

DIVERSITY OF CHARACTERS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHER COMMUNITY IN M. J. AKBAR'S *BLOOD BROTHERS*

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Abstract

India is a land of unity in diversity. Since time immemorial people of different communities live together harmoniously. This diversity and co-existence of people is a great asset to our nation. However, sometimes unequal treatment and appeasement politics breaks this harmonious relation by some greedy people for their vested interest. This sows the seeds of hatred; and may result into conflict between people. In this, religion plays an instrumental role and people misuse it as a political tool to gain power, wealth etc. This communal politics is a great hurdle to the secular democracy of our nation. We must confront and counter it through secularism, wherein there is an equal treatment to all the citizens, irrespective of their religion and religious difference.

This paper deals with the diversified characters of the two communities i.e. the Hindu and the Muslim and their treatment to other community in the novel *Blood Brothers* (2006). And how they view one another: on the one hand with hatred, suspicion and on the other hand harmonious as well. Moreover, the role of true religion in people's life is also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Communalism, Secularism, Fundamentalism, Religion, Hindu, Muslim.

Blood Brothers (2006) is a nostalgic account of a century of Indian History which spans from 1870 to 1960s, as seen through the eyes of a Muslim family. It is a story of three generations of a Muslim family – based on the writer's own grandfather (Sheikh Rahmatullah), his father's (Sheikh Akbar Ali) and himself (Mobashar). And how they deal with the fluctuating contours of Hindu-Muslim relations in a small sleepy town named Telinipara, which is some thirty miles north from Calcutta (now Kolkata). The city once took pride in its cordial Hindu-Muslim relations. Such is the love for humanity that Wali Muhammad, a tea-stall owner and his wife Diljan Bibi, adopt a Hindu refugee boy, called Prayaag. The boy is so overwhelmed with the love of Wali-couple that he becomes Rahmatullah (Rahmat), a Muslim. The narrator/writer recounts the plight of Prayaag who migrates to Telinipara from Bihar in search of livelihood.

Here he assimilates into the inhabitants of every community of the town and becomes the champion of secular values.

Here I shall discuss different characters and their treatment to the other community.

The novelist has portrayed basically two types of characters, on the one hand religious fundamentalists and on the other hand the characters who always favour secular values. Govardhan Ahir (a cowherd) and Ram Chatterjee (an M LA of Chadernagore constituency) are presented as hard core Hindu fundamentalists. They treat Muslims as their opponent. Here, it is required to discuss what is fundamentalism. Vasanthi Raman has rightly stated that: “Fundamentalism is basically a political phenomenon which uses religion as a tool to either gain power or consolidate power and social domination” (27). On the pretext that our religion is in danger, the religious fundamentalists always try to foment people on trivial issues; and they mostly politicize the religion. In fact such kind of fundamentalism, practiced by any of the religious community, is an utter threat to the secular structure of the Indian democracy. The secular mode of religion practised by any state is always at crossroads with vicious distortion of religion practised by the fundamentalists. This is not the real picture of any society/country because only some people in any religion can be fundamentalists. But we should not question over the nationalism of everyone in general. Such type of misconception creates a chasm among people; which can be resulted into conflict. As in the novel, aforesaid two characters have hatred for Islam and its followers. Hence Govardhan always suspects Muslims’ so-called loyalty towards India and he annoys: “I could not understand what Muslims wanted. I wanted freedom for my India. They wanted freedom for their Caliph in Turkey....Muslims will always be more loyal to Mecca and Medina than to India,” (119). He, therefore, calls Muslims as outsiders because of their traditions, those are taken from outside (particularly Arab countries) and their support for foreign Muslim rulers in medieval and modern period of India. He does not regard Islam as a religion and considers its rituals as mere masquerade. Further, he questions over Muslims’ religiosity:

They don’t go to a mosque to pray. They go for military training. Have you seen how they pray? They stand in straight lines, like soldiers. They don’t allow any gaps. They bend and kneel and touch the floor with their heads; these are all military exercises. Obedience is compulsory. Each year for one month they fast without drinking even a drop of water from sunrise to sunset. Why? To learn military discipline – because the Quran orders them to fight and kill! (133)

Generally as Muslims call their faith as a religion of peace but Govardhan takes different stand and presents two different faces of Islam. As it is a peaceful religion only in theory while in practice, most of its followers are peace-breakers and aggressive towards the other religions – and their followers. Muslims are peaceful only when they are powerless. Further, he dictates that in Mecca, where Muslims were not in power, their Prophet was more generous and cooperative towards local masses and their authority. Here the message of Prophet for non-believers of Islam was: “things like your religion for you and mine for me” (133). Whereas in Medina, when they snapped the power the tone of His message turned despotic for the masses. “His Allah suddenly began to send verses saying that all non-Muslims should be slaughtered in a jihad” (133). He also criticizes that history of the Muslim rulers in India is full of bloodshed. Though they were a few in numbers yet they slaughtered plenty of Hindus. Though, on the pretext of their safety and

for Muharram procession, they take military training throughout their life. However, in reality they utilize this training to attack on the *kafirs* (infidels) – non-believers of Islam. Further, he bursts out:

Muslims are trained to kill from the age of seven, when a boy is sent to say his namaaj in a mosque. Didn't you see how they were brandishing swords and spears at the Muharram procession? Islam is like an army, with Allah as its commander-in-chief and but a single aim, to establish its empire all over the world. Every mosque is a camp of this army, where men are trained for jihad. (134)

The novelist has emphasized the view that during riots people take their personal revenge with the followers of rival community. Further they also connect it with the honour of their faith, which is neither logical nor ethical. We must think logically and have humanistic approach that personal revenge should never become the community revenge. We can sit together to sort out our personal differences rather than connect it with the respect of that community. We should not incite people to join hands to fight for the sake of community. As in the novel, Ram Chatterjee has personal grudge against Rahmat. In conversation with Pulluck Sanyal, manager of Satyajit Banerji Estates, Ram repeats his pledge to send all the Muslims to Pakistan because they were demanding it for such a long time. "What's our duty? The Muslims wanted Pakistan. It is our duty to send all traitors to Pakistan. Is it, or is it not?" (218). This communal politics is mostly played by our politicians to gain name and fame. Laymen become an instrument in the hands of these politicians. As in the novel Pulluck becomes instrument in the hands of Ram Chatterji. He suspects the role of the Muslim freedom fighters in the freedom movement that they were committed to work only for their faith not for freedom of the country. He takes a pledge along with Pulluck: "What is your duty? Your duty is to rid our holy land of Pakistanis!" (219) He is of the opinion that only two places are left for Indian Muslims which are: "Either Pakistan or *Kabristan*!" (219). Here we need to understand this communal politics through communalism.

Communalism is applied to organized community movements based on the proclaimed interests of a religious community, usually in response to a real or imagined threat from other religious communities. A noted historian Bipan Chandra has defined it thus: "Communalism is basically an ideology. By ideology, I mean a belief system or inter-related assumptions through which polity or society is viewed. Communalism is, in other words, a way of looking at politics and society, and politics organized around it" (10). We must differentiate here two terms i.e. Fundamentalism and communalism. Both the terms attack the concept of separation of religion from politics and state. The communalists can favour the reform of inherited religious and social structure but fundamentalists seriously urge the actual revival of the pristine past and its religious, social, cultural, legal and political practices. Fundamentalists use religious differences as the basis of their politics and exploit religion for their political ends. They try to attract the masses by exciting their deep religious feelings by arousing the fear that their religion is in danger. They often mobilize uneducated youths towards their political ends and recruit and indoctrinate unemployed youths to fulfill their purposes. They use religion as an emotionalizing and inflammable factor.

The novelist has presented the view that such vitiated propaganda of religious communalism creates an unbridgeable gap between the two communities. Therefore communal riots start against the Hindus in Dhaka which enrages the people in India. Every action has an

equal and opposite reaction so in the same way Hindus take revenge on Muslims in Park Circus, Beniapukur, Beliaghata and Toltola areas. The Hindu landlords hire thugs to set fire Muslims' properties. Consequently the Muslim families have to escape from Beliaghata and take shelter with their friends and relatives in the safe places. Some Muslims fundamentalists like Zahid Qureshi enrage over the atrocities of the Muslims and he vows to take revenge. Further, he warns the Hindus for their butchery against the followers of Islam: "If these Hindus think that they can throw out Muslims just because they have power...then this knife of mine also has power" (285).

The writer has emphatically presented his strong view of harmonious relations between the two communities. As in the starting of the novel, the inhabitants of the town Telinipara, whether they are Hindus or Muslims, live cordially, harmoniously and there is no sense of hatred for each other. People of the town put aside their religious differences on each-other's festivals and they heartily celebrate them. Novel presents an observation of strong secular values through Muharram procession. As Akbar says:

The procession started with mock combat between my grandfather and Girija Maharaj, who used wooden staves instead of swords, and stopped every two hundred yards or so for set piece displays by experts, young and middle-aged men who had mastered the traditional martial arts of north India. (127)

The Muslims equally take part in the Hindu festivals. In spite of violence across the country, the family members of Rahmat participate in the Holi Festival. The narrator utters:

On the morning of Holi, known as *Id-e-Gulabi*, or the Id of colours, at our home, T P Singh would appear at our door, accompanied by a small group of revelers, call out for Abbaji and fill my father's dark, thick hair with the red powder called *abir*. (241)

Further, through another example, we can understand deep bonding of relationship between two communities. When the tension is emerged and further escalates due to the partition (that is not directly discussed in the novel) of the country and the religious fundamentalists incite the followers of respective community, the masses of Telinipara forget their religious differences and work together to subside the tension and save the lives of people from rioters. T P Singh, Girija Maharaj, Benoy Choudhary (friend of Akbar Ali) and Thakur Bhagwan Singh (a distant relative of Prayaag from Bihar) assist Rahmat's family to pack up their belongings and leave for Calcutta. Moreover, in behalf of Akbar's family, Benoy Chowdhary is ready to face first attack and later he announces that "Anyone who comes for Akbar will have to deal with me first!", therefore he urges:

Go away, go away, go away, Akbar, go away for my sake, for the sake of my children, for the sake of your children! T P's lathis will not stop Ram Chatterjee. He has guns. (223)

Moreover, T P Singh offers and later on provides shelter to Akbar's two sisters in his own house. Singh assures Akbar that as no harm would come as long as he is alive. This is true reflection of human values. Further, he solaces him that as the storm of hatred subsides, he might return to his home. "Akbar this is the madness of a moment...this will always be your home. You can't live in Calcutta or – or, anywhere else" (225).

The novel strongly condemns the parochial attitude that 'Muslims are outsiders and they are not the true inhabitants of secular India.' Kamala, grandson of Girija Maharaj, believes that

Hindus and Muslims who have equal right to Indian soil therefore people of majority community should not treat Muslims as their step-brothers but they should treat equally to all. ‘Indian Muslims are part and parcel of Indian civilization and culture,’ he utters: “What is there to argue about? Indian Muslims marry among us, so they are one of us...” (261). This is true reflection of Gandhian philosophy of everyone has equal rights and there should be equal treatment to all the inhabitants (without considering their caste, creed, colour, language or religion) of this nation. Novel reflects true picture of Indian secularism. In which, there is no state religion and the state shall treat all the religions equally. State should be impartial towards all the religions and their followers. Further, there is no state religion. Bipan Chandra also observes secularism in a same way: “The state must be neutral towards all religious faiths or, as religious persons put it, the state must show equal regard for all faiths including atheism; the state must not discriminate in favour of or against any citizen on grounds of his or her religion; and communalism of every variety must be clearly and firmly opposed” (70). The novel strongly supports in equal treatment to all the citizens. There should neither be partiality nor appeasement to any of the citizens. State should provide equal opportunity to all the citizens.

Novel, on the one hand, criticizes Hindu fundamentalists and, on the other hand, it also flays Mullahs, who fan trivial issues to create hype and disturb the harmony of society/country and create a chasm among the people. In the novel, Syed Ashfaque Alam, the poet and teacher at madarasa of Hughly, criticises fanatical Muslim leaders, who don’t stand for harmony of the society but always incite people on trivial matters. But they are a few in numbers. We should isolate them for the betterment of society as well humanity. They do not stand for the whole society. They thrive by spreading venom against the other community. The parochial views of selected Maulvis create the tension in minds of the masses and incite them for violence. They use religion as a tool to garner support. As a true secularist like Gandhi, Ashfaque ridicules them in a poetic way:

I live with them. Their friendship is as dangerous as their enmity...
 Mussulman ko luft-o-aish se jeene nahi dete
 Khuda deta hai khana, sheikhji peene nahin dete.
 (They never let Muslims live in joy and comfort
 Allah gives us food, the Mullah denies us drink). (106)

Every religion of the world emphasizes peaceful coexistence and tolerance. However, a communalist misuses religion to justify communal conflict. Religion never comes in the path of social and political harmony whereas communalism clashes with any humanitarian value. Religion and religious difference never become a cause conflict among the people. “In fact religion *per se* is neither fanatical nor liberal. It is what its follower makes it out to be” (Engineer, “Religious” 701). There are multitude underlying factors which cause the conflict including deprivation of basic human needs, competition for scarce resources including territory, extreme level of insecurity and fear, historical grievance, a psychology of victimisation, and incessant cycle of asymmetric warfare which has caused untold trauma, loss of life and collateral damage. The novel has presented a true religion and suggests that a person should follow true religious beliefs of his faith, against religious fundamentalism and communal hatred among the characters. The essence of religion and its application for masses is only to regulate life in systematic way. Religion should be used for the betterment of humanity but not to spread the disharmony and hatred among people. Religious tenets teach people to live in mutual

cooperation and harmony and we should not quarrel on the trivial matters. One person should not be rigid on particular issue that is against the religious dogmas or offering of rival community. Praising Islam for assimilating a person who willingly embraces it, the narrator's father Akbar observes a true religion.

The virtue of religion...is surely not what it gives to its believers, but what it offers to others. My father was an orphan, who come to Islam out of a mother's love, and became a believer when he learnt what was written in the Quran. 'He who gives to an orphan lends to God,' says the Quran. That is wisdom of for all mankind. (331)

The novelist has emphasized that true religion never teaches hatred to the masses. People should stand for composite culture, as the Sufi and Bhakti Saints had done in the medieval period of Indian history. The Sufi and the Bhakti saints were much more tolerant and they evolved new blend of the Hindu and the Muslim identity, hence the two entirely different but not hostile identities merged into one another and a new one came into being. "Most of the bhakti saints tried to harmonise the orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements of the great and little traditions of Hinduism and Islam. These saints preached the philosophy of life which was close to the social ethics and philosophical problems of the poor and artisans that are common to both the Hindus and the Muslims" (Burman 1211). Both the movements had helped to bring about a fusion of both the cultures. Sufism became a bridge between the two religions to subside the tension. Burha Deewana, a mendicant and true follower of Sufi saint Khawaja Muinuddin Chisti who preaches tolerance for other religions and exposes the hypocrisy of religious people, who befool masses in the name of religion. He suggests that mere talk of peace does not bring peace. It should be in one's action. He warns against such type of the devilish works, which creates tension among masses and pollutes their mind and even body. Therefore men should purify their mind. He utters that

There is no evil more malignant than a poisoned heart...God does not divide men. Men divide God. God is one: alone, eternal, indivisible. The Jews call Allah Elohim, the Hindus know Him as Brahma. Let men kill each other over wealth, women, property, prejudice and power, but not over God. (62)

In a nutshell, novel is all about Communalism is inimical to the whole society and country at large and favours secular values of the nation. People should not use religion as a tool to garner political support for their own benefits. But religion tells us systematic way of living life. It teach us unity but not conflict. What needs to be realized is that violence can never be an answer to the violence because **violence begets violence** and this series of violence do not easily end. Moreover, a true religion and religious doctrines never comes in between our better relationship. It preaches us non-violence, peace, cooperation and humanity but not hatred, cruelty and violence. We should think that which path is right. Humanity never favours hatred and violence. India is a secular country. We should understand that Hindus and Muslims, who are citizens of this great nation, have equal right to Indian soil. People should respect each other's religious believes. We should stop step brotherly treatment to one another. All the inhabitants of the country are equal.

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