

VARIS ALAVI

Riots and the Artist^{*}

HAVING WITNESSED the Nazi atrocities, Thomas Mann remarked that “In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms.”¹ Actually, Mann was alluding to a fairly complex and obscure feature in the web of causality that lurks behind the tragedy of present-day man. Our age is so deeply immersed in politics that we no longer have any agency in the satisfaction of even our own instincts and spiritual desires, rather it is the political institutions, parties or agendas that preeminently decide their fate. Whether political or something else, at the end of the day an institution remains only an abstraction. Man’s association with an institution or an ideal is not a blood relationship, and neither is it visceral, visible, or physical. Hence, it is a purely nonhuman relationship. It is tragic that Man has offered up his sound and enduring human relationships as a sacrifice at the tenuous and abstract altar of political concepts and ideals. Rather than being a flesh-and-blood entity, a complete being, Man has thus come to be viewed as a political unit, an abstract idea.

Man didn’t kill another man in the carnage at My Lai or Ahmadabad, but a dominant political abstraction certainly did. It killed Man in his fullness, thinking all the while that its victim was none other than a concept—disguised, accidentally, as a man. This is by far the most telling example of the dehumanization of contemporary man: neither the killer nor the one killed possess even a modicum of human greatness. And the process of killing and dying is occurring at such a hideous level that one

^{*}“Fasādāt aur Fankār,” from Vāriś ‘Alavī, *Tisrē Darjē kā Musāfir, Muntakhab Tanqīdī Mazāmin* (Jodhpur: Amit Prakāshan, 1981), 230–52. Annotation and translation of Urdu poetry are by the essay’s translator.

¹In the absence of any reference in the Urdu original it is difficult to locate the source of the quote; however, it appears as an epigraph to W.B. Yeats’s poem “Politics,” which is quoted by Vāriś ‘Alavī on the following pages.

feels neither sorrow nor amazement. When, at My Lai, the skull of a wounded child is blown to bits from a distance scarcely eight feet away, or, at Ahmadabad, an entire family of ten, children included, is burned alive in just one house—exactly what is one supposed to feel? Sadness and stupor, pity and fear—in other words, the feelings that tragedy inspires in us? But what is happening around us is singularly devoid of the barest trace of tragic majesty. Our violence is as meaningless as our agony and pain is senseless. Entirely unproductive! Our violence and our atrocities have risen so far above all ethical consideration of good and evil, and reached such an extreme form, that they appear laughable. One time I went to see a slaughterhouse with a friend. A slew of bulls tied to ropes just stood there chomping on the fodder. The butcher would go over to them and run the sharp edge of his knife across the throats of a few. The bulls just chomped on, still standing, as though nothing at all had happened to them. Then, one by one, they would collapse to the ground with a thud. Seeing this, my friend observed with a laugh, “How funny!” And I too laughed. Another time a student of mine was relating an incident that happened during the communal riots. Mostly what they did was round up a man, douse him with gasoline and set him on fire. Now and then the victim, his body burning away, would suddenly rise to his feet and start running, and then, “It was so funny,” my student said, “the wild goose chase.” This should do for man’s blood relationship. As for pity, here are a few sobering lines from Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*:

My business is too hard, for my business is arousing human sympathy. There are a few things that stir men’s souls, just a few, but the trouble is that after repeated use they lose their effect. Because man has the abominable gift of being able to deaden his feelings as well, so to speak. Suppose, for instance, a man sees another man standing on the corner with a stump for an arm; the first time he may be shocked enough to give him tenpence, but the second time it will only be fivepence, and if he sees him a third time he’ll hand him over to the police without batting an eyelash.

(1998, 95)

I recall something which Mrs. Indira Gandhi had said after touring the devastation at Ahmadabad: “What saddens me the most is that people have not even had shame over the dreadful situation!” But who should feel shame? What did the American press and people say about the My Lai massacre? Just that such things do happen in war. The riots in Ahmadabad elicited the same response from the Indian press and people: Riots and water make their own path! Remorse, shame, sadness, anger are all

human emotions which only living human beings experience, not political abstractions. Having already become a mechanical entity in the technological age, today's living human being has, regrettably, under the tight control of political expedients, turned into a political abstraction as well. Any wonder that emotional springs should dry up in such a man? We see with our own eyes how this cold man, indifferent to all considerations of good and evil, is drifting farther and farther away from his nature and his world and, unaffected by human feelings, is being divested of his instincts. We forget a basic fact, namely, that any situation which has to do with Man is, first and foremost, a human situation, and only subsequently social, political, and moral. This inevitably permits us to ignore the human aspects of the situation and investigate only its social and political aspects. Absent from the writings of politicians and newspaper columnists is precisely this human perspective, as if these people do not have the foggiest idea that riots are primarily a human problem. If it has been made into a major problem, then this is the consequence of exploitation by political rogues and of their insatiable hunger for political power. The entire struggle of the contemporary artist/writer is against this cunning, self-delusional, inhuman, cold, and phony society. In the midst of this commotion he is trying to somehow protect his human qualities and values because he knows that the source of his art is none other than his own human self. If this self becomes twisted or warped, he too will turn into an instrument of this brutal society, producing nothing better than journalistic trash. Instead of succumbing to political ideals, parties, and movements, he tries to formulate his own ideal where he can determine the values of human existence. He wants to preserve the living aspects of his emotional, spiritual, and instinctual life from the influence of the political and social pressures that are determined to destroy them. This is not walking away from life's struggles, rather it is setting those struggles on the right course. There was a time when both our liberal-minded lawyers and politically savvy critics used to laugh at these lines of the poet Ḥāfiẓ:

*rumūz-e maṣlaḥat-e mulk kbusravān dānand
gadāʿ-e gōsha-nashīnī tō Ḥāfiẓā makburōsh*

(1969–70, 218)

Subtleties of the empire's affairs—kings know;
You, Ḥāfiẓ, a beggar who sits alone in a corner,
don't you shout!

However, the contemporary artist/writer fully understands the significance of these lines. If the field of action unfolds into a deathly rampage of power-crazy people, it is entirely preferable that he embrace the values and relationships that are dear to him and seek the peace and quiet of a cloistered life. Never has an artist/writer been able to stop a society on its way to destruction, but he has been able to preserve those ideals, memories, and experiences which would have surely been annihilated had he given up his secluded life to join the mob of crazies. Such a character in the artist/writer is not exclusive to our own time, indeed it has always been the same across the ages. Hence, what we call the history of human culture is defined by the creations of the cloistered artists/writers. These creations enshrine the finest experiences of human existence and—having been expressed through the medium of color, musical harmony and rhythm, word, and dance—they have reached us in the form of a long tradition. Thanks to this tradition, we have managed to preserve some remnant of values in a world filled with violence and superficiality. What are these values? Millenniums of cultural evolution have slapped so many artificial layers upon them that it has become impossible to even find a clue to the fundamentals that define man. If we scrape all the layers off, he is reduced to merely a biological entity, functioning through a conglomeration of basic instincts, which, if nothing else, are at least human. This is precisely what prompted Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī to make the facetious remark that he infinitely preferred looking at pictures of nudes over reading short stories about the intercommunal rioting of 1947. Looking at nudes was, at the very least, a human thing to do. The mind of a person who reads pornographic novels or looks at obscene pictures is, by comparison, healthier and more human than the mind of a person who pores over Savarkar’s² and Golwalkar’s³ books and looks at the pictures in *Mother India*.⁴ That obscene novels and nude pictures excite his sexual instinct can hardly be denied. But, however wrong such arousal might be, the perusal of the writings of a biased and highly communal mind inevi-

²Vinayak Damodar “Veer” Savarkar (1883–1966) was a fierce Indian nationalist who propounded the doctrine of Hindutva and was linked to Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination by Nathuram Godse.

³Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–73), a champion of Hindu militancy and fundamentalism, he was the chief of the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh. He strongly advocated that Indian Muslims should either adopt Hindu culture, civilization and language or live in perpetual subjugation to Hindus.

⁴A Bombay-based magazine devoted to the promotion of communalism.

tably transforms man's humanity into a nauseating abstraction. Today as we witness an upsurge of linguistic and communal prejudice and of Fascist forces gathering ever more power around us, a profound sense of vulnerability settles into our hearts. In this vulnerability we see an unambiguous and painful reflection of the death and destruction of all our cherished dreams. These are not dreams of unrestrained pleasure and limitless happiness, but of simple human relationships that characterize a living society. A heightened form of these relationships is the one between a man and a woman. Born purely from their innate attraction for each other, it obliterates the smallest trace of otherness and promotes, instead, a sense of togetherness, intimacy, awareness, confidence and cooperation between them. Perhaps this is why Yeats perceived sexual love to be the most attractive refuge from the general atmosphere of political anarchy around him:

How can I, that girl standing there,
 My attention fix
 On Roman or on Russian
 Or on Spanish politics,
 Yet here's a travelled man that knows
 What he talks about,
 And there's a politician
 That has both read and thought,
 And maybe what they say is true
 Of war and war's alarms,
 But O that I were young again
 And held her in my arms.

(Yeats 1997, 356)

In other words, whether war, politics, prejudice, or hatred—none stands any comparison to the embrace of a beautiful young woman. The embrace, in its highest form, is emblematic of the human relationships that result from living together, trusting someone, pledging to live and die with that someone. It is these relationships that receive the severest blow in communal rioting, and it is mutual trust that suffers most. After all, it is in the trust of one's neighbors that one feels safe and sleeps peacefully. But, today, numberless people are killed as they sleep:

abhī maiñ apnē ghar mēñ sō rahā thā
abhī maiñ ghar sē be-ghar hō gayā hūñ
abhī lōgōñ sē milkar kbush hūvā thā

abhī lōgōñ sē dartā p̄hir rabā hūñ

(‘Alavī 1995, 327)

Moments ago I was fast asleep in my home;
 Moments ago I was made homeless.
 These are the very people it pleased me to meet;
 These are the very people I now fear.

Can there be an experience more dreadful than that a man should fear the very same people he sees every day, shops for his daily necessities at their stores, hugs or scolds their children? Relationships of blood and bonds with the land are the very marks of human society; their loss renders man a living corpse. It is these characteristics that contemporary man is beginning to lose, slowly but surely. His greatest problem today is none other than human relationships: as a human being, how does he relate to other human beings? what is the nature of his relationship with them? Otherwise we all live under the pretense of human friendship. So, it would seem, this robe has finally been slit open. But exactly what shape is our body and our soul underneath:

utār p̄hēñkūñ badan sē p̄haṭī purānī qamiṣ
badan qamiṣ sē baṛḥkar kaṭā p̄haṭā dēkhūñ

(*ibid.*, 343)

Let me tear off the old tattered shirt from my
 body,
 to see a body more tattered and torn than the
 shirt.

Or how relationships have been severed in an instant:

maṭṭī tō kačči hai lēkin
ṣadyōñ kā rishta pakkā hai
pal b̄har mēñ kyā ṭūṭ gayā hai

(‘Ādil Maṣūri⁵)

Surely the earth is raw, it is weak,
 but the bond is centuries-old—and firm;
 how it has snapped in an instant!

When the only connecting link between two individuals is death and

⁵Reference to published source not available.

murder, man is confronted with such unbounded despair that only death can relieve him of it. And it is the confrontation with death that produces self-awareness in him. The protagonist in many Hemingway stories is freed of all bonds and his true essence becomes revealed to him precisely at the moment he comes face to face with death. Now the decision whether to live or die, or on what conditions, should he decide to live, will have to be made by him and him alone because until he confronts death he doesn't become himself but remains divided.

yabān tō ā'inē hī ā'inē haiñ
mujhē d̤hūnd̤hō kabān par khō gayā maiñ
 ('Alavī 1995, 321)

Mirrors—everywhere here
 Look for me, where am I lost?

It is death that presses the scattered elements of the world into a unified whole. In its presence man is compelled to choose between life or extinction.

maiñ nē bhī apnī maut kō dēkhā qarīb se
aur is kē ba'd jīnē kī ḥasrat na kar sakā
 (*ibid.*, 350)

I, too, witnessed my death from up close
 And then felt no longing to live.

One who cannot entertain a longing for life after coming face to face with his mortality, is truly freed. This freedom is akin to the Sufi's gnosis which they attain only after experiencing the extinction of their individual egos (*fanā*). A world fashioned by political poets, a society founded upon banditry and plunder, exploitation and brutality that shackles everyone, the structure of our values, saturated with toxic hate, contempt, and moral cunning—all these fall off an artist at one fell swoop, transforming him into a caring and compassionate human being who cares for others and is able to feel their vulnerability. In place of hate, contempt, and anger, an anguish is born in him that resonates with limitless human sympathy.

aurōñ kē g̤har jalā kē qayāmat na kar sakā
g̤har jāl gayā magar maiñ shikāyat na kar sakā
 (*ibid.*)

By burning down others' homes he couldn't

bring down the heavens—
My house too was reduced to ashes but not even
a complaint escaped my lips.

Those who had come to set fire to the house had not the slightest idea
that

ghar mēñ thā kyā jō mirā gam usē gārat kartā
(Ġālib 1989, 137)

What was there in the house that my pain
would've ruined it.

But, of course, the sense of futility swelled manifold after the rioters had
set the house on fire:

thī tō sabī par āj sē pablē itnī ḥaqīr faqīr na thī
(Ṣiddīqī 1955, 100)

It was there though never before so weak and
insignificant

The pyromaniacs couldn't see what the poet could: both were victims,
both utterly ruined, those who torched the house and he whose house
was torched. Both were facing the fundamental torments of life. The
arsonist too had walked out of his house—no less desolate and dreary—
leaving a slew of unresolved conflicts behind. For the moment, though,
he had turned his back on his frustrations and worries, as he walked out,
matches in hand, to set another house of sorrow on fire. How can one
complain about such a man! or even contemplate revenge at such a level
of depravity! So the artist cannot even put such human feelings as hatred
and revenge to use; instead, he is wracked by a terribly strange feeling of
suffocation:

us nē mujhē tabāh biyā is kē bāvajūd
dō čār dīn bhī us sē main nafrat na kar sakā
(Alavī 1995, 350)

Though he ruined me
I couldn't hate him even for a day or two.

“Couldn't hate”—not because of some moral excellence, but simply
because who was there to hate.

*mujhē diyā na kabhī mērē dushmanōñ kā patā
mujhē havā sē laṛātē rahē jabāñ-vālē*

(Zafar Iqbāl 1962, 78)

The world never gave me a clue to my enemies
and made me fight with the wind all my life long.

The people who've come to kill him are not really his enemy—they're just a collection of unfamiliar, unknown, invisible, and utterly abstract faces. Lifeless political robots. An invisible contagion of disease and epidemic. They can destroy you, but you cannot hate them because they remain invisible. One sees only men of flesh and blood, whom one can trust:

*apnē sē baṛh kē tujh pe mujhē e'timād thā
afsōs tū bhī mērī hifāzāt na kar sakā*

(Alavī 1995, 350)

I trusted you more than I trusted myself
Pity—even you failed to protect me.

One can, of course, feel sorry for such a man, but hate him one cannot. In other words, the artist is facing a situation where a normal human response just won't work. Indeed, the situation is so extraordinary that he is dazed, no longer able to exercise his faculties to determine the nature of his emotional reaction. His internal and spiritual struggle was already too wrenching to begin with, now he must also face a nonhuman struggle provoked by the actions of insane men. How well the spiritual and material anguish comes together, and how the dirge of one's spiritual shattering merges into the elegy on the disruption of one's external and material life in the following lines:

*masjid shahīd hōnē ka ḡam tō kiyā magar
ik bār bhī maiñ us mēñ 'ibādat na kar sakā*

(*ibid.*, 350)

The gutted mosque did sadden me, but alas—
I couldn't pray there even once.

For the individual, his awareness of leaving the mosque unattended was already serious enough to precipitate a veritable spiritual and cultural crisis in him; he must now add to this the further irony that the rioters destroyed it precisely because they thought it was a well-attended venue. Man's true predicament was that he was drifting away from the mosque, which was hence becoming desolate on its own.

Muḥammad ‘Alavī’s poetry on the communal riots depicts a man who has suffered a terrible jolt and, in the dizzying aftermath, has become estranged from his roots but is, nonetheless, still engaged in the hopeless struggle to reconnect with those roots. The most salient characteristic of this poetry is its portrayal of a mind that has been scorched beyond limits, and, therefore, chooses to express its sensitivity in concrete and specific experiences, rather than in general statements. Here, sensitivity does not denote making a plea in the name of a love for humanity, or carefully balancing the scales. This is because the very nature of communal riots has undergone a drastic change, and the communal madness of the majority is thirsting for blood, forcing Muslims to think, in the words of poet Nūn Mīm Rāshid,

*ai kbudā
āj apnē ābā kī sarzamīn mēñ
ham ajnabī haiñ
hadaf haiñ nafrat kē nāvak-e tēz-o-jāñsitāñ kē*
(1957, 108)

O Lord,
today in the land of our ancestors
we are strangers,
the butt of hatred’s archer—of sure aim and life-
taking.

Not only is their condition reminiscent of a wounded animal surrounded by hunters, they are also being made to feel as though they are deadly beasts that had better be exterminated mercilessly. Bhartification [i.e., Indianization], personal law, across-the-border loyalties—all mere excuses to justify the religious bigotry that is lodged deep inside these Abstract Men who thrive on politics. The entire society is turning into a political abstraction and, likewise, views the entirety of the minority as a political abstraction. This grossly inhuman situation has brought the artist to the brink of limitless despair. The only way to neutralize it is for him to present himself and the human values of which he is constituted to those who have lost perception of those human values. It is not a question of begging for mercy in the name of humanity, but rather a question of presenting one’s wounded humanity with all its tragic agony just so that people might realize that he who was slain at the height of spring was a flourishing man. However, the Political-Abstract Man and the man in the

fullness of his possibility have drifted so far apart that no channel of communication is left open between them. After his permutation into a political being, an artist simply cannot think about Bhartification, personal law, and four wives. Neither can a Political Man understand, like an artist, the personal conflicts of an ordinary person or empathize with his afflictions and his emotional and social conundrums. If a man must stand guard outside his door with a gun in hand simply in order to go in and shoot down his three young daughters in the event that rioters attacked his house—so that they would at least die with their honor intact—in the face of such situations that stretch man's patience and spirit to the breaking point, to say that all this mess is the consequence of your marrying four wives and being disloyal to the country simply makes a dreadful situation downright ridiculous. What else can an artist, besieged by this tragic ridiculousness, do but say:

*abhī rōyā abhī hañsnē lagā hūñ
tō kyā sač-muč maiñ pāgal hō gayā hūñ*

(*ibid.*, 321)

I was just now crying, and now laughing.
Have I gone mad—truly?

Self-pity, wailing and weeping, or indifference—none will help an artist face this situation. The collision he is experiencing is swiftly carrying him toward perfect self-awareness. Man is a victim of his own contradictions, his emotional frustrations, and his spiritual dilapidation, capped by the contradictions, violence, cunning, and affectation of the society in which he lives. Thus the artist is cracking up from within and without. Only the search for a suitable weapon with which to confront this situation could help him keep his fragmented self together. Such a weapon is contempt; however, its expression in the poetry of 'Alavī and others has so far remained underemphasized. By contempt I mean a contempt full of zest and brio, the kind which Caligula expresses in the eponymous play by Albert Camus:

This world has no importance; once a man realizes that, he wins his freedom. And that is why I hate you, you and your kind; because you are not free.

(1958, 14)

In other words, the artist reenters the domain of existence (*vujūd*) after experiencing extinction (*fanā*). Now, though, he accepts life on a wholly

new condition, which does not negate but confirms life. He does not accept to live on the terms dictated by the Abstract Man. And he is able to proclaim, as he stands at the edge of a cliff peering down into the abyss of nonbeing: “The world you’ve fashioned has no importance at all. Now I know this, and am therefore free, and choose life freely.”⁶ On human and biological bases he is—a robust and fulsome man—at war with an entire society founded upon artificiality and deceit, with its darkness so bereft of intensity that it resembles the pale darkness of a sickly, decaying and waning night:

akēlā thā kisē āvāz dētā
utartī rāt sē tanhā lārā maiñ

(‘Alavī 1995, 321)

I was all alone, who might I have called for
help—
I fought with the waning night all on my own.

This is so because in the age of Abstract Man communal riots too have acquired an abstract form. In the obscurity of the societal fog a man whom we can hardly make out kills another man whom he doesn’t even know or recognize. This has rendered the act of killing and plunder so mechanical that one can scarcely feel any natural human reaction to it, such as anger at these inhuman actions, or pity and sorrow at such a tragic event. Without a consciousness of good and evil, even man’s crime and sin lose all their capital of human significance. He just picks up a spear and drives it straight through the heart of a living person, in exactly the same cold, unfeeling, and mechanical fashion that he makes love. He has no interest in the warm body, writhing in the heat of passion. Perhaps, in a way, he even fears it. To him the parabolas, the tautness of a young healthy female body, drowned in the nectar of Sanskrit lyrical poetry, are nothing more than mere geometrical lines and circles. Sadly, in our society the perusal of *dāstāns* and *Koka Shastra* is seldom for any reason other than to excite one’s own sexual desire, certainly not to learn how to arouse the other body. We don’t maintain a record of our sexual life; nothing like a Kinsey Report is available. But were such a report ever constructed, all the deceit of our sexual morals would become exposed. Perhaps then we would understand that kissing has absolutely no purchase in our sexual conduct, nor female orgasm any significance. Our acts

⁶This is a translation of the Urdu translation of the quote by Vāriś ‘Alavī.

of killing and lovemaking are simply forms of masturbation: drab, meaningless, cold, mechanical, and self-centered. A man who cannot see the sudden gleam in the eyes of his partner during the sex act, or absolute dread in the eyes of his victim when he kills him is masturbating in the darkness. If he would see the victim's agony and dread and still proceed with the killing, then we could perhaps say that this was a blow administered by a man, not by the blade of a guillotine. By a lost and anguished man who perpetrated a meaningless and profitless murder, so movingly expressed by Munir Niyazi in the poem:

*tēg labū mēn dūbī thī aur pēr khushī sē jhūmā
 thā
 bād-e bahārī čalī jhūm kē jab us nē mujhē
 dēkhā thā
 ghāyal nazrēn us dushman kī aisē mujh kō taktī
 thīn
 jaisē anbhōnī kō'ī dēkhī in kamzōr nigāhōn nē
 ye inṣāf tō ba'd mēn hōgā kyā jhūṭā kyā saččā
 hai
 kaun yaqīn sē kab skatā hai kaun burā kaun
 aččhā hai
 lēkin phir bhī ēk bār tō mērā dil bhī kānpā thā
 kāsh ye sab kučh kabhī na hōtā mēn nē dukh sē
 sōčā thā
 ghāyal nazrēn us dushman kī gahrī sōč mēn
 khō'ī thīn
 jaisē anbhōnī kō'ī dēkhī in kamzōr nigāhōn nē
 kaun hūn maiñ aur kaun thā vo jis par hōnī nē
 vār kiyā
 kaun thā vo jis shakṣ kō maiñ nē bhārī bahār
 mēn mār diyā*

(1983, 80)

The sword had drowned in blood, the tree had
 swayed in ecstasy
 The spring breeze had sailed with abandon
 when he looked at me.
 The enemy's wounded eyes were staring hard at
 me
 As though those dimming eyes had seen some
 impossible thing.

What is false and what is true—that will be
 decided later
 For who can say with certainty who is good and
 who bad.
 Still, for one brief moment, a tremor rocked my
 heart:
 If only none of this had ever happened—I had
 painfully thought.
 The enemy's anguished eyes were lost in
 fathomless thought:
 As though those dimming eyes had seen some
 impossible thing.
 Who am I? and who was he—assaulted by the
 inevitable,
 The man whom I'd killed at the height of spring?

This is the true human situation! It's been an animal, and even a human instinct to try different methods of relaxing the opponent at the time of combat. Face-to-face combat is more human for this reason, unlike the battle in which gunshots are fired from a distance or bombs dropped from high altitudes, because such encounters foreclose every possibility of human communication. Countless good poems have been written about war and bombardment, but a pilot who drops his lethal payload on a silent city from up high in the dead of night, still awaits a poem such as "Mērē Dushman kī Maut"⁷ (The Death of My Enemy). How can such a poem be written about these rioters who round up all the men, women, and children, herd them into a small room, yank off its corrugated tin roof, douse it with gasoline and then torch it, burning the occupants alive; kill more than a hundred occupants in a single *čālī*; and, after peace is established, spew out learned sermons about communal rioting. In journalistic pieces just about every progressive and secular intellectual has only this to say: all this mess is because Muslims marry four wives, follow their own group, and refuse to recognize Hamid Dalwai⁸ and

⁷The poem just quoted.

⁸A secular Marathi Muslim who advocated modernization, liberalization, and integration of Muslim communities in India. In his book, *Muslim Politics In Secular India*, he exposed the communal politics of Islamic fundamentalists and said, "unless Muslim communalism is eliminated, Hindu communalism will not disap-

Chagla⁹ as their leaders. Nobody ever talks to those young widows who wake up screaming in their sleep, “Don’t kill him! Please don’t kill him!” After the riots communal parties take out a massive procession to protest against rising inflation, but, in fact, it is to have a celebratory march over their victory in the recent killing. All the enlightened people immediately start praising the procession to high heaven. Not one among those who kill indiscriminately in the dead of night, nor those who look the other way at those killings in their journalistic articles drafted in broad daylight and mentioning only the national stream, cry out in agony and say: “*kaun thā vo jis shakḥḥ kō maiñ nē bhārī babār mēñ mār diyā*” (who was he I killed at the height of spring). This handful of words is a proof of the last few remaining bits of humanity. This murderer is an infinitely better individual than the Political Man who doesn’t himself kill, but does create the conditions which prompt a man to divest himself of his humanity and engage in spilling blood. The Machiavellis of our age, totally bereft of all creative, spiritual, and esthetic impulse, have no qualms about getting thousands of innocent people murdered with impunity, validating their actions by blaming the death of their victims on the fallacy of the latter’s ideas and misguided political actions. Rather than show remorse at the death and carnage, they prefer to give speeches in town halls, arduously locating the reasons for the killing of women and children in the Persian script, Urdu language, four wives, Tughlaq and Ghori Sultans, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the Khilafat Movement, and the practice of donning burqas. Take a hard look at this man, because today, through his many books and articles, he is trying to subvert the entire history of a people, bending over backwards to convince them that their present misery is the inevitable consequence of the insane and shameful deeds of their forefathers. He has lost the ability to empathize with the pain and suffering of others.

In T. S. Eliot’s play *Murder in the Cathedral*, the four knights, after killing Becket, address the audience and provide the justification for their heinous act with compelling logic. Keep in mind that in the spiritual levels

pear.” He believed that a uniform civil code was the only answer to guarantee fundamental human rights for all Indian women. His Marathi novel *Indhan* (1965) is viewed as a classic of Marathi and pan-Indian fiction. He died at the age of 44.

⁹Mahommedali Currim Chagla (1900–81) was the first permanent Indian Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court. After his retirement in 1958, he served as the Ambassador of India to a number of countries, including Ireland, Mexico, and the U.S.A. He was an ardent supporter of the transformation of Indian Muslim society and its Personal Law.

Eliot has assigned to Thomas Becket, the chorus women and the knights, the latter occupy the purely animal level. They give profoundly logical speeches, show Thomas Becket to be full of hubris and of himself, and consider his murder a political and national necessity. They say:

No one regrets the necessity for violence more than we do. Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured. At another time, you would condemn an Archbishop by vote of Parliament and execute him formally as a traitor, and no one would have to bear the burden of being called murderer. And at a later time still, even such temperate measures as these would become unnecessary. But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step.

(Eliot 1963 [1935], 82)

At their animal level, what the knights fail to perceive is that Thomas Becket's entire struggle was precisely against taming this pride and self-conceit. His greatest temptation was the most dreadful form of pride, namely, the pride of martyrdom, and he fought against that temptation as well. The discourses of the four knights reveal a mind utterly incapable of understanding the mind of another. Our age is not unaware of the moral consequences of justifying violence as a political necessity. Eliot's knights make full use of political reasoning and the entire cadence of their speeches is saturated with diplomacy, not much different than the political commentators' speeches in the wake of My Lai. Read this sentence of one knight with a minor variation of words and the meaning will become as clear as day: "At another time, you would condemn *the victims of My Lai Vietcong* by vote of Parliament and execute *them* formally as *traitors*, and no one would have to bear the burden of being called murderer." So all that happened, happened on account of suspicion, while, in fact, there was no room for *suspicion*. The statements made by political commentators after the riots wouldn't have differed much, namely, the minority was disloyal to the country. It needs to be Bhartified. During Baroda riots posters demanding "Leave Hindustan!" sprang up everywhere. Just about everyone was complaining that they'd become sick and tired of Muslims, and newspaper columnists too were touting Muslim narrow-mindedness, religious fanaticism, backwardness, hooliganism, isolationism, insistence on their own personal law, and how all these went against the welfare of the country. "But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, ..." These political commentators are as incapable of understanding the raging mental con-

flicts of an ordinary Muslim as the knights were of understanding Archbishop Thomas Becket's spiritual turmoil. An ordinary man's mind remains a closed book to a political being. When life's problems appear daubed with political color, they metamorphose into political issues. It is only art and literature that have the capacity to express the problems of life and create the man in whose eyes we can see the gleam or fear, and meet with him at the purest human level. How many characters are there in Urdu fictional literature that anyone would want to kill as Muslims? Hardly any. But one would be hard pressed to find a single Muslim in the political histories being fabricated today that anyone would want to leave alive. One cannot foist the image of a people arising from political histories on even a single member of that community, because man is not merely a political entity. Our society is in the clutches of a man who has become divorced from human instincts and emotions. Such a man erects concentration camps and gas chambers, commits genocide, raises private armies, and murders culture and language. This accomplished, he then, like Eliot's knights, justifies his actions in journalistic pieces and political books. What can an artist feel before such a man except a sense of anguished helplessness:

ik bhīr hai andhī sī čali ātī hai
ik tēg-e ḥaqārat hai ke lebrātī hai
ik jañgal ug rabā hai lamḥa lamḥa
ik būnd bačī thī sō babī jātī hai

(Fārūqi 1977, 48)

A crowd, surging forward blindly
 A sword of hate that keeps swishing in the air
 A jungle that grows every instant
 A drop, just a drop was left, it too is flowing
 away.

How can one even begin to talk to this blind crowd, this geometrical jungle, this maze of lifeless lines! A drop, just a drop of blood which you had somehow saved from the merciless incivility of time's dehumanizing forces, saved it from turning into bitter and turbid water, how will you save this bright drop of warm blood from the swishing sword of naked hatred? No poem can be conceived about this blind crowd. In vain is poor

Sulaimān Arīb¹⁰ trying to get it across to this sight-deprived crowd that he's lost all hope in them, in the humanity of humans, in those who slice off women's breasts and rape mothers and sisters with impunity. One despairs when there's hope. But what can one hope for from the ever-growing jungle of Abstract Men. One who masturbates before women can hardly be expected to show any regard for their breasts. The man who tears the posters with pictures of beautiful women in the name of religion and morality is the same man who, again in the name of religion and morality, lobs off their breasts. How can the artist address a society so filled with cunning and self-deception? If the other shows regard for his human state, one can talk to him making humanity the point of reference. But how can he when the other is so devoid of human decency. The only course left open for the artist/writer is for him to clench his teeth and let the shaft of grief penetrate down into his heart, and to rivet his eyes in a protracted vigil on the scene of devastation unfolding before his eyes with its cargo of burned habitation and disfigured and charred bodies:

*āñdhī nē girā diyē gharōñdē sārē
nannhī gurṃyā kī be-ḥijābī dēkhūñ*

(*ibid.*, 47)

The dust storm has felled all toy-houses
How must I see the little doll in all her
nakedness!

And keep on witnessing, in dazed immobility and pain.

‘Ādil Mañṣūrī’s poem “Khūn Mēñ Lathḥī Hū’ī Dō Kursiyāñ” (Two Chairs—Bathed in Blood), peerless and easily one of a kind among poems on communal riots, does precisely that, in its remarkable restraint, in its ability to maintain a quiet melancholic and mournful cadence all the way to the end-line in what sounds like a dirge about the poet’s self and his people—all of which give the poem its extraordinary intensity and tenderness. At no point does the timber of the poet’s voice become loud or shrill, or the tide of emotions overflow. Its style is that of melancholy eyes and clenched lips—simple like a tribal dirge, filled with the soul-wrenching desolations of Greek tragedies, and refreshingly free of self-pity, of wailing and lamentation, accusation and blame or sneering and of the kind of self-righteousness that makes poems about communal riots so

¹⁰Sulaimān Arīb (1922–70) was an Urdu poet and editor of the monthly literary journal *Ṣabā* (Hyderabad, India).

banal. In other words, the poet doesn't consider himself separate from or better than the riot-makers, or that he is following the Straight Path (*ṣirāṭ-e mustaqīm*) and can look down with contempt upon those who have deviated from it. His mental state is preeminently that of total bewilderment, of unspeakable dread over what has happened and is happening, his inevitable fate in all distressing periods of history. One will find the same painful bewilderment frozen in the wrinkles of the old woman's face who, at every turn of human history, rummages through piles of ashes in the gutted dwellings, with her dull eyes and tremulous hands, looking for the scorched bones of her loved ones. Her eyes have, on the one hand, a tragic resignation that provides the strength needed to endure heavenly calamities, and, on the other, a sense of bewilderment because the dreadful gruesomeness of what she sees is beyond all conception of terror:

Every horror had its definition,
 Every sorrow had a kind of end:
 In life there is not time to grieve long.
 But this, this is out of life, this is out of time,
 An instant eternity of evil and wrong.
 We are soiled by a filth that we cannot clean,
 united to supernatural vermin,
 It is not we alone, it is not the house, it is not the
 city that is defiled,
 But the world that is wholly foul.

(Eliot 1963 [1935], 77–8)

This terror, beyond all conceivable limits of time and space, finds its most lethal expression in *King Lear*, and especially in the scene in which Lear enters bearing the corpse of his most loved daughter Cordelia in his arms (“How must I see the little doll in all her nakedness!”) and cries out in pain, “Howl, howl, howl, howl!”¹¹ This very cry of Lear is transmuted into a quiet lament, a mournful dirge in ‘Ādil Maṣūri. There is neither complaint, nor even a whiff or remonstrance. Like Lear, ‘Ādil evinces no interest in the enemies or their death or their character. Once a man has been robbed of his most prized possession, he loses all interest in those who robbed him of it. Like the old woman who rummages in the debris of gutted dwellings for the bones of her loved ones, he too gathers what has

¹¹William Shakespeare's *King Lear* 5.3.57.

been robbed, burned down, and slaughtered as an eternal symbol of wounded humanity, and lovingly recites its elegy:

khūn mēn lath̄rī hū'ī dō kursiyān
shu'lon̄ kī raushnī mēn vaḥshi ān̄khōn̄ kā
hujūm
rāt kī gebrā'iyōn̄ mēn maujzan
ajnabi baḥtē hū'ē sāyōn̄ kā shu'ūr
nīm-murda sā ye čānd
kō'ī dōshīza kā jaisē adh-kaṭā pistān
aur us par khūn mēn lath̄rū hū'ī dō kursiyān
maiñ jō ab ṭūṭā huwā ā'īma hūñ
ēk sē dō, pāñč, pandra, das hazār
mēri in lāshōn̄ kō kafnā'ēgā kaun
na'ra'-e takbīr meḥrābōn̄ sē dūr
mēri in lāshōn̄ kō dafnā'ēgā kaun
čashm-e shab-bēdār kē khvābōn̄ sē dūr
dūr shu'lē
aur shu'lon̄ mēn čamktā ik makān
aur shu'lē
aur un mēn khūn mēn lath̄rī hū'ī dō kursiyān
baḍḍīyōn̄ sē sar uṭḥātā ye dhuvān̄
ye dhuvān̄ jō ajnabi sā lag rahā
bū tirē ajdād kī
bū mirē ajdād kī
phēlā gayā
tīrgī mēn jugnū'ōn̄ kī jagmagātī nōk har sangīn
kī
āsmān̄ par ṭikṭiki bāndhē hū'ē
raushnī kī muntazīr ān̄khēñ udās
band kamrōn̄ kī fīzā mēn sīlanī sāñsēñ udās
aur udāsī kē parōn̄ kē darmiyān̄
khūn mēn lath̄rū hū'ī dō kursiyān

(Maṣṣūrī 1970, 6)

Two chairs bathed in blood
 The crowd of beastly eyes in the glow of flames
 The thought of alien, advancing shadows
 swelling in the depths of night
 This half-dead moon
 like a maiden's breast slashed in half

and the two chairs over it, bathed in blood.
 I—a shattered mirror now:
 one, two, five, fifteen, ten thousand—corpses all
 My corpses—who will shroud them?
 The cry, “God is Great!”—far from the arches
 My corpses—who will bury them?
 Far, far away from the dreams of an ever-wakeful
 eye.
 Flames leaping far into the distance
 A house shining in their glow
 Flames
 and two chairs bathed in blood.
 The smoke, there, rising from the bones
 the smoke that feels so strange
 has wafted everywhere
 the scent of your forefathers
 the scent of my forefathers.
 In the darkness, the point of every bayonet—like
 flashing fireflies
 Eyes frozen in a stare at the sky
 waiting for reassuring light
 moist breaths—despondent in stuffy rooms
 and amidst the wings of despondency
 two chairs—bathed in blood. □

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon

Works Cited

- Alavī, Muḥammad. 1995. *Rāt Idḥar Udḥar Raushan*. Gandhinagar: Sāhitya Akā-
 ḍamī Gujarat.
- Brecht, B. 1998. *The Threepenny Opera*. In his *Collected Plays*. Vol. 2. Translated by
 Ralph Manheim and John Willett. London: Methuen Drama.
- Camus, Albert. 1958. *Caligula and Three Other Plays*. Translated from the French
 by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Eliot, T.S. 1963 [1935]. *Murder in the Cathedral*. London: Harcourt Brace & Com-
 pany.
- Fārūqī, Shamsu'r-Raḥmān. 1977. *Ār Simt kā Daryā*. Lucknow: Kitābnagar.
- Ġālib, Mirzā Asadu'l-Lāh Khān. 1989. *Dīvān-e Ġālib*. New Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqī-

e Urdū, Hind.

Ḥāfiẓ, Khvāja Shamsu'd-Dīn Muḥammad. 1969–70 [=1348]. *Dīvān-e Kobna'-e Ḥāfiẓ*.

Edited by Īraj Afshār. Tehran: Intishārāt-e Ibn Sīnā.

Iqbāl, Ẓāfar. 1962. *Āb-e Ravān*. Lahore: Nayā Idāra.

Manṣūrī, 'Ādil. 1970. "Khūn mēñ *Lathrū* Hū'ī Dō Kursiyāñ." *Shab Khūn* 4, no. 44:6.

Niyāzī, Munīr. 1983. *Kulliyāt-e Munīr*. Lahore: Maktaba'-e Munīr.

Rāshid, Nūn Mīm. 1957. *Īrān Mēñ Ajnabi aur Dūsri Nazmēñ*. Lahore: Gōsha'-e Adab.

Şiddīqī, Mukhtār. 1955. *Manzil-e Shab*. Lahore: Nayā Idāra.

Yeats, W.B. 1977. "Politics." In *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Vol. 1, The Poems*. 2nd ed. Edited by R.J. Finneran. New York: Scribner/Simon & Shuster. 356.

Published in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 20 (2005)

<mumemon@charter.net>