

DESIRE AND DESPAIR DURING COMMUNAL – RIOTS IN BOMBAY:A STUDY OF IMTIAZ DHARKER'S SELECT POEMS

Anil Kumar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, India

ABSTRACT

The study is focused on the thematic concerns of communal-riots in the selected poems of Imtiaz Dharker. The desire to prove the supremacy of one religion or the other at any cost, results in despair and delirium is also the matter of concern of this study. The panorama of communal-violence is present in Dharker's "Bombay: The Name of God," a section in her anthology, "Postcards from God." This section is replete with the description of communal-riots between Hindu and Muslim communities, particularly. The humanity soaked in the blood of its own during this cataclysmic event. The endless train of various types of atrocities such as blood-curdling and destruction in a world shattered to the soul by communal-violence, terrorist-bombing, arson, attempts for genocides and state sponsored atrocities of one kind or another in the name of religion and God, whose message to his creation is peace, pity and love for humanity. The cause of this conflict was the demolition of Babri Mosque on 6th December 1992. The impact of this demolition was observed in the form of whirl-of-violence throughout the nation, particularly in Mumbai, a city of Indian sub-continent. The anarchy has overpowered the nation. Humanity, human-values and innocence were on the mercy of ogre i.e. communal-riots. This section of Dharker's anthology reflects the meaninglessness of riots, the deteriorated human as well as moral values and states that how the human beings show unity within the limits of caste and religion to torture the people who belong to the religion other than theirs. Humanity as well as human beings are fated to suffer during this man-made catastrophe. Humanity and human-lives can never be nurtured under the shadow of fear, torture, bloodshed and many-other such type of horrendous events. Such incidents are like raptors to humanity and human values as well. But a question always haunts the conscience, is any religion is more important than innocent humanity and human beings? This section with the ghastly events and their results inspires the common people to avoid such horrific acts for the world, full of peace, pity, love and fellow-feelings for the whole creation of God.

KEYWORDS: *Desire, Despair, Conflict, Riots, Communal-violence and Anarchy.*

INTRODUCTION:

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Lahore (Pakistan) to Pakistani parents in 1954. She was brought-up in Glasgow, where her family settled when she was less than a year old. Now she is an important presence in the world of Indian English Poetry. Her varied cultural experience characterise her literary works. Being an artist also, the images in her poems as Ezekiel points out, "are not merely images created for poetic effect, they are like blazing fire compelling the readers to take

notice" (Nabi,7). Accompanied by her visual art, she has published six books of poetry, they are, "Purdah and Other Poems" (1989)," Postcards from God" (1997), "I Speak for the Devil" (2001), "The Terrorist at My Table" (2006), "Leaving Fingerprints" (2009) and "Over the Moon" (2014). In these anthologies she mainly deals with the themes like communal–conflicts, violence, home, freedom, journeys, geographical and cultural displacement and gender politics. She is the winner of the "Queen's Gold Medal" for her English poetry and an award with a "Silver Lotus" for a short film in 1980 and many other awards has been bestowed on this living legend. Her poetry has been described by critic Alan Ross in London Magazine as, "a strong, concerned economical poetry in which political activity, homesickness, urban violence, religious anomalies, are raised in an unobtrusive setting, all the more effectively for their coolness of treatment" (Subramaniam: Online).

Babur, it is believed, was the first Mughal invader to India. His desire for power or to extend his kingdom instigate him to encroach Indian territory. When he was at the zenith of his power he demolished *Ram Mandir* (Temple of Lord Ram) in Ayodhya, a part of Indian state in Uttar Pradesh. His desire to prove the supremacy of his religion results in various types of heinous atrocities on common people. The result of this blood-curdling was despair and delirium among masses. The spark or desire for revenge remained dormant for centuries. When Indians, particularly Hindus came to power, they also use their political power and demolished the Baburi Masjid. Like Babur they also tried to prove the superiority of their religion and again the result was same i.e. the religious–intolerance and conflicts. Desire for revenge is like the fire without smoke. After this demolition the communal-hatred and desire for revenge strengthen its roots in the heart of masses. Imtiaz Dharker witnessed this religious – intolerance resulting in communal – conflicts and penned the causes and impacts of riots in her poems. Her book, "Postcards from God" meditates upon the disquietude in society, its sudden and planned acts of violence, its feuds and insanities, religious and political anarchy, which forces her to a permanent wakefulness that turned her "eyelids/.... to glass" (PFG, 141). Particularly, "Bombay: The Name of God" a section in her book, "Postcards from God" is replete with the political overtones and violence in Indian sub-continent, because of riots. These communal-riots are the result of the

demolition of Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, in northern India, on 6th December, 1992. This incident in Ayodhya, changed many things for every Indian, over the night, particularly for Hindu and Muslim communities. Dharker's poetic register recorded these bloody communal-conflicts. As for as violence is concerned, Mumbai can be regarded as the microcosm of India. After the demolition a series of riots, based on religion, soon erupted throughout the nation. During these communal-riots around nine-hundred innocent people lost their lives and more than two thousand were injured throughout the country. Some political and religious fanatics have delivered the seditious speeches to worsen the situation. All this had erupted into the frenzy of riots, senseless maiming, killings and many other atrocities. Riots are the naked dance of destruction and death with ogre. Riots are self-breeding like phoenix which borns-out of its own ashes, similarly there is no need to create riots again and again, what they need, just a start. Different religious groups were brazenly lurking about in the cities' streets and alleys in the dark with swords, knives, rods, sticks, chains, guns and explosives to maim and kill the humanity and people as well, who belongs to the religious and communal sects other than theirs. This communal-hate pampers the riots and bleeds the humanity to death. These riots are regarded as the worst sectarian riots of the post-independence era. The demolition of the mosque sparked Muslims' outrage all over the country and provoked inter-communal riots between Hindus and Muslims. The result of all this is attacking one-another, burning and looting homes, shops and places of worship. The kingdom of anarchy, despair and delirium engulfs the city and country as well. Mumbai was among certain cities, perhaps at the top in the country, which bore the brunt of the aftermath of the demolition.

Society is the network of various castes, creeds and religions, so for the peaceful running of the society the harmony, tolerance, respect and understanding is essential in every societian for the other religious sects. The imbalance among these may cause and affect the peace of society. As mentioned earlier that one such incident of intolerance has occurred on 6 December 1992, when Babri Mosque was demolished. The causes and aftermaths of this incident have been recorded by Imtiaz Dharker. There was a panorama of the endless train of violence, bloodshed and destruction, which the human beings and humanity experience in a world torn apart by seditious

speeches of political-psychopaths and religious-maniac. Such type of speeches increase the feelings of –ism and intolerance in the society, resulting in communal carnage, terror attacks, bombings and many other political, religious and state sponsored heinous atrocities of one kind or the other. This is evident especially from the section "Bombay: The Name of God". Even the title of this section is quite ironical because in this particular city the most or so-called intelligent creation of the God is shedding blood in His name. In this context Hoshang Merchant in his poem "Bombay, 12 March 1993" has rightly said that "If man has five senses/Why is he so senseless?" (Su.P, 39). The city as well as nation is torn-apart by these communal-riots.

The communal-speeches, desire for revenge and the permission for these murderous events create a bottomless hatred among human beings for each-other. The first poem of this section, "Seats of Power" is about the misuse of these 'Seats' by delivering seditious political and religious speeches with their aftermaths,

There is a great shuffling
in the corridors of power,
a flurry of whispering,
...
Greetings are exchanged,
hands folded, faces prepared
to give and to receive
...
among such banalities
things go sour. (PFG, 139)

The above stanza is quite clear about the hypocrisies and formalities of politicians and religious leaders. In the "...corridors of power" the orders are given and because of this "things go sour" means a wave of unrest and communal-hatred have its roots in the hearts of masses. The "old man" sitting in the chair and observing the whole situation with, "a lizard eye" is the symbol of experienced politicians and their fore-knowledge of the impending danger. These corridors of power are the symbols of religious and political activities and from here the, "... permission has

been given/for the carnage to begin" (PFG, 139). These destructive orders are given in the so-called, "civil rooms" with this starts the nude dance of ogre i.e. riots with destruction and death. In this context poetess says, "... Somewhere else in the city/a blade finds flesh" (PFG, 139). Even the title of the poem is very ironical because the so-called seats of power are for the justice and welfare of common people or masses but in this poem these seats are used for the injustice and pogroms of humanity and human-beings as well. The breeders of these anti-social activities do not know that they are like a 'moth' who "...carries its own ashes/when it makes the long journey/round the flame" (LF, 110). Another poem entitled "Cloth" is about the orders or so-called "liberty" granted by political and religious leaders (fanatics) against humanity, "This you can do./All ease, all liberty/belongs to you" (PFG, 152). This murderous liberty belongs to the majority only and because of this unbridled liberty they torture the people who belong to minority and desire to dominate them with power, as is indicated in the following stanza of the same poem,

Rip the faces off those
who look you in the eyes.
Gag the ones who try to speak.
Take their hands and bind them up.
They are nothing, voiceless, weak.
Root out the eyes
that see too much.
Burn the flesh. Break the limbs.
Crumple them between your hands.

Toss the remnants into darkened rooms. (PFG, 152)

The above stanza clearly indicates that orders or permissions are given to the fanatics to harm, injure, maim and so on, those who you think even, are thinking to harm you. Such type of instigations or freedom is the cause of communal-intolerance among the masses. Torture, maiming, terrorizing, murder and looting are the aims of riot-mongers. They enjoy all these anti-social and anti-humanity activities in every way. Such type of religious-intolerance and the

support from the so-called seats of power or corridors of power for religious fanatics are the major causes of such type of heinous incidents. Despite all that a question haunts the conscience that any religion of the world is more important than humanity and living beings. The poem entitled, "6 December 1992" is a symbolic poem. The title of the poem is the same day on which the illegal orders by political and religious fanatics for the demolition of Babri Mosque, has been executed. The result of this demolition was the country-wide riots among Hindus and Muslims. Imtiaz Dharker, being the resident of Mumbai, has witnessed this bloody and devastating scene. She was quite shocked and despaired, for this particular morning she says that the, "Glass leaders laugh/and the whole world can see/right through their faces/into their black tongues" (PFG, 141). The "Glass leaders" are the symbols of emotional sterility, cruelty and insensitivity of their hearts. The last line of the poem, "the bodies begin to burn" symbolizes that during riots the human beings were burned alive and human values are at stake. After leaving her bed on this fine morning, the writer finds her, "... eyelids/turned to glass" (PFG, 141). The glass eyelids of the poetess symbolizes the shock and despair at the overnight changed scenario and dead or dying human values. In her poetic world everything has changed into glass. When she blinks the "glass eyelashes crack" means that she was quite startled at the sight of "fragile bodies" some of them "circumcised" and some not. This whole scenario clearly speaks that everything is at stake in the vicinity. While the "glass god in makeshift shrines" (PFG, 141) is the symbol of deafness, dumbness and benumbed senses of God and his helplessness for the welfare of his beloved creation, which is shedding blood of humanity and human beings on his (God's) name. The panorama of glass throughout the poem indicates the commonness of indifferent attitude of God and violence among individuals irrespective of their castes, creeds and religious identities suggested by circumcision, as well as the sheer vulnerability of the human beings, in the times of such violence, when everything and everyone holistically became intolerant and fragile as glass.

The end of the year 1992 and the inception of 1993, enhanced the incessant communal hatred. One such description of anarchy is found in Dharkers' poem, "8 January 1993". The year 1993 started with the gruesome incidents like bomb-blast, arson, blood-shedding and many other atrocities beyond imagination. The poem is replete with the images of arson and burning of

human-beings as is said by the writer, "The bolt bangs in./A match is struck and thrown./The burning has begun" (PFG, 142). This panorama of atrocities is continued in her poem "Drummer".

I was born a foreigner.
I carried on from there
to become a foreigner everywhere
I went, even in the place
planted with my relatives,
...

All kinds of places and groups
of people who have an admirable
history would, almost certainly,
distance themselves from me.
I don't fit,
like a clumsily-translated poem;
like food cooked in milk of coconut
where you expected ghee or cream,
the unexpected aftertaste
of cardamom or neem.

(PFG, 157)

The writer finds herself completely alienated and unwanted person everywhere. Again she says even, "...language flips/into an unfamiliar taste;/where words tumble over/.../...in their midst,/an alien" (PFG, 157). In this feeling of loneliness further she feels herself insecure and starts scratching "...a piece of paper./A page doesn't fight back" (PFG, 157). The page is peace-loving and will not retaliate in anyway. This sense of insecurity and fear is further heightened in the lines when she says, "...through all the chatter of community,/.../immigrate into your bed,/ squat in your home,/ and in a corner, eat your bread" (PFG, 159). In all this mess and unstable thoughts

with the fear of communal-violence, one feels utterly confused, despaired and is unable to recognize his/her ownself,

until, one day, you meet
the stranger sidling down your street,
realise you know the face
simplified to bone,
look into its outcast eyes
and recognise it as your own.

(PFG, 159)

Finally they recognize their ownselfs in a state of shock, despair and with a sense of an "outcast" or otherness.

The sense of insecurity prevailed among the people of minority. The bloody riots of 1992 continued in the year 1993. In this context the poem entitled "1993" depicts the continuity of riots with the images of bleeding humanity, kingdom of anarchy and the ogre waiting at the doors for more destruction. The writer herself was the victim of these riots and shares her experience with her shattered inner-self and the crumbling human-values around her. For this, in her despair she says and asks, "...The things we want are cliches:/Peace and brotherhood,/sanity, the goodness in ourselves./What kind of words are these/ to play with in this age/of fire and blood?" (PFG, 143). Hate, prejudice and anti-humanity feelings were in the air, because there was no check on these anti-social activists and their activities. The reason of this widely spread kingdom of anarchy is, the power or control has gone, "...to roost/in grasping hands" (PFG, 143). The result of this mishandling of power, is the monstrous-violence. The poetess has regarded these riot-mongers as monsters and says,

Monsters stand patiently at our doors,
ringing our bells,
waiting to visit us in our homes.
The beast is upon us,
long arms dangling,

squatting on our shell-bright domes. (PFG, 143)

These "Monsters" are waiting to pounce and crush the soul of humanity to the roots. This personal experience during riots is continued in the poem, "The Name of god." The title of this poem is very ironical because the communal-fanatics were on havoc in the name of God; the creator of the world, who sends the human beings in this world with the message of love, peace and pity. During this cataclysm these virtues are found nowhere. The irony is heightened when the poetess shares her experience and the way how she had a narrow escape from that violent and murderous crowd. She has to run-away from her own home with her daughter, "...when they started/pounding at the door/banging with their sticks, and swords./Then the fire/spread across the floor./.../We ran out through the back,/.../past the neighbourhood boys/with hatchets, hacking/out the name of god" (PFG, 145). The bloody-mob was eager to kill her and her daughter. For all this bloody mess around her, Dharker thinks herself lucky and details that: "... I'll be happy to say,/I never learned your customs./I don't remember your language/or know your ways./I must be/from another country" (ISFTD, 31). In this context Hoshang Merchant in his poem, "An Indian Poem for Baghdad", has rightly answered the question of his own conscience, that, "Whose earth is it anyway?/ The earth is his who can make it rain?/ The tears of mercy from two eyes" (Su.P, 25). In this critical situation she remembers the name of god, but it was different and was like, "... the sound/of children whispering,/ water lapping in a pot,/ the still flame of an oil-lamp" (PFG, 145). This horrendous sight terrified the writer to the extent that she in delirium forgot, even the name of god and says, "The name of god/in my mouth/ had a taste I soon forgot./ I think it was the taste/of home" (PFG, 145). What remains in her memory, is the memory of her sweet home, which she has to left, to be looted and burned by the violent communal-crowd. In this context Hoshang Merchant in his poem, "Bombay, 12 March 1993" has rightly asked the God,

Where were you

When all was burning?

Where was the small flame to warm

When the big flame burnt?

(Su.P, 38)

Slowly and steadily this forgetfulness leads to the faithlessness of the writer and common people as well in almighty. This faithlessness is indicated in the first half of the fourth part, of the poem "Absent Without Leave" where she says, "... these were not my gods?" (PFG, 147). The god has turned heartless for his own creation. He is happy only with the different ways, by which he is worshipped, for this she says,

Small eyes pink with craft,
the china hands of dolls,
plump lips pursed to a flute.
A heavy rope of incense coils
around you. The fat gods
dig you in the ribs and laugh. (PFG, 147)

The writer and other people as well, have lost their faith in god, because of the unemotional and murderous aptitude of human beings towards their own counter-parts and his (God's) indifferent attitude towards his most loving and intelligent creation, whom he has sent in this world with the message of love, peace and pity. Because of all this the sanctity and divinity of God is being challenged and it is presumed that the god has been "hijacked." In this context in her poem, "Greater glory" she says,

God was hijacked long ago,
held hostage in empty churches,
desecrated temples,
broken mosques. (ISFTD, 90)

In another poem, "Frame" Dharker speaks about the god's helplessness and his inability to do anything. The god is assumed to be speaking or complaining and avoiding his responsibilities in this poem, he says,

They have put me in a frame
and left me here
trapped behind glass,
among the hanging clothes

and the smell of yesterday's sweat
to deal with all the demands
that wash up against me.
Can't they see my hands
are tied?

(PFG, 90)

In her atheism she is in accordance with W.B. Yeats, in his poem, "Second Coming" in which he expects the second coming not of Christ but of a giant with lion's body and man's head going towards the Bethlehem, the place where Christ was born, to take over his place and virtues as well. Similar to her, W.H. Auden challenges the existence of god, because of the mindless atrocities on human beings by their own counter-parts. He firmly believes that, "...the world was created by a giant with three heads or that the motions of the stars are controlled from the liver of a rogue..." (CP, 392). Both the poets are neither ready to believe in God nor in the fact that God has created the world. The preachings of God are compassion, pity, peace and love for every creature but what prevails in the society is; brutality, greed and hatred which are the virtues and preachings of a "giant with three heads". It means that the giant has captured the heavens, that is why nothing is good with the whole creation.

There is a ray of hope for the better future. The last section of the poem, "Absent Without Leave" ends with the positive note for the future of humankind. For this Dharker says,

Sometimes you hear another god
crackle from a single singer's throat.
Birdflight raises a minar
that goads the sky into smiles.

Distance is not made of miles.

(PFG, 147)

This extract means that she desires and hopes for the happy and peaceful future of every creature. For all this, it is suitable and better to quote from Imtiaz Dharker's discussion on "God and Devil" with Jerry Pinto, where she says, "God is who you can be; so is the devil" (Pinto, 2015 online). In this statement she is in accordance with John Milton's views in "Paradise Lost" that it is upto human beings to "make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven" (Online, 10/2/2015).

Dharker's poem "Kite" is a symbolic poem. The "kite" in it symbolizes the broad mindedness and is free from any type of worldly allurements, although it is attached to the "ground" (world) through a thin thread. The kite in symbol does not belongs to any caste, colour, creed and religion, rather it belongs to the almighty and his preachings. It is free from any type of worldly relations. That is why poetess says,

...
unburdened by messages,
just hanging there
with one fine line
holding it to the ground,

...
there seemed no need
to look back, or even think
of coming down.

(PFG, 148)

This intactness of kite, is the symbol of its intactness with God and his message of pity, peace and love among whole creation for each-other. In this context, the writer herself feels pity and compassion for the victims of the riots and says,

I wish these were imagined things.
I wish I could put them
safely in another poem,
reconcile them with this
paper and this pen
so I could never smell the burning

or hear the breaking glass again.

(PFG, 155)

This stanza symbolizes the writer's desire for peace and to keep the victims safe in another "poem" i.e. another world, full of peace, pity and love for everything. She does not want to see these horrendous and contemptuous atrocities on human-beings by their own counterparts. In this

context the first Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who also desires for the love, peace, pity and open mindedness in every sphere of life. Every barrier in the path of humanity must be blown-up with the feelings of love, compassion, fellow-feelings, peace and pity for all. For this in his "Gitanjali" he prays and desires for the land,

WHERE THE mind is without fear and the head is
held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards
perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-
widening thought and action-

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my
country awake.

(G, 18-19)

Like Dharker, the people who are kind-hearted and peace-loving do not want to associate themselves with any religion .They want to be regarded as the citizens of no man's land. In this context she has rightly said in her poem, "Not a muslim burial" and desires that after death,

No one must claim me.

On the journey I will need

no name, no nationality.

Let them label the remains

Lost Property.

(ISFTD, 29)

No one is there to blame for these devastating communal-riots because they are created by human beings to decide the superiority of their religion, over the other religions. The humanity is marred by the inhuman feelings of rage, glutton, hatred and so on. There was no natural disaster which has caused this havoc but it is human mind or human beings which are more furious and destructive than anything else in the universe. The nature and human beings are the creations of the same God. Nature always follows the preachings of God. Nature has the tremendous harmony, if drought of winter is there, the spring season follows to soothe the wounds of winter; if hot, harsh and dreary seasons of autumn and summer are there, the rainy season is there to quench the thirst of nature, what a co-ordination nature has. But who is there to salve the wounds of human beings, given to them by their own counter-parts in the form of bloody- riots. Why the human race, which is regarded as the most intelligent creation of God have forgotten such type of virtues and preachings of God? In this context W.H. Auden has rightly said and asked in his poem, "The Question." Poet says, "All of us believe/we were born of a virgin." (CP, 894). Christ was also born of a virgin so the question arises, "from where did Christ get/that extra chromosome?" (CP, 894). This extra chromosome of Christ is full of pity, peace, love and fellow-feelings for the whole creation. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi throughout his life preached for communal-harmony and non-violence. But generations after generations have refuted these virtues of nature, God and his emissaries by their cruelty, greed and hatred.

CONCLUSION:

The narratives of the section, "Bombay: The Name of God" reflects the meaninglessness of riots, deteriorated human as well as moral values and states how the living beings are fated to suffer during this man-made catastrophe. Human life can never be nurtured under the shadow of fear, torture, blood-curdling and many other such type of ghastly events. This, riots based section inspires the people to avoid such horrific acts for the peaceful world with fellow-feelings for every creature, by the virtues of peace, pity and love, the whole world can be changed into heaven. It is rightly said, "We are born of love;/ love is our mother./ Through love all that is/bitter will be sweet, through/love all that is copper will be gold,/through love all dregs

will/become wine, through love all/pain will turn to medicine" (The Times of India, 10). It is not so hard to spread the fragrance of love and communal-harmony. In this context Hoshang Merchant in his poem "Man/Woman/Man" has rightly said,

To accept difference
is to love

....

Those embracing love
become human.

(CW, 285)

This is also the message of almighty for every creature of the universe, for the peaceful running of the society and world as well. For this every individual should contribute to the construction and consolidation of the national, ethnic and communal-harmony.

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