best with your postdoc and any of your future endeavours.

FN: Thank you, Iram. It was a pleasure talking to you.

About the author

Fathima Nizaruddin is a filmmaker and an academic currently teaching at AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi. She is an alumnus of Goldsmiths and the University of Westminster. Iram Ghufran is a filmmaker and PhD researcher at CREAM, University of Westminster.