



'UTOPIA' IN SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI'S *BAKER OF TARIFA*

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ABSTRACT

'Utopia' can be defined as an ideal or perfect place or state, or any visionary system of political or social perfection. Shadab Zeest Hashmi is a Pakistani-American poet. She published two collections of poetry: *Baker of Tarifa* and *Kohl and Chalk*. Her book *Baker of Tarifa*, won the 2011 San Diego Book Award for poetry. It is based on the history of Al Andalus (Muslim Spain), an utopian land or Spain of the middle ages, illustrious for tolerance between Muslims, Jews and Christians. She has rejuvenated the simple and serene facets of the life of the Al-Andalus civilization from 755 to 1492 A.D. She tries to show what is possible when cultural and religious harmony is blended in history and what is lost when there is a clash among religions as in the present world. Shadab believes that sort of harmony is the remedy to religious fundamentalism and terrorism in the world.

Key Words: Utopia- al andulus- religious tolerance- cultural harmony- remedy to religious fundamentalism

Shadab Zeest Hashmi is a Pakistani-American poet. She published two collections of poetry: *Baker of Tarifa* and *Kohl and Chalk*. Her book *Baker of Tarifa*, won the 2011 San Diego Book Award for poetry. It is based on the history of Al Andalus (Muslim Spain) or Spain of the middle ages, memorable for forbearance between Muslims, Jews and Christians. She has invigorated the simple and serene facets of the life of the Al-Andalus civilization from 755 to 1492 A.D. She tries to show what is probable when cultural and religious harmony is intermingled in history and what is missing when there is a clash among religions as in the present world. Shadab believes that sort of synchronization is the therapy to religious fundamentalism and terrorism in the world. 'There has been a revival of concern 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' (Schezee Zaidi). She

wishes to show the true spirit of Islam, which is now identical with angry mobs and suicidal bombers.

Baker of Tarifa is divided in three sections dealing with historical and intercultural matters and many of the poems highlight those enlightening relationships in the Andalusia locale. The poems mostly paint a picture of a territory in which the spirit of fortitude, illumination and the pursuit of knowledge. She imagines a small coastal town during the time of the *convivencia* (coexistence). In the poem 'Montage' she examines the roots of words to explore the way they have developed in different languages, creating certain attitudes, even prejudices between the characters of the Abrahamic faiths. She praises 'The Andalusian/is known for sensitivity and intelligence'. She enumerates the basis of the word Andalusian from 'adafina':

Adafina
comes from "dufn" or "buried" in Arabic.
The Andalusian is often
drawn with black pigment.
("Living and Re-Living Al Andalus": Book
Review *Baker of Tarifa*, by Sam Hamil)

The word 'adafina' and rendering of the Andalusian as "The handsomest among them was as black as the cooking pot", relates efficiently the points of amalgamation and incongruity between users who are culturally diverse, hence revealing their connectedness. Shadab exemplifies the etymology of the word 'Adafina':

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

So the Jewish word 'Andalusian' is commonly used for the Muslims, Christians and as well the Jewish in Arabic Spain. 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 example of religious harmony existed in the opinion of the poet. So she 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 uses the word 'adafina' to picturises the culture and harmony existed in that society. 'She weaves her poems after carefully thinking and her source of inspiration is the common source of religious and cultural lore of Islam, Christianity and Judaism' (The Dawn, Jan 15, 2011).

Shadab answers Ilona Yusuf regarding the inspiration for Baker of Tarifa in the interview:

When I was a student at Reed College, I stumbled upon Iqbal's poem on Cordoba while researching "Urdu" for a Psycholinguistics class. Soon after that, I attended a concert by the Al Andalus Ensemble and found out that the civilisation of Al- Andalus is known for moments of inter-faith tolerance, known in Spanish as "convivencia," a legendary period of harmony between the Abrahamic people. When I first began writing the poems in this collection, about 15 years ago, I was mostly interested in unravelling the mystique of Al-Andalus. I went to Spain twice with my husband during this period

and started collecting my research material including books, photos and music.¹

During her journey to Al Andalus (Andalucía), the poet walks the streets, scents the baking, the cooking and lives the life of that time during the golden age of Spain, when the Muslims, in all their learning, culture and glory ruled Al Andalus. In the title poem 'The Baker of Tarifa', Shadab informs that Tarif Bin Malik was the first Muslim to enter Spain in 711 CE. She sings about the preparation and baking of the bread. She talks about the recipe:

You'll need a cup of crushed
almonds
.....
brown sugar and plenty of butter
Also an eye-cup of rosewater
for the filling
Muqawwara means arena
Cut the bread
neatly in that shape
Take care the dough has been softened
with fresh milk.
(Sam Hamill)

She writes in her blog that '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' (oct19,2010) 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.

In the article 'Kneading: The Making of Baker of Tarifa' Hashmi expresses her feelings and her journey to Andalusia. She questions herself "Who was I, here, in Andalusia?" I had chased a poem, Iqbal's majestic Sufi work "Masjide Qurtub" from Reed College to Cordoba where I had just arrived. But this was no first visit. It was a return.....'(oct19,2010).According to poet Shabnam Riaz it is " a journey back in time when simplicity, tenderness, daily rituals and compassion used to be the order of the day. For instance in the poem "The

End of the War” Shadab describes a market “puffed up / with flags and shrouds,” and as morning comes, experiences both a factual and metaphorical dawning. She narrates:

Morning broke on the page
I was reading
And I let words fall
Into tightly woven nests
And I let illumination
Be the song. (Ibid)

She believes that her explanation itself is a song which narrates the historical allusion of Al Andulus i.e. the scene after war. In “The Fire Did Not Cool for the People of Abraham”, she supplies notes for the Islamic “Ibrahim,”; the Inquisition, Maimonides (a preeminent medieval Spanish, Sephardic Jewish philosopher, and astronomer), Averroes (a mediæval Andalusian Muslim polymath.), and Albucasis (an Arab Muslim physician and surgeon), in a short lyric poem (Sam Hamill). She celebrates the blossoming of intellectualism and broadmindedness that was the stamp of the Arab Empire in Spain. She uses the symbol ‘charred Bread’ to signify the essential food in all cultures is burnt hence it is not useful any more. She continues the visualisation of the great Andalusians:

and obsidian as books
containing the grain
of Maimonides
Averros
Albucasis. (Ibid)

Though the realm 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. Shadab uses the image of ‘lute strings’ to symbolize ‘intestines of stray animals’. She writes:

When the spell broke
Ziryab’s lute strings
were strewn like intestines of stray animals
Carved wood ceilings had turned
into snuff-boxes
Galleries were sweating paint
On the walnut shelves
Corpses with coins. (Ibid)

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.” ‘Thus the later sections of this collection, deals with the re-conquest of Spain by Queen Isabella, show how war dehumanises people and lays waste the achievements of civilisation. There are many parallels to be drawn, whether intentional or unintentional on the part of the poet, to our own times.’²

In the poem “Sorrows of Moriama”, Shadab picturises not only the suffering of ordinary people but also the royalty. Moriama, wife of Boabdil (Abū ‘abd Allāh Muḥammad Xi), the twenty-second and last Nasrid ruler of Granada in Iberia (Al- Andalus), endured imprisonment and exile when Spain fell to Castilian rule (1492). Shadab visualises the misery of Moriama in the voice of a window “Ain al Ayesha” in the Alhambra palace. The window overlooked the city of Albaicin:

And so she is wed
in her plain *mantilla*,
the stoic *vezir*’s
sixteen-year old Moraima s
to Abu-abdallah, *rey el chico*.
She has three times as many sorrows as
you,
lone cypress with the bent torso!
I watch her burn before she has bloomed.

.....
A husband at war, a child taken captive,
all day she digs for a window.
.....
she is behind deaf *carmen* walls
in the city below
shut away from this, her palace.
Three times your sorrows, broken cypress.
(The Cortland Review Online Literary
Magazine, SPRING 2010)

Shadab Zeest Hashmi draws ‘a picture of the withering and destruction brought on by war and literalism’ (Ilona Yusuf). The surrender of Boabdil leads to the end of the Muslim rule which stood as a model of cultural synthesis.

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)

<http://abrahamicfamilyreunion.org/the-baker-of-tarifa-by-shadab-zeest-hashmi-recommended-by-sam-...>

Thus '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: 2003). Hashmi is hopeful about a utopian world where there won't be any religious strife. *Baker of Tarifa* is a wonderful example of the myth of a utopian world, which the Muslim community laments the loss of Muslim Spain.

Shadab supports the views on Al-Andalus and its religious harmony, of her contemporary writers/poets like Salman Rushdie and Imtiaz Dharker. They find a utopian world, where people live in harmony respecting the customs and religions of one another. Dr. Alamgir Hashmi, an English poet of Pakistani origin said that Shadab's poem's would go a long way in creating amazing response and awareness among people in the west between tolerant and peaceful Islam and the false face of Islam they see today.

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