Salam alaykum. Greetings of peace.

To begin with, I would like to express my profound respect and gratitude to Jonny and Jen for the honour of invitation….

Sinéad O’Connor was more than just a musician. She was a symbol of a changing society in Ireland. She used her platform to lift the voices of the vulnerable and admonish those in power at the cost of being vilified and cast aside by a body politic that preserved the status quo.

Tonight, I would like to make a reflection on her life journey, and the “political connection in her spiritual life” and I do this by reflecting on her name: Shuhada

A word whose full meaning is best understood by examining its linguistic roots. One of the origins of Shuhada is the root word Shahada, which means bearing witness. In the second chapter of the Quran, God addresses some of early followers of Prophet Muhammad by saying: We have made you (true Muslims), and people of justice, that you be witnesses over humankind (وَتَكُونُواْ شُهَدَآءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ)

Bearing witness is also the first pillar of Islam, the confession of faith (al-shahada) is observed in each ritual prayer, when one bears witness to the Oneness of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad. Shahadah is a sacred practice. It is the expression of an act of faith in God, and an act of responsibility before God and the universe. For Muslims; bearing witness for God and Godliness is a sacred task and bearing witness against power is a moral position and moral task. It is only through understanding these interconnected meanings that Shahada as the confession of Faith becomes an act of witness. Standing in God’s presence is a means of obtaining the presence of God,

"One of the most pernicious forms of violence is the silencing of those who have been violated and abused. Despite the years and years being silenced by the force of power, Sinead often found a way. A way of bearing witness at the threshold of the two worlds.

Her life story and her way of being in the world was an act of witness. Her art bore witness to a tragic history of thousands of mothers and babies abused by the institutional religion, state surveillance and capitalism. Her song invited each viewer to reflect on their moral responsibility to end this perpetual cycle of violence. Sinéad O’Connor was on the front lines of that fight over racism, war and gender injustice.

She was someone with inner authority, who had committed her life to the struggle for justice. Her art offered her the capacity to bear witness and speak truth to power. Her art bore witness to both past violence and future hopes for justice in creative and distinct ways. She developed her own aesthetics. She saw the creative artistic space as a kind of continent of its own, as a site to dismantle the hierarchies of oppression while reflecting on root causes of violence, methods of resistance, and visions for a just world.

Her voice gives power back to victims, survivors, and witnesses. To those who have never had the right to speak, never had the right to bear witness. Her voice is powerful, moving the listener beyond the dichotomy of victim versus survivor, to resistance through words and action.

For her, commitment to justice or bearing witness to God’s justice was by protesting the persecution. She did this by breaking silence and disrupting the dominant narratives. With the increasing Islamophobia and racialisation of Muslims as a homogenous group of people, and in the context that reverts with Hijab receive disproportional attack of anti-Muslim hate crime, she bravely made her choice, reclaimed her narratives, and put them out there on her own terms. She valued gender expression and gender justice as an integral manifestation of her spirituality.

She was a Theologian. In an Interview few years ago, she asserted: Islam is a way of Thinking. When I was reading chapter 2 of the Quran, I found that I have been a Muslim my whole life and I even did not realise it. For Sinead, the realm of the spiritual was both a site of resistance to hierarchies of power and a means through which the oppressed garner the strength and aspiration to move forward. Spirituality was when she backed millions of Iraqi Kurds who sought refuge at the Turkish and Iranian borders due to their fear of Saddam Hussein’s chemical weapons and donated the revenues of her latest album to the International Red Cross Kurdish Relief program.

Spirituality was when she cancelled a concert she was scheduled to play in Israel, in protest at the deadly attack on Gaza in summer 2014. “Nobody with any sanity, including myself, would have anything but sympathy for the Palestinian plight.

And in her final onstage appearance when she dedicated her 2023 Choice Music Award “to each member of Ireland’s refugee community, not just the Ukrainian ones. You’re all very welcome in Ireland” she said. a dig at the Irish government’s two-tier processing system that allows black and brown refugees to be left on the streets to fend for themselves.

Words often fail to describe the violence she endured. However, through poetry and music, she captured the trauma experienced by so many. The stories of abuse painted in her songs leave a haunting legacy. She expressed: “It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society”. — Sinéad O Connor.

Sinead remained a witness till the end, she was engaged in a transformative renewal of her relationship to the sacred through a radical and sustained struggle and critique of oppression in all its manifestations and a creative and engaged contribution to shaping a life that honours the spirituality. She reminded us that our silence as witnesses of injustice is complicity and dared us to stand up against the violence.

Speaking here tonight… I believed could be a form of witness and I would like to finish this act of witness by noting that in Islamic theology the word for Witness (Shahed), the Confession of Faith (Shahada) and the world for Martyr (Shahid) all emerge from the same root.

Once upon a time, there was a martyr, her blood is still flooding in my veins; And her songs have dissolved in my voice! Extend your steps, The walk to freedom is still long, But we have no other alternative, And every step on the road is a lantern.

Azadeh