

## Depiction of Communalism and Angsts of Jews in *City of Fear*

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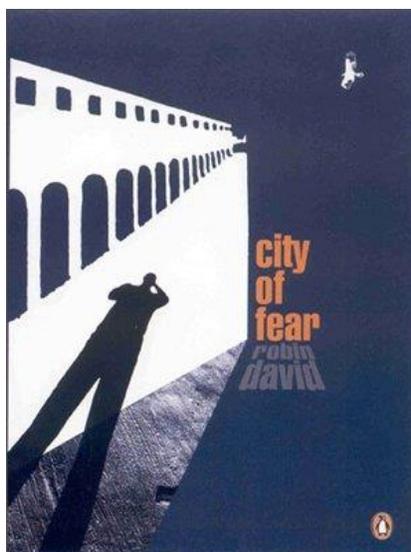
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### Abstract

Robin David vividly covers Gujarat's earthquake of 2001 and the Godhra riots of 2002 in his novel, *City of Fear*. Though the Preamble of the Constitution of India states India as a secular country (Bakshi 1), one still finds the communal sentiments prevalent at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in India. The Research Paper aims at the depiction of discrimination and hatred based on religion that turns people irrational and more fanatic. It chiefly focuses on the plight of Jews like how they feel struck amidst two majoritarian Indian religions, i.e. Hindus and Muslims. This Paper acquaints the readers with the emotional and psychological anguishes of Indian Jews resulting from the communal tension between Hindus and Muslims.

**Keywords:** Robin David, *City of Fear*, Communalism, Secular, Psychological anguishes, Indian Jews.

*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines Communalism as a strong sense of belonging to a particular, especially religious, community, which can lead to extreme behaviour or violence towards others (300). It is a feeling which widens the gap between self and others. Religion is a personal and sensitive issue for most people. Some people are so fanatic that they can easily be instigated in the name of religion. Political leaders misuse this tendency of people to influence their vote banks at times. Though Article 15 of the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Bakshi 41), it becomes completely ironic when it comes to practice in the context.

Robin David, the novelist, depicts how the inner turmoil compels the Jews to migrate to Israel, their Promised Land using the Law of Return, and even in Israel how they do not find themselves at home. The feelings of rootlessness and homelessness result chiefly from the communal clashes of the two majoritarian Indian religions and due to the absence of the desired ethos in their dreamland, Israel. The novelist writes, “Every Jew has the right to immigrate to this country’, the Law of Return said and, at least on paper, ended 2000 years of nationless wanderings of the Jewish people” (3). Aiming to test this law, the writer attempted to immigrate to the Promised Land twice but returns empty-handed and disillusioned. Sharing his experience, he writes:

Ten years had passed since the Law of Return had failed me. Or I had failed the Law of Return. I do not know which is closer to the truth. What do I know as truth is that I had felt more like a wandering Jew in Israel, out of place at Ashkenazi synagogues at Shabbat prayers despite wearing a white shirt and a crocheted skullcap, never totally mastering Hebrew, and wondering if I wanted to spend the rest of my life picking pears, avocados and carrots. Within a year I had realized that the Promised Land was not my country. Even the strong fragrance of spices, wafting in from the Arab market through the yellowing Jerusalem sandstone, did not help. Just like Teen Darwaja, but not like home. (12)

Robin David confesses that Israel was not their Promised Land anymore. In a hope of settling down into the closely knit minuscule minority of Bene Israel Indian Jews in Ahmedabad, he returns to India along with his sister and mother. He writes, “In short, all of us had thought of running out of the house at some point or another but was always for extremely personal reasons” (67).

The novelist projects the communal riots of 2002 Gujarat which terrorize the hearts of the people. *The Times of India* on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2002 reports that fifty-seven people including twenty-five women and fourteen children were burnt alive and thirty injured when the

Ahmedabad-bound Sabarmati Express was pelted with stones and petrol bombs by a mob at Godhra junction (33).

On 27<sup>th</sup> February 2002, David was in Vadodara and as soon as he knew about the stabbings at the Vadodara railway station itself, he called his mother and tells her not to go out of the house that day as there might be trouble. News channels had started flashing the train burning incident (36). When she says that she knows nothing, he says, “Muslims have killed some *kar sevaks* returning from Ayodhya in a train attack at Godhra this morning...There is bound to be some madness” (37).

The news turns the novelist and his mother worried about their existence in India. The incident of the burning of the train is followed by the communal riots and numerous such scenes get reported by the novelist in the novel where Hindu mobs stab and burn the minority Muslims and the Muslim mobs do the same simultaneously.

The minutely vivid description of heart-rending communal scenes turns the readers breathlessly stunned at times in the novel. The novelist writes:

I listened, carefully this time. The shouts were coming from behind our garden wall. Then the steel thaalis began to ring. Men with steel thaalis and wooden sticks had been positioned at the edge of fields just outside the house to warn residents if Muslims attacked Guptanagar from here. Apparently the men had seen some in the darkness. ‘They are coming. Everybody out...Jai Shree Ram...Jai Shree Ram...’ They were shouting. More voices joined in. ‘I am going to kill these sister fuckers’, I heard someone say as I stood in the garden peeping over the wall. All the men, the drunks included, were starting to swarm around the edge of the fields, dragging behind them axes, metal pipes, rusted swords and scythes. (84)

Geetaben becomes one of the victims of the communal frenzy of the Hindu mobs. Sam had clicked her photographs after she had been stripped by the rioters. Her body had swollen by the time Sam and David reached there. Sam visualizes that the rioters after stripping had killed her and had danced on her body in celebration like a finale which resulted in her swollen body as the dead body does not swell up so quickly. David writes, “On the other side of the road lay her Muslim husband, his shirt full of blood. The mob had left thinking he was dead, when he was in fact alive” (124). David's Mother expresses her fear a week after Geetaben's murder over the phone to David as she says, “The only people I see are the maids and the men running in front of the house with swords in their hands” (142).

Religion can tense the strongest friendships. All sorts of differences that did not matter earlier start becoming significant when religion comes between them. One starts judging people based on religion developing a riot filter. David quotes his friend Jayendrasinh Sisodiya, a professor in English who had great persuading skills with his arguments with logic. As the writer used to have a conversation on riots, at times Jayendrasinh Sisodiya's hatred towards Muslims used to get erupt from his heart. He believed that it is natural for a Hindu to hit back at Muslims and teach them a lesson. He used to argue that it was Muslims who started expressing communal hatred first. They started the bloodshed. How can one ignore the fact that they burnt the train first? David would argue that it is not fair to make broad generalizations and look at all Muslims through the lens of hate as all the Muslims were not bloodthirsty. The event happened just as one mob of Muslims turned bloodthirsty. Then the Professor would draw David into the mire of pro-Hindu and anti-Hindu arguments. The professor used to remind David that if he did not support the Hindus in this battle, he was anti-Hindu. If he is anti-Hindu, it simply means he is pro-Muslim. If he is pro-Muslim, it overtly means that he is anti-national. If he is anti-national, it directly makes him a terrorist and a spy of Pakistan because all Muslims are terrorists and spies of Pakistan. All those who support them are collaborators or pseudo-seculars (96-98). After a series of arguments, differences keep on growing and David feels compelled to explode his heart when Professor urges as why they cannot be friends despite of differences: "Fuck our friendship-where the fuck is your reasoning? A Government is behaving like the mob, and you see nothing wrong?" (103). David hardly controls his hands from reaching his friend's neck to shake him.

Thereafter, the novelist Robin David acquaints the readers with his personal experiences i.e., the mob or intentions of the rioters. He presents his first encounter with the communal frenzy when he moved for Vadodara with Bharat Pathak, the photographer: "What we did not expect is that in the eighty kilometres between Godhra and Vadodara there lay a hungry eighty kilometres-long snake with a thousand heads, ready to devour anything that looked even vaguely Muslim. It crawled slowly but stung with the force of a thousand fangs" (39). After the train had been burnt through a metaphor of eighty kilometres snake, David refers to the fanatic attitude of the Hindus of that belt who were ready to abolish the Muslims with their poison of hatred. David mentions that the policeman who emerges from the crowd let his car pass from the crowd only after confirming them as Hindus due to the photographer who introduces themselves as Hindus to the press. The policeman waves to the mob 'let them pass brothers, they are one of us' (40). After getting rid of the first mob, the second mob appears before them. This one was much larger and better armed but was disorganized. No policeman was there but every single rioter was the leader here. They were having axes, sickles, metal pipes, and even a small plough. When Bharat goes down to speak to the mob using 'Jai Shree Ram' (42), some men surround the car and start looking into the car to trace out the identity of the driver and David. One of them says to the driver that he must be a Muslim. But the driver maintains his equanimity and says, "Are baba, I am a total Hindu. Murarai Sharma my name is. Here look at my driving license" (42). Bharat

immediately supports him in his identity saying that the driver is just like him, and they all are from the press compiling a report of what the Muslims did in Godhra. More men peep through the half-shut window of the car and someone amongst them shouts that “Because we can always pull your pants down and check” (43).

At this the novelist shares his state of mind, “Between the mob and three men in the car, I was the only one with the circumcised penis. Had they pulled my pants down, they would have found my circumcised penis. I would not have been able to explain to them that I was a Jew, and although I had something in common with Muslims, I was definitely not a Muslim” (43). In such an atmosphere of communal frenzy, David’s presence is viewed with suspense either by the mob in the darkness of night when he was holding a torch (91) or while being abused ‘*Hai Madarchod!*’ (139) by the policeman.

Having witnessed the mobs and their revengeful attitudes the novelist’s mother develops an intense sense of fear and insecurity being a Jew struck somewhere in between two confronting major religions, i.e., Hindu and Islam in India. On phone, his mother says to David that they need to get out of Guptanagar. While describing the scene outside she says, “Robin it’s too scary. I can see yellow flames from between the trees. There is black smoke everywhere. Everyone seems to have a sword here. They are running all over the place” (47). Having experienced life under curfews, she says to David that she does not want to let her grandchildren grow in such an atmosphere and learn the meaning of the word “curfew” (79). After Geetaben’s cruel murder in Guptanagar, David’s mother realizes that she should not have come back from Israel. She changes her mind to leave the place and decides to sell her house in Guptanagar for the sake of peace and harmony and shifts to a new house in a new and desirably safer place.

Further, the novelist showcases that the smooth survival of Jews becomes a challenge during riots and curfews in India. Curfews provide the people with minimalistic choices whereas rioters from both communities look at the identity of people from religious perspectives. Robin David gives such an example:

Before leaving the house, mother looked into the mirror and carefully placed a large, red sticker *bindi* in the middle of her forehead. She loved to anoint her forehead with large, red dots, even wearing them to the synagogue at times to shock the Jews. She calls it her third eye and sincerely believes that without it she becomes weak. But now it had a different function. She was going to a Hindu area and the *bindi* would be her armour, her shield. 76

The understanding of present socio-cultural circumstances compels a Jew to come up with ways for survival. If she does not wear a *bindi* on her forehead like Hindu women she

would have been mistaken for a Muslim because of her white *kurta* [shirt] and white hair. Once she had crossed the Hindu settlements and was about to enter the Muslim area, she used to remove her *bindi* to give an impression of a non-Hindu.

The novelist also acquaints the readers with how people from minority religions like Parsi survive through the character of Sam. Sam has been portrayed as a Parsi, but nothing has been shown stereotypically Parsi about him obviously because of the society where he lives in. So, he becomes a Muslim among Muslims and a Hindu among Hindus. He takes complete advantage of such identity, attends the funerals of both communities sharing their grief (117).

The question of Jewish identity haunts the novelist and his mother throughout the novel consistently. After the decision of selling the old house, as they start searching for the new one wherever they visit some property it becomes tough to explain their identity. At the first property, the owner considers them Christians and asks whether they are Roman Catholic or Protestants and as David replies that they are Jews, he asks, “‘You are what?’ ‘Jews’, mother said. ‘You know... Yahudis. We are different’” (150). Another experience of this category the novelist shares about Ramesh, the Barber who asks David while having a conversation ‘you are Christian, right?’ (176). David says that they know one another for a long time, why he has asked this question after so many years? Ramesh replies ‘No I was just wondering... About your caste and all that...’ (177). David attempts to clarify his doubt that he has no caste. He has a religion just. He is Jewish by faith and Jews do not have any castes. He translates the word as Yahudi for more comprehension. He further adds that Jews are different from Christians and Muslims.

The most dominating aspect of the novel is the depiction of the psychological insecurity, fear, and horror that terrorizes human beings and turns them restless irrespective of religion. After having witnessed numerous mobs, various sights and sounds of the riots overpower the novelist’s mind and heart. After such experiences, he gets up in the morning with a dull headache, and dry throat, having woken up thrice during the night feeling that the Hindu rioters were trying to pin him down by pushing at his chest, grabbing his balls, and inspecting his penis (115). All communal events and rioters' assertions leave indelible impressions on the mind of the novelist and move to his unconscious mind. In other words, keep haunting the victims all the time.

The novelist comes up with a clear stand that things or matters cannot be generalized into black and white rather one must look into them objectively. It is not right to make biased observations, rather impartiality must not be forgotten. David addresses the following lines to his Hindi fanatic friend:

You seem to believe that all Muslims are violent, sub-human animals, who, as you say, deserve to die. But is there a difference between them and you? Haven't you displayed the capacity for equal if not more violence? I fear that you have become as sub-human and violent as you claim the Muslims to be. You have become what you hate, so who are you killing and defeating in these bloody street fights? Isn't it yourself? (119)

Through this rhetorical question, the novelist puts more emphasis on the fact that there has remained no difference between Muslims and Hindus, and both have become inhuman and violent which is disastrous for peace, love, and harmony in society.

### **To Conclude**

To conclude, with the vivid and minute descriptions of killings, stabbings, burning and destruction by Hindus of Muslims and vice versa based on religion, the novelist depicts the inhuman, self-centred, and irrational mindset of the mobs who can be easily led by diplomatic leaders for the sake of self-interests which the novelist is highly satirical of. The novelist presents a vice of Indian society that he wants to reform. He seems to revive the Gandhian principle of non-violence, love, and peace for the harmonious co-existence of varied communities in India. However, the plights of minority communities like Jews and Parsis have well been expressed like how they feel unsafe and homeless even desiring migration under such circumstances. Moreover, the novelist has emphasized the formation of the value of truthfulness and justice like criminals are criminals who do not belong to a particular religion, caste, gender, or race. They can be born from any religion. Punishing the whole community for the deeds of one criminal is unjust.

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