



CONCEPTION OF ENVIABLE SPACE: IMTIAZ DHARKER AND SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI'S CONCEPT OF CULTURAL HARMONY

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ABSTRACT

Imtiaz Dharker and Shadab Zeest Hashmi are Pakistani based diasporic poets. Imtiaz Dharker's *The Terrorist at my table* and Shadab's *Baker of Tarifa*, narrate their perception of the culture harmony and ethnicity that must have existed in A-Andalus. Both their verse collections are based on the history of Al Andalus (Muslim Spain) of the Middle ages, celebrated for forbearance between Muslims, Jews and Christians. Dharker envisages 'feminist Utopia' to illustrate Al-Andalus society under the rule of the Moors of Spain. She declares it her 'Utopian home', a perfect place. She also envisages the liberty and equal status enjoyed by women in that society. She hopes such culture to prevail in the contemporary world and emphatically believes that then only the existence of humanity continues. Shadab has revived the easy and serene facets of the verve of the Al-Andalus civilization from 755 to 1492 A.D. and also the culture of tolerance and peace it promoted.

Dharker and Shadab acknowledge that in the contemporary world, it is nearly impossible to imagine the great minds of Muslim rulers who made Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths live side-by-side, nurturing one another, introducing paper-making and Hindi-Arabic numerals, cotton, algebra and more to Europe. They consider the 'Utopian land' its cultural synchronization and its religious lenience as a root for appeasement to bring together the struggling religions and communities to live in peace. They know that it is not doable. Still Al-Andalus stands for a mitigated hope, and that hope is precisely the one that lives today: the uncertain hope--still worth fighting for, no matter how unsure the people are--that democracy, pluralism, and multiculturalism are possible against the force of barbarism'. Both Dharker and Shadab wish to show the true spirit of Islam, which is now synonymous with angry mobs and suicidal bombers. Both these poets are hopeful of a utopian world like Al-Andalus to subsist in the present world, where religious tolerance and liberty of women sway. They believe that sort of harmony is the remedy to religious fundamentalism and terrorism in the world.

Keywords: *Al-Andalus, Cultural Harmony, Liberation of Women, Endurance of Human Race Etc.*



Desirable space or Utopian world means an ideal state of the world or an idea of a perfect world or perfect space. According to Lyman Tower Sargent "there are socialist, capitalist, monarchical, democratic, anarchist, ecological, feminist, patriarchal, egalitarian, hierarchical, racist, left-wing, right-wing, reformist, free love, nuclear family, extended family, gay, lesbian, and many more utopias".¹ The idea of a desirable space differs according to the notion of the Self. In many cultures, societies, and religions, there is some myth or memory of a distant past when humankind lived in a primitive and simple state, but at the same time one of perfect happiness and fulfilment. These mythical or devout archetypes are inscribed in many cultures, and resurge with special vitality when people are in difficult and critical times. "However, in utopias, the projection of the myth does not take place towards the remote past, but either towards the future or towards distant and fictional places, imagining that at some time in the future, at some point in space, or beyond death, there must exist the possibility of living happily"² (Wikipedia).

This myth of 'desirable space' is found in Al-Andalus of Spain by many poets and writers. In today's troubled, globalized world, al-Andalus has assumed a different significance, not in terms of military might or political power, but of "the comingling of religious cultures (Christian, Jewish, Islamic and Olympian) and all that was lost when the religions pulled violently apart from one another"³ The Jews of Arab lands, particularly those in Muslim Spain, were said to have lived in a "Golden Age," even an "interfaith utopia." (Mark R. Cohen of Princeton University,). Islamic Spain was a multi-cultural mix of Muslims, Christians and Jews. It brought a degree of civilisation to Europe that matched the heights of the Roman Empire and the Italian Renaissance.

Pakistani based women poets Imtiaz Dharker and Shadab Zeest Hashmi wish to create a desirable space in the present day world where people live under the threat of religious fundamentalism and terrorist activities. Dharker discusses the grief, loss and communal segregation of Muslim community in India and also in the world. She exemplifies the suffering of women due to culture

and politics of religion and the suffering of men because of racism and religion. She opines that the discrimination towards the community led to terrorist activities in Indian subcontinent and also the world, eventually. She expresses her hope of religious tolerance and multiculturalism. She gives the historical evidence of Al-Andalus, which she calls a utopian home and imagines about the freedom and equal status enjoyed by women in that society. She hopes for that sort of society to prevail in the contemporary societies of the world and emphatically believes that then only the existence of humanity continues. Shadab Z.Hashmi expresses similar ideas.

Imtiaz Dharker's *The Terrorist at my table* and Shadab's *Baker of Tarifa*, narrate their perception of the culture harmony and ethnicity that must have existed in Al-Andalus. Both their verse collections are based on the history of Al Andalus (Muslim Spain) of the Middle Ages, celebrated for forbearance between Muslims, Jews and Christians. Dharker envisages 'feminist Utopia' to illustrate Al-Andalus society under the rule of the Moors of Spain. Shadab has revived the easy and serene facets of the verve of the Al-Andalus civilization from 755 to 1492 A.D. and also the culture of tolerance and peace it promoted. Currently, discussions on al-Andalus comprise numerous allusions to the high level of liberty, culture and independence enjoyed by the women of Andalus, compared to the continuing rhetoric of orthodox Muslims and also western notions of "oppressed Muslim women". (Muneeza Shamsie: 2016) Kamilla Shamsie in the essay "Librarians, Rebels, Property Owners, Slaves: Women in al-Andalus" explores a literary culture where women could participate as poets and literary figures and were often clearly employed as scribes. She gives the example of two well-known writers: "Lubna of Córdoba, who was possibly a slave or a freed slave; and Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, daughter of an erstwhile Umayyad caliph, who was a poet.

Imtiaz Dharker projects this higher realm of freedom for women in her verse. She employs feminist utopia in the sub section "Remember Andalus (Osama Bin Laden), of the poetic collection *The terrorist at my table*. She illustrates the liberty the women enjoyed in Al-Andalus society under the



rule of the Moors of Spain. In an interview Dharker says, 'I wanted to take this territory back for poets, this model of Paradise that Bin Laden claimed for Muslim supremacy'.I wanted to take the territory back for the women, who weren't aiming for immortality'.⁴ Dharker's perception of Feminist utopian writing in this section represents 'all-female space'. She uses 'pomegranate' symbol for the 'birth of religious tolerance' in most of the poems in this collection. The poems "Alif, Anar", and "How to cut a pomegranate" narrate her wish to restart the creation with pomegranate seeds and establish a utopian home like Al-Andalus. Poems like "Women bathing", "What the women said", and "The women" are examples of feminist Utopia. In "Women bathing" Dharker dramatizes the scenes where she brings those historical women to life and makes them live and experience the modern times. She describes:

Bodies lush, generously-hipped.
Bodies like pomegranates,
bursting with promises. (p.69)

Dharker compares bodies to pomegranates to symbolise 'abundance'. The poet talks both as a woman and an observer and voices out the coveted freedom of the women 'let the veils fall, one by one'. In "The women", the poet uses pomegranate symbol for 'rebirth' or 'revivification' of women from seeds. The feminist utopian Writer Sally Miller Gearhart calls this sort of writing political: "it contrasts the present world with an idealized society, criticizes contemporary values and conditions, sees men or masculine systems as the major cause of social and political problems (e.g. war), and presents women as equal to men, having ownership over their reproductive functions."⁵ (Utopian and dystopian fiction: Wikipedia)

She writes:

I scatter pomegranate seeds,
and from each seed springs a woman.
.....
Just one more seed,
flung a little further than the rest (P. 71)

In these lines Dharker narrates a vision of female utopia with asexual reproduction like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her *Her land*. She wishes to establish 'all-female community living in peace, with loving submission' (Noah Berlatsky

:2013). Dharker wishes to include herself in that women's world and says, "And I am on my way to meet them". She subverts the idea of "Woman seduced by man" in "Aixa at the Alhambra":

It wasn't the man. It was the
garden
that seduced me. The breeze
glanced off the white mountains
and blew secret messages to me.
(P. 75)

She is lured by the beauty of the gardens of Alhambra. Now all that magnificence of the past is gone. Like Rushdie, Dharker thinks that all culture is palimpsestic in nature and asserts:

All gone from me
poems, words, the beauty of a turn of
Phrase.....
All blown away,
.....
Not a whisper now. (P. 80)

So she sighs over the disappearance of all splendor of the city, its religious tolerance and also over the catastrophic effects of Islamic fanaticism throughout the world. She mentions the name of Osama bin Laden in the title to represent his views on Andalus. "In a videotape broadcast on American TV after 9-11, Osama bin Laden once referred to the tragedy of Andalusia, considered the greatest disaster in Muslim history before the re-birth of Israel."⁶

Shadab Zeest Hashmi's notions of al-Andalus were fairly enthused by Iqbal's Urdu poem "Masjid e Qurtaba" and led to her first visit to Andalus. She mentions all her ideas about it in her poetry collection *The Baker of Tarifa*. "It is a contemplation of that brilliant culture, its demise as well as its enduring legacies. In this issue her creative memoir "Bread and the Secret/Musk of Books" describes her travels to Spain, where landscape, image, imagination and historical memory merge into her sense of self and her poetry." (Shamsie M.) Shadab Zeest Hashmi exemplifies her wish of 'Utopian society' in this collection. *Schezee Zaidi comments*, 'There has been a resurgence of interest in Islamic civilization over a decade now and the *Baker of Tarifa*, existing at the intersection of dream and would-be reality, captures some of that wonderful



era that has been seen as a beacon for centuries of how mankind of differing religions may live in peace and harmony'.⁷

Shadab imagines a small coastal town during the time of the *convivencia* (coexistence) in Al-Andalus and throws a light on the ideal world survived there in the poem "Montage". She examines the roots of the word 'Andalusia' She writes:

*Adafina is a cooking pot
used by Jews. It is buried
in embers on Friday night.
The meal is ready
the next day.*

("Living and Re-Living Al Andalus": Book Review *Baker of Tarifa*, Sam Hamil)

So the Jewish word 'Andalusia' was the name of the place where not only Jews but also Muslims and Christians lived in harmony without cultural bias. The poet focuses on the authenticity of their religions in the following lines:

*The highest commandment
For Jews, Muslims and Christians:
Love God with all your heart, soul
And mind. (Ibid)*

This is the best instance of both cultural and religious harmony that existed in the opinion of the poet. So Shadab declares "Arabic is a Semitic language", which is relating to, a subfamily of the Afro-Asiatic language family that includes Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Amharic. 'She weaves her poems after careful thought, and her source of inspiration is the common source of religious and cultural lore of Islam, Christianity and Judaism' (The Dawn, Jan 15, 2011).⁸

Shadab writes in her blog: 'Bread became a central metaphor for the book it became the link between generations, between creeds and between the world of women and men. The history of Andalus spanning 800 years that I had wanted to explore in poems finally came together for me as a journey from the time of communal ovens in which Andalus Muslims, Jews and Christians happily baked their bread to the demise of this civilization, marked by book-burning pyres and ethnic cleansing by burning at the stake'.⁹ She says: *Sing/ what your mother sang/ while you fry the bread*'. She believes that

bread and singing are timeless; both of them bind generations to share past and future.

Andalusia is praiseworthy for its multicultural tolerance, and also for its artistic creation, and scientific advancements.. Two of the most well known scholars to the Western public are - Avicenna (Ibn Sina), most known for his Canon of Medicine (1025), a standard textbook in Europe up until 1650 and still taught in today's universities as part of the history of medicine. Averroes (Ibn Rushd), most renowned among scholars as "The Commentator," for he authored the most sustained and perhaps most important commentaries on the works of Aristotle and Plato, in addition to other works in Islamic jurisprudence, astronomy, geography, logic, psychology, and politics. The achievements of the scholars and those of many others in a variety of fields (astrology, physics and optics, botany, medicine, mathematics, architecture, literature, and music) contributed to an extraordinary cultural renaissance in Muslim Spain, and this at a time when the rest of Europe was still wallowing in the dark ages. This is mentioned in the poem "The Fire Did Not Cool for the People of Abraham". Shadab recollects the great personalities of Moorish Spain like Maimonides (a preeminent medieval Spanish, Sephardic Jewish philosopher, and astronomer), Averroes (a medieval Andalusian Muslim polymath.), and Albucasis (an Arab Muslim physician and surgeon), in a short lyric poem:

*.....and obsidian as books
containing the grain
of Maimonides Averros
Albucasis.*

("Living and Re-Living Al Andalus": Book Review *Baker of Tarifa*, Sam Hamil)

She celebrates the blossoming of intellectualism and liberalism of the Arab Empire in Spain. Though the monarchy of the Moors in Al-Andalus (*land of the vandals*) was a time of artistic, educational, and cultural enlightenment, it came to a tragic end. She reminds the readers what was coming to an end, when Spain began persecuting the innocent and exiling its Arab community. She presents an elemental poetry with exact imagery: "Groves cut down / to feed a furnace / with unfaithful / innocents." 'There are several parallels



to be drawn, whether deliberate or accidental on the part of the poet, to our own times' (Ilona Yusuf 9 February 2012).¹⁰

In "THE STONEMASON'S SON CONTEMPLATES DEATH" while throwing a light on the decline in religious harmony; she expresses a hope of lasting element of various religions i.e. humanity. She prays:

May the water refresh your soul
The clanging of keys became loud
A soldier stood behind me pissing in the well
Someone sang in the distance
Couldn't tell if she was a Jew
Christian or Muslim
It was a devotional song.

(Sam Hamill)

Thus 'Al-Andalus stands for a mitigated hope. Shadab supports the views on Al-Andalus and its religious harmony, of her contemporary writers/poets like Salman Rushdie and Imtiaz Dharker.

Both Shadab and Dharker acknowledge that in the contemporary world, it is nearly impossible to imagine the great minds of Muslim rulers who made Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths live side-by-side, nurturing one another, introducing paper-making and Hindi-Arabic numerals, cotton, algebra and more to Europe. They consider the 'Utopian land' and its religious tolerance as a root for reconciliation to bring together the struggling religions and communities to live in peace. They know that it is not practicable. Still Al-Andalus stands for a mitigated hope, and that hope is precisely the one that lives today: the uncertain hope--still worth fighting for, no matter how unsure the people are--that democracy, pluralism, and multiculturalism are possible against the force of barbarism'(Gil Anidjar).¹³ Both the poets of Pakistani origin are hopeful about a utopian world, where cultural harmony, religious tolerance and liberty of women reign.

By understanding the background and social standing of each individual religious and ethnic group, as well as their individual cultural backgrounds within Al-Andalus, it is possible to understand how the culture of Al-Andalus formed into, not a completely unified new culture, but rather a composite hybrid culture. These cultural aspects have

withstood the test of time and prove as the most evident examples of this hybridization that can be seen in the art, architecture, language, and literature of Al-Andalus. In a videotape broadcast on American TV after 9-11, Osama bin Laden once referred to the tragedy of Andalusia, considered the greatest disaster in Muslim history before the re-birth of Israel. The subtitles conveniently forgot to note that Andalusia meant the Iberian Peninsula, and that Muslims want it back.

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