



GERMINATION OF COMMUNAL VIOLENCE IN DAVID DAVIDAR'S *THE SOLITUDE OF EMPERORS*

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ABSTRACT

The solitude of Emperors is a novel with a political conscience, written by someone whose memory is scarred by the profanities of faith. Elegiac and elegant, it traverses the realms of dissent and idealism, of the martyrdom of the outcast and the make-believe of the rioter. It is a novel India can't afford to ignore.

The Solitude of Emperors is a stunningly perceptive novel about modern India, about what drives fundamentalist beliefs and what makes someone driven, bold, or mad enough to make a stand. Vijay is a young man, in a small town K--- in Tamilnadu. His father encourages him to write about the rise of religious fundamentalism in India. He wrote an article, which was partially made up and edited with his father's help. It got rejected from most newspapers and magazines, but managed to catch the interest of Rustom Sorabjee, who was the proprietor and founder of The Indian Secularist.

It is a gripping saga of Vijay who is caught up with communal violence in Mumbai and was asked by Rustom Sorabjee to go on a working holiday to a place in South India and made earnest attempts to avert violence which he completed successfully with the help of Noah. Davidar does a beautiful job in showing how circumstances and conditions motivate different people, in different ways.

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David Davidar's second novel, *The Solitude of Emperors*, focuses on the life of a young journalist, Vijay, who narrates some of the violent events in India during the winter of 1993-94. With occasional Dickensian elements, Vijay's narration is straightforward and old-fashioned: "My years as a journalist have equipped me with enough tools to thread together a coherent, sturdy narrative." Eschewing imaginative leaps or postmodern tricks, Davidar frames his political story with a "Prologue" and a final chapter, "The Last Truth."

Now settled in Toronto, Vijay recounts his long journey from his childhood town in Tamilnadu, to his journalistic apprenticeship in Bombay, and his final destination in wintry Canada. More important than

Vijay's spatial and temporal forays, however, are his spiritual quests, for in this Buildings roman he encounters influential mentors whose philosophical outlook mark the stages of his development. Verses from Kabir, a mystic poet, appear in the novels epigraph.

"The one who stays within the limits assigned to him is a man.

The one who roams beyond these limits is a saint.

To reject both the limits and their absence:

That's a thought with immeasurable depths."

The Solitude of Emperors roams, explores limits, and measures certain depths. In the midst of a Canadian

winter, Vijay performs an annual ritual at a cemetery in honour of his deceased friend, Noah, who had died trying to defend a temple in Meham against fundamentalists. In contrast to those religious sectarians seeking to dominate India, eccentric Noah was one of “the invisible ones, the ones who were too small, weak, poor or slow to escape the onrush of history.” Noah had lived in a cemetery, tending the gardens, so Vijay’s ritual is a reenactment of Noah’s life-both somehow celebrating the solitude of Emperors. Where Noah gravitated toward “the great peepal with leaves like flattened spearheads and the jacarandas that flung sprays of blue into the deeper blue of the Nilgiri sky,” Vijay smokes and drinks near maples that are bare and evergreens too dull and uniform. As in his first novel, *The House of Blue Mangoes*, Davidar proves to be an observant horticulturist.

Vijay describes the childhood town he wishes to escape:

“It had the standard-issue refuse-filled streets, open drains, ugly residential sections, hospitals, a cinema or two, clamorous bazaars, open-air barber shops, temples, mosques, churches, the scanty shade of neem trees, cows, crows, bicycles, beggars and sunlight so intense that by mid-morning everything in town was wrapped in a shimmering skin of heat-a stereotypical small town, then, with little to distinguish it from the dozens of others that were strewn across the great South Indian Plain.” (6)

Ayodhya, Bombay, Ahmedabad ... and the sanguineous politics of gods becomes a text that can no longer be understood by the simple rules of good and evil, of victim hood and villainy. It has precipitated beyond redemption in mythology and pathology. And it is being manipulated irresistibly by both fundamentalists from the right as well as the left. David Davidar’s second novel is an audacious trip beyond the headlines, into the remote recesses of hate sanctified by religion. *The solitude of Emperors* is a novel with a political conscience, written by someone whose memory is scarred by the profanities of faith. Elegiac and

elegant, it traverses the realms of dissent and idealism, of the martyrdom of the outcast and the make-believe of the rioter. It is a novel India can’t afford to ignore.

The Solitude of Emperors is a stunningly perceptive novel about modern India, about what drives fundamentalist beliefs and what makes someone driven, bold, or mad enough to make a stand.

In December 1992, in the small north Indian town of Ayodhya, Hindu nationalists destroyed a 16th century mosque they claimed was built by the Mughal emperor, Babur, over the birth place of the Hindu God, Rama. This demolition, achieved as a helpless government mutely watched in New Delhi, constituted the one act that altered the social and political landscape of modern India. Its ripple spread across the country and, in the financial nerve centre of Mumbai, turned into a wave of sectarian violence and bloody killings that seemed to drown the city’s spirit of cosmopolitanism.

Weeks after the incident in Ayodhya, disaffected Muslims carried out stray attacks on Hindus in Mumbai. The retaliation was quick and anomalously brutal nearly 900 people were killed in the ensuing riots, choreographed and executed by right-wing Hindu nationalist. Within a month, in February 1993, Muslim gang lords supervised their own reprisal attack; serial blasts across Mumbai killed 257 people. The city (in those days called its old-and too many, more enduring- name, Bombay) was scared forever.

It may, as its wont, have got back on its feet quickly and gone about its business at the forefront of the economic boom in India. But the ghosts of those riots and blasts still haunt the city. They convulsed Mumbai – always frenetic, always on the move into a sense of self-awareness and introspection, and forced it to confront the fact that the secular and inclusive credentials on which it prided itself were merely a veneer for malevolence and intolerance. After the demolition of the mosque and the violence in Mumbai, these are questions that India, more diverse and various a country than any other, has been grappling with.

They also lie at the heart of David Davidar's ambitious, disturbing new novel. Vijay, a young man who longs to escape his claustrophobic home in south India, comes to Mumbai to work as a journalist for a small but respected magazine called "The Indian Secularist." He is caught in the middle of the riots, and sees the chilling violence. He saw a man's left eyeball

"had been gouged out of its socket and the right eyeball and had been slashed by a knife, and was cloudy and occluded by blood." (51)

He suffers an emotional breakdown. His kindly employer, Mr. Sorabjee, sends him to recuperate in the Nilgiris, the "Blue Mountains" of south India. But it is, he warns Vijay, a working holiday: he is to report on a religious disturbance at a famous shrine in a small town nestled in the mountains; and to read the manuscript of a history textbook that Sorabjee has written for young adults. It focuses on three great Indians who epitomized the virtues of religious tolerance and empathy.

As the book hurtles towards its dramatic denouement, it offers us quite a white-knuckle ride. Davidar, now boss of Penguin Canada, is also the publisher who started Penguin's India operation from a small Delhi room many years ago and has done a great deal for the English-language publishing boom in India. He has a keen eye for detail, and an elegant turn of phrase. This is a daring novel that engages with Indian realities: It looks sectarian violence and intolerance in the eye, and does not turn away.

"I thought about the taxi driver who had been murdered. Deepak hadn't said whether he was young or old, but I imagined him to be as young as I was, and there was a good chance that he, like me, was a recent immigrant to the city, perhaps from Hyderabad, or some smaller place that did not have enough work or resources to hold on to its young. He would have come here hoping to make his fortune, and may be in time he would have. Why had he worn the badges of his faith to the very

end, in wonder? Even when his life was at stake, why hadn't he thought to take them off? May be they were so much a part of him, he hadn't even seen them as symbols to be discarded. They would have helped him link himself to a community, of course, until he had saved enough to bring his family over from his home town because it was likely he had saved enough to bring his family over from his hometown because it was likely he had married young. Until this fateful day, his religion would have saved him from the loneliness of the room in the chawl or slum. He would go to the mosque, meet others as lonely as he was. They would do their namaz together; celebrate the great festivals of Id and Ramzan with feasts of biryani on Mohammed Ali Road. Yes, his religion had been good to him, until the day it had devoured him. (45-46)

Suffocating in the small-town world of his parents, Vijay is desperate to escape to the raw energy of Bombay in the early 1990s. His big chance arrives unexpectedly when the family servant, Raju, is recruited by a right-wing organization. As a result of an article he writes about the increasing power of sectarian politicians, Vijay gets a job in a small Bombay publication, "The Indian Secularist," There he meets Rustom Sorabjee – the inspirational founder of the magazine who opens Vijay's eyes to the damage caused to the nation by the mixing of religion and politics.

A year after his arrival in Bombay, Vijay is caught up in violent riots that rip through the city, a reflection of the upsurge of fundamentalism everywhere in the country. He is sent to a small tea town in the Nilgiri Mountains to recover, but finds that the unrest in the rest of India has touched this peaceful spot as well, specifically a spectacular shrine called The Tower of God, which is the object of political wrangling. He is befriended by Noah, an enigmatic and colourful character who lives in the local cemetery and quotes Pessoa, Cavafy, and Rimbaud, but is ostracized by a local elite obsessed with little more than growing their prize fuchsias. As the discord surrounding the local shrine comes to a

head, Vijay tries to alert them to the dangers, but his intervention will have consequences he could never have foreseen.

David Davidar's second novel is set against this background of religious or political violence. His hero and narrator, Vijay, is a young graduate from Tamilnadu who gets a job in Bombay on a Magazine called *The Indian Secularist*. Its circulation is small, and so is Vijay's salary, but it's the kind of magazine that publishes essays on Indian identity by eminent Indian economists and Vijay feels he is, at last, at the centre of things. When the post-Ayodhya riots begin, he decides he wants to do more than weak editorials and seeks out the mob. He is so upset by the killing he witnesses that his editor, an elderly Parsi called Mr. Sorabjee, sends him to recover in a tea-plantation town in the Nilgiri Mountains. Here, Vijay admires the scenery and encounters the local gardening club led by a fuchsia-loving retired brigadier. But he is more intrigued by a man called Noah who sleeps in and tends to the local cemetery. Noah's background is unclear. He may be the son of the local priest and he claims to have studied in America. He quotes Pessoa, Cavafy and Rimbaud, writes poetry himself and worships Jimi Hendrix. Vijay's editor has asked him to write about a holy site called the Tower of God. It is both a Christian shrine and a Hindu temple and there are rumours that right wing Hindus are planning to take it over as an exclusively Hindu shrine. Vijay becomes obsessed with stopping this attempt and recruits Noah to his cause but, once again, his plan to get involved goes badly wrong.

Vijay is retelling the events of the novel 12 years later. He is now a bank-teller in Canada and every year he performs a ritual in a cemetery (any cemetery) in memory of Noah. The book we are reading is a tribute to his dead friend but Vijay is apologetic about it:

"I have neither the effrontery nor the imagination to make this the sort of book Noah would have admired, but my years as a journalist have equipped me with enough tools so thread together a coherent, sturdy narrative."(4)

The novel gets its title from a book Vijay's editor is writing about his heroes of religious toleration: the emperors Ashoka, Akbar and Mahatma Gandhi. He gives the manuscript to Vijay to read in the mountains and chapters of it appear throughout the novel. Every time Vijay reads it, he feels more determined to stop the fundamentalist. It's unlikely to have the same effect on its other readers (Mr. Sorabjee is writing for teenagers), but it fits in with a didactic aim to explore the misuse of religion in politics. There is so much explanation in the novel that it overwhelms any sense of action. Davidar's commitment to his message is admirable but more effrontery and imagination, of the kind Vijay says he lacks, would have made *The Solitude of Emperors* a more successful novel.

The novel stands as a glaring witness to the communal divide and the politics engaged by religion. In the heat of 1992 communal riots, Davidar places the hero narrating the events as they distort and disrupt the private life of the hero. It is when he moves to Mumbai (Bombay) to begin in the job that he receives his own bitter lesson about the violence that plagues India. He is assaulted by Hindu thugs during the riots of 1992. It hadn't mattered that he was Hindu; they were exacting revenge on anyone or anything that was better off or different than they were.

After he recovers his employer figures it might be good for to take a vacation away from the city and sends him to find out about the threat to a Christian shrine from Hindu fundamentalists in a small town. He also asks him if he would do him the favour of reading over a short manuscript that he has written about three figures in Indian history whose ideas and stories he wants people to remember.

Vijay's employer believes that the only chance India has is for another person like one of these historical figures to come along and set the example for the rest of the country to follow. His hope is that by describing these individuals' characteristics it will enable people to be able to recognize the next great "Emperor" who comes along to lead people away from the path of mutual destruction.

It's from this manuscript that the title *Solitude of Emperors* comes from. It is Rustom Sorabjee's belief that Emperors are able to sit in solitude and face up to his or own demons and learn about themselves sufficiently to develop a true path. He cites as his example three men of legendary status from the annals of Indian history who have all dedicated themselves to preserving her plurality.

Although Vijay had gone to report on the situation dealing with Christian shrine, it soon becomes for him a symbol of the fight against fundamentalism. With the assistance of a local eccentric, Noah, he tries to rally support against the planned occupation of the shrine by Hindu extremists. Unfortunately, this is the same apathy that grips most of Indians believe that anything serious will happen.

Vijay is no Emperor and in spite of all his efforts ends up only able to record the events of the attempted occupation and not be an active participant in its defense. In fact, like so many others of his generation, he flees the country for Canada to escape. Partly he is looking to escape himself, and partly the violence of his country. In the end, he realizes he can't escape either one.

Davidar has created a situation and characters that bring a different perspective to the violence that periodically surfaces in India. He does not shy away from the reality of the situation and in fact manages to make it far more realistic than the majority of authors. His depiction of the leader of the fundamentalist Hindu group as a pillar of society whose arguments in support of his extremist views are ever so reasonable, make him far scarier than the usual wild-eyed fanatic that we find in the pages of a novel.

While intellectuals are becoming more apathetic towards religion, Davidar has the gumption to make the point that the discarding of religion can never be a practical or workable solution for India, where it permeates every aspect of daily life. He also points out that it is in periods of great economic volatility that a country is most vulnerable; which is why millions of Indian youngsters, frustrated by the gap between the haves and the haves-not, easily become puppets in the hands of vote-seeking

politicians who promise them security in the name of religion. And that most of these politicians are not really deeply religious themselves, they are simply clever opportunists who know how to sway public feeling.

The Solitude of Emperors, which is very different, both in size and in its writing style, from *The House of Blue Mangoes* is inspired by some of the work of Coetzee and Orwell.

This novel, though, is more intelligent than its narrator. Its idealism doesn't verge on naivety. "I am certainly a secular idealist," says Davidar,

"But I do have a deep interest in religion, all major faiths. At the same time I have a problem with the uncritical acceptance of faith, scripture and religious teaching. And I am most disturbed by the cynical misuse of religion."

In *The Solitude of Emperors* is dissent at its literary best. Davidar does not hesitate to call it a political novel. "This is an overtly political novel in the tradition of novelist I greatly admire, such as Orwell, Coetzee and Pamuk. Indeed I think it would be almost impossible for a serious novelist today to be apolitical." Some of the finest storytellers at work today are trapped in history. And in their stories, history is not a distant place; and their stories are hardly historical. History is an adjective to existence, as in Davidar's sprawling first novel, *The House of Blue Mangoes*. *The Solitude of Emperors* is the memorial service of a novelist for whom storytelling is what Vaclav Havel calls "living in truth". Davidar's story is an argument that redeems as India ravages by the extremities of religion.

While *Solitude* is evidently Vijay's story, Davidar interweaves his tale with the words of an unpublished treatise on past leaders of India, written by Vijay's mentor Mr. Sorabjee. In this manner, Davidar tries to manage the not-inconsiderable feat of seamlessly couching a diatribe on India's "compact with the Gods" within a personal drama of sizeable power.

Attempting to encapsulate the timeless lessons of Ashoka, Akbar, and Gandhi, while tying them to the

state of the country in the 1990s, Mr. Sorabjee hopes that his text will serve as a call to arms for young Indians. While admitting that poverty and poor educational resources are rampant throughout the nation.

Davidar thus creates three distinct viewpoints — that of the innocent, the wise man and the cynic respectively — to articulate different sides of the argument for secularism. The characters are fleshed out well-enough to never seem like mere mouthpieces; I found Vijay's voice, with its pared-down eloquence, particularly convincing. And though Davidar's agenda is thinly disguised, the plot has enough momentum to keep readers turning the pages to determine the fate of the shrine. An additional twist is provided by questions dogging Noah's identity — did he really attend school in America? And hang out with Dom Moraes in a smoky Mumbai cafe? And make out with the gorgeous Maya?

We are accustomed to thinking of emperors as they function in the public sphere, using their power to expand territorially; this novel, however, explores their inner lives, and their ability to transcend the trappings of external power for higher goals. Like the three emperors in Sorabjee's treatise, Noah and Vijay grapple with solitude against the forces of evil and sectarianism, so the novel is a coming-of-age story about not only its protagonist, but also India and the entire modern world. Sorabjee seems to echo Wordsworth's "the world is too much with us," as he exhorts the youth of his nation not to squander its most precious resource, solitude. Addressing the "emperors of the everyday," Sorabjee tells them to mingle and learn.

Inhale the genius of this country. Do not discount anything, the transcendent poetry of the Sufi and Bhakti poets, the architecture of Hampi and Fatehpur Sikri and Mount Abu, the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and the Shirdi Sai Baba. "Let the plaintive wail of the shehnai fill your senses, the plangent notes of the sarod and the sitar slice through the dullness of your waking life. Watch Rhododendrons mount on a Himalayan slope".

He summarises his epiphanies of solitude and mingling:

"No other place in the world can boast the width and depth of history, art, spirituality, food and music that this country has to offer."

No mere nationalist novel, however, *The Solitude of Emperors* also recommends roaming more widely to the West—hence the character of Noah, who quotes from the Portuguese poet, Pessoa, the Greek Cavafy, and the French Rimbaud. From England and America, Noah absorbs Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and the group Led Zeppelin—which explains why Vijay plays Jim Morrison's "Riders on the Storm" when he pays homage to Noah at the cemetery. In his heroic act to save the Tower of God, Noah becomes an "Emperor of the Everyday." The *Solitude of Emperors* has its didactic and descriptive moments, but we learn from Davidar's experiences of the East and the West an inclusive tolerance that would make for greater peace in all regions

Davidar's argument for secularism gains additional historical weight by the device of Mr. Sorabjee's textbook manuscript, which, while occasionally impeding the flow of the plot, is so well-written as to pull in the reader within a few paragraphs. Now, if only Mr. Sorabjee's manuscript could actually find its intended audience, I'd be a lot more cheery about the future of Indian secularism.

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