

The “Mumbai Riots” and the Play of Literary Strategies: A Reading of Rahman Abbas’s *Rohzin*

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ABSTRACT

Article History:

Revised:

March 16, 2021

Accepted:

May 25, 2021

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The present paper traces reflections of the 1992-3 Mumbai Riots in Rahman Abbas’s 2016 Indian Urdu novel *Rohzin* by using instruments of literary criticism. While this novel is overtly a story about the love of two young people, it is also a profoundly political novel bearing on a number of problems faced by the younger generation, especially young Muslims in India. Since politics and aesthetics are enmeshed in the plot, the parts of novel related to the Mumbai Riots show that both plot and literary strategies—focalization, time-frame, flashbacks and flash-forwards—employed by the author carry the political import of the text. Furthermore, the features of Magical Realism in the selected text also have both aesthetic and political impact. The article attempts to show how literary strategies are employed in support of a multi-religious, politically riven, and secular India.

Keywords: *Communal violence, Urdu literature, Political impact of literary strategies, Mumbai*

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This paper traces references to the Mumbai Riots in Rahman Abbas's 2016 novel *Rohzin* by using instruments of literary criticism. The passages concerned with the Mumbai riots demonstrate how not only the plot of a fictional work of literature but also literary strategies, basically devised to enhance the aesthetic quality, may carry a political message. The novel illustrates how religious feelings get instrumentalized by political organizations and lead to communal violence and, eventually, be disastrous for all parties. This message unfolds gradually in a subtle manner in a few passages in the novel.

Rahman Abbas, based in Mumbai (Bombay) and one of the more prominent Indian Urdu authors of the past ten years, has so far written seven books including his four novels. *Rohzin* is Rahman Abbas' fourth novel. Only two years after its publication, the German translation came out in 2018, and later in the same year, Rahman Abbas was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award for Urdu. The well-known critic Gopichand Narang praised *Rohzin* as "an important turning point in the history of Urdu fiction" (Narang, 2021).

It would be in order to contextualize Abbas's novel with his recent publication (as editor and author) of the proceedings of two Sahitya Akademi conferences on the modern Urdu novel in 2012 and 2018. The book is a critical survey of the Indian Urdu novel in the 21st century, and contains articles about major Urdu authors from India. It was published under the title *Ikkisvin Sadi Ki Dihliz Par Aham Urdu Novel* (Abbas, 2020). Its title may be translated as *Important Urdu Novel at the Threshold of Twenty First Century*. More than an overview of recent Indian Urdu novel writing, this work is an appeal to writers to explore new paths in Urdu fiction, to look into contemporary issues instead of nostalgically focus on the lost glamour of Muslim domination and on the aftermath of Partition. *Rohzin* is an attempt to do exactly this: to expose problems Indian youngsters face today, and to express the author's deep concern at the recent social and political developments in his country.

It is almost impossible to give a summary of the contents of the novel in a few sentences. One reason is that in several respects it does not correspond to the classical type of the novel genre. The other reason is that it deals with various issues each of which could be understood as the central topic. *Rohzin* is a love story and a story about the concept of Love and its aspects. It is both the story of two young people and an exploration of several varieties of love—from an extramarital affair to sex as a therapy to the absolute, self-denying love of the classical Urdu *ghazal*. *Rohzin* is also a portrait of the city of Mumbai. It is a city novel whose protagonist, setting, and multiple narratives—all reflect the diverse aspects of one of the most fascinating megacities of the world. Finally, *Rohzin* addresses certain issues of India's recent past, in particular the rise of religious fundamentalism since the 80s of the last century.

Apart from the first chapter that establishes certain central motifs such as young man's first sexual experiences and the indomitable rage of the

ocean, the story takes place within a relatively short span of time, from the beginning of May 2003 to the end of July 2004. Interruptions of the chronological narrative by flashbacks and flash-forwards serve to broaden the temporal outlook by about ten years into the past and the future. In addition, there is an extra-temporal dimension provided by the recurring appearance of supernatural beings such as gods and demons.

The perspective is mostly that of the omniscient narrator. In combination with focalization strategies, this perspective allows a panoramic view of varying locations, time(s), and characters. Taken together, they constitute a narrative which reveals itself as a multi-perspective representation of Mumbai.

The protagonist of *Rohzin* is Asrar, a young man from a village on the shore of the Arabian Sea, who goes to Mumbai in order to find work and build up a life for himself. There are numerous other characters like friends and colleagues of Asrar, his school teacher, the perfume dealer Yusuf and his Arab wife, a group of practitioners of Satanist cults, a prostitute, and a Sufi who is the guardian of a miraculous book. From the first pages of the book until the end, however, the main character is Asrar who represents the literary type of the flaneur, explorer and observer of the urban landscape, and takes the reader both through the city and through various experiences of love. In some parts of the book, the focus shifts to other persons, like Asrar’s girlfriend Hina and her father, or non-human beings like ghosts, animals, or plants. In such passages, the reader feels to a much lesser degree that he shares the values and the outlook of the focalized character, Asrar, who is the central character not only because of his strong presence from the beginning to the end of the novel but also because of the higher probability of the reader’s identification with this character.

Historical perspective: The Mumbai riots

South Asia has had a long history of interreligious violence. While communal conflicts have many reasons and take many forms, this article focuses on their reflection in a novel from India, based on particular events in one of the Indian megacities about thirty years ago, events which are known as the “Bombay Riots” or “Mumbai Riots”. These riots broke out shortly after the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists in 1992 and were outwardly an expression of Hindu-Muslim hostility. Up to the present, among the outbursts of violence in India, Hindu-Muslim clashes and anti-Muslim pogroms have been prominent. The literary treatment of the riots in a recent novel is therefore significant and tantamount to a direct political statement bearing on the present situation.

Babri Masjid was a mosque from the 16th century in Ayodhya, India. Ayodhya occupies a special place in the sacred geography of India as it is believed by many Hindus to be identical with the legendary capital of an ancient kingdom, ruled, amongst others, by Lord Rama. Furthermore, the site of the Babri Masjid is believed by many Hindus to be Lord Rama's birthplace. This did not lead to conflict up to the 18th century and, even after that, nobody—neither governments nor Hindu or Muslim organizations—cared much either about the fate of the historical mosque or about the alleged birthplace of a Hindu god. It was only in the 80s of the 20th century when right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations, above all the Vishva Hindu Parishad and its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party, started a campaign for the construction of a temple dedicated to Rama at this site. On December 6, 1992, a group of Hindu activists marched to Ayodhya with hundreds of followers, overwhelmed security forces and demolished the mosque. The picture of a mob standing on top of the building brandishing a saffron flag, went around the world and has ever since become an iconic image of the excesses of Hindu nationalism.

The violence did not end with the destruction of the Babri Masjid. The demolition of the mosque sparked protests worldwide, above all protests from Muslim organizations and individuals within India. The demolition was followed by several months of Hindu-Muslim rioting in various cities. One of the worst riots in the aftermath of the Ayodhya events happened in Mumbai called the "Bombay/ Mumbai Riots". These riots took place in several stages, starting with communal tension and mostly Muslim protests against the demolition of the Babri Masjid, culminating in anti-Muslim riots in December 1992 and January 1993, and followed by a series of retaliatory bombings in March 1993. Between December 1992 and March 1993, several hundreds of people lost their lives (Jaffrelot, 2007, pp 279-282; Masselos, 1994; Masselos, 2007, pp 363-384).

That the Bombay Riots are not forgotten so many years later could not be better demonstrated than by the following surprising statement found, even if only temporarily, in the relevant Wikipedia article:

The violence was widely reported as having been orchestrated by the Islamic political parties in Maharashtra. A high-ranking member of the special branch later stated that the police were fully aware of the Muslim's capabilities to commit acts of violence, and that they had incited hate against the majority communities. Historian Barbara Metcalf has described the riots as an anti-Hindu pogrom. (Wikipedia, Sep., 30, 2020)

This deliberate distortion of the truth would not be worth mentioning, if it was not an indication of the continuing interest in the riots, and the strife for the prerogative of interpretation. The Wikipedia article was found corrected the very next day in the following words:

The violence was widely reported as having been orchestrated by the Shiv Sena, a Hindu-nationalist political party in Maharashtra. A high-ranking member of the special branch later stated that the police were fully aware of the Shiv Sena's capabilities to commit acts of violence, and that they had incited hate against the minority communities. Historian Barbara Metcalf has described the riots as an anti-Muslim pogrom. (Wikipedia, Oct., 10, 2020)

Of course, there is no indication as to who uses Wikipedia and who writes on it, but the distortion of facts in the Wikipedia article and its immediate emendation next day show the importance allotted to the Mumbai riots in the context of present interreligious conflict in India. It is therefore no mere coincidence that the Mumbai riots are also the most prominent political event mentioned in Rahman Abbas' *Rohzin*. However, while the Mumbai riots are generally, and typically in the aforementioned Wikipedia article, perceived as a Hindu-Muslim conflict, the novel, as we can see later in the discussion on forthcoming pages, gives it a new interpretation—an assault on humanitarian values, irrespective of religious affiliation.

Tu hi re: Love, the city, and the riots in Rohzin

Even before he enters the city, Asrar, the protagonist of the novel, has formed a mental image of Mumbai, which is more than anything else due to movies, in particular to “Bombay” (directed by Mani Ratnam, 1995). While the mention of the film song *tu hi re* seems at first sight to point to the love story, it also draws our attention to the background of the film: the interreligious conflicts and the traumatic events of the Bombay Riots of 1992-3. Thus, the film song acts to anticipate all the main topics of the novel: love, the city, and the Mumbai Riots which are the subject of this paper.

The setting of the story in the year 2003 places it about ten years after the Bombay Riots. The events of 1992-3 are addressed in four passages, all of them from the first half of the novel: the 2nd, 3rd and 5th chapter. The 5th chapter is located more or less in the middle of the book (pp. 136-190). In the latter half of the novel, poetry shifts to the foreground, while politics plays a rather subordinate role. In this paper, the passages have been analyzed to show the historical events (within the framework of the Bombay Riots) addressed in the novel, and how their treatment serves to transport meaning. This article is therefore also a contribution to the discussion about the relationship between the aesthetic and the political. A full theoretical discussion with a view to universal statements is, however, beyond the scope of this article (for an overview, and the philosophical background, see Rush 2009). A discussion on the said four passages follows in the forthcoming pages.

Muslim victims, Muslim aggressors

The first passage from the second chapter is placed in the context of a Mumbai sightseeing tour which is undertaken by a group of young men including the protagonist. In the crowded Muhammad Ali Road, Asrar pauses to admire the beautiful historical Minara Mosque. Using the literary strategy of shifting focalization and a time frame connecting the present time with the past, the narrator introduces the reader for the first time to the traumatic events of the Bombay Riots:

These minarets had seen battles about religions and dogmas. They had watched the persons dressed in police uniforms who had brought about a bloodbath in Umar Ali Usman Lungi Cut Bakery during the anti-Muslim riots, but were not found guilty of any offence by the court. The minarets had also been witnesses when late at night, just before dawn, Imam Mahjur al Bukhari alias Hijr Ghilman, had had his followers dump RDX boxes in the silent roads nearby. Nobody had ever found out who was behind this action. The matter had remained under a lot of debate, and the mystery had not yet been cleared up when Imam Mahjur al Bukhari was murdered a few years later a few kilometers away from the mosque. (pp. 43-44)

What is related here is the personal view of the minarets of an old mosque which gives the narrative a perspective wider than that of the protagonist who is both new in the city and has very limited historical knowledge. It refers to several historical events. On 9th January 1993, a special operations squad of the police stormed the Suleman Usman Mithaiwala sweet shop next to Minara Mosque, after “armed terrorists” had allegedly hurled bombs from the roof. The action left numerous Muslims dead, both in the sweet shop and outside. Later, several policemen were accused to have killed eight unarmed persons. The trial in the Suleman Usman Bakery firing case began only in February 2019, three years after the publishing of the novel and 26 years after the event (Shantha 2019). The text ironically speaks of “persons dressed in police uniforms” and the inability of the authorities, despite the apparent carnage, to prove anything against the aggressors. Irony is a common rhetorical strategy to expose shortcomings and injustices. Here it serves to criticize the actions of the police and the state authorities as unnecessarily violent and biased. While the events surrounding the Suleman Usman Bakery firing case belong to the past, the criticism is indirectly (also) aimed at unprofessional behavior of Indian police in the 21st century.

The passage further refers to the case of Maulana Ziauddin Bukhari, a prominent, at times radical, local Muslim politician who was murdered under unexplained circumstances (Zakaria, 2004, p. 271) and whose role in the Mumbai riots is obscure. His mention in this context, however, suggests that he was indeed involved in terrorist attacks.

As is appropriate for the minarets of a mosque as eyewitnesses, the focus is on persons of Muslim religious affiliation. The Muslim population of Mumbai is slightly higher than the national average (Census of India 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/365-mumbai.html>), but unevenly distributed over the various parts of the city. It is neither ethnically nor linguistically uniform. Many of the various Muslim denominations and *biradaris* have in fact little or no contact with other Muslims groups, and inter-Muslim conflicts in India have been just as common as interreligious clashes. In the passages of *Rohzin* referring to the Bombay Riots, but not in other parts of the book, the differences are not addressed. This contrast in the portrayal of Muslims in the novel as a whole and in the parts related to the Mumbai Riots is significant. On the one hand, Muslims of India are portrayed as multilingual and multiethnic, and this in itself is a statement directed against the standardization which has been promoted by fundamentalist Muslim groups since the 80s of the last century. On the other hand, in the context of the Mumbai riots, Muslims as a target of Hindu violence, and Muslims as terrorists were seen indiscriminately as “Muslims” from outside, with the effect that confessional differences were also temporarily and contextually put aside within the community. The minarets are not concerned about sectarian affiliations, and so the reader, without having to be told explicitly, feels that it is nothing but their quality of being Muslim that makes people targets for the attacks of fanaticized Hindus or policemen, whether they are young agitators, terrorists, or innocent passers-by.

By clothing the account of past events in the memories of a mosque, the author filters the information, limiting both the geographical and the psychological space covered by the account. On the one hand, this is a distancing strategy, limiting the value of the evidence, on the other hand, the testimony of an historical building provides a wider outlook in terms of time. The reader’s attention is drawn towards the role of Muslims in the Mumbai riots, but these events are put in a context of many “battles about religions and dogmas”. The techniques of flashback and focalization serve to give the message a scope that reaches beyond the experiences of the protagonist. While the information provided at this point of the novel is very vague, it contains the message that violence against Muslims, often tolerated or supported by the state authorities, is an old and recurring pattern which, consequently, is as virulent today as during the Mumbai riots and many times before.

Bits and pieces, and no salvation

In the same chapter about 20 pages later, we find the second occurrence of observations related to the Mumbai Riots. The young men are taking a rest under a tree in the Mandvi locality of Mumbai. This is an opportunity for the

narrator to portray the involvement of the gangster boss Dawood Ibrahim in the terrorist attacks (Masselos, 1994, p. 90) from the point of view of this tree. In *Rohzin*, the gangster makes his appearance as part of the tree's memories of his conversation with a demon that took place a long time ago. While Dawood Ibrahim's connection with the Bombay bombings, which he is widely believed to have masterminded, is nowhere mentioned directly, this is what has to be interpreted as the core message in the context of this passage. To add, Dawood Ibrahim is portrayed as a true Mumbai boy who grew up and started his career in one of the old quarters of the city:

Sitting in this very tree opposite the post office many years back, a *deev* from the trees opposite Mumba Devi's temple had revealed a secret: this Dawood Konkani who made merry with his friends under this tree and kept saying, "Abe chutya hun kya?", he will later on become the Don of Dongri and will fill the world with terror. 38 solar eclipses before the beginning of a new century, he will flee from Mumbai and rule over another island. He will become a fanatic supporter of an intelligence agency and will—some would call it revenge—carry out terrorist attacks on the city of Mumbai. Intelligence agencies from all over the world will search for him but his own secret agency will give him shelter in a cave. (p. 65)

All this is related while the protagonist and his companions are taking a rest. It takes on the appearance of a highly relevant information which is imparted exclusively to the reader. However, whatever political or historical information may be derived from this passage, it is relativized by the setting. The informant is a tree, not a human being, and its testimony is of limited value in three respects. First, it concerns a time when Dawood was still a largely unknown leader of a local youth clique. Everything that happened afterwards, including Dawood's criminal career as a gangster and internationally wanted terrorist, is given in the form of anticipation, as events happening in the future. How reliable these predictions are likely to be is subject to the readers' evaluation: some of the episodes referred to are in fact historical, but there are also prophecies about events set in a future time beyond the publication date of the novel. Second, all information is based on the insights of supernatural, often fabulous and fantastic characters—a tree, a demon, an angel, a Hindu goddess—and, one wonders, if it becomes more trustworthy because of these sources, or less. Third, the information comes only as a second-hand account by the *deev* (demon) who did not participate in the conversation but only overheard it, and even that only incompletely:

After the death of a Sufi friend at Haji Ali, an angel spent some days or weeks at the Mumba Devi temple. Mumba Devi called him Mikhail Singh. It was Mikhail Singh who revealed to the goddess the secret about Dawood Konkani's destiny and its consequences for Mumbai. He also told her how Dawood would die, but this information was

whispered, so softly that I couldn’t make out what he was saying. (p. 65-66)

In the scene under the tree in Mandvi, the narrator takes the reader on a highly dramatic, if somewhat abstruse, journey through recent Indian history. The author combines literary devices of focalization, flashback, and foreshadowing, as well as both reporting and scenic narrative. The uneasiness and confusion the reader (not the protagonist who at this stage is still ignorant of the past events) feels after the revelations ascribed to the angel is part of Rahman Abbas’ strategy to approach the subject of the riots somewhat gingerly, and step by step. Even though the reader, thanks to the perspective of the omniscient narrator as well as through common historical knowledge, has a wider outlook than the protagonist, it takes a lot of patience and continuous involvement in the story before the bits and pieces combine to form a coherent picture.

The conversation between the demon and the tree ends with a short scene which immediately reduces the distance between the reader and the characters:

The deev closed his story with the words: ‘While Mikhail Singh and Mumba Devi were talking about everything under the sun, I was standing at the temple window. When they discussed the blasts in Mumbai, Mumba Devi had tears in her eyes.’ The tree fell into a sad silence. At last, he said: ‘It is Mumba Devi’s responsibility to plead to Brahma and save the city from calamity.’ The deev burst out laughing, and flew off to Chor Bazar. (pp. 67-68)

Here, the anticipated future events suddenly appear as directly relevant, and indeed ominous, for the young men of the novel, but also for the city of Mumbai of the reader’s own life time. Using the words *brahma ki duhai* (invocation of God Brahma), *musibat se bachaen* (may save from disaster), and *zimedari* (responsibility), the tree invokes a supposed world order under divine guardianship, but that will hardly offer any consolation because it is immediately exposed as mere hollow words by the demon’s laughter.

Again, whatever information is given is vague and presented as hardly reliable. It is not the least due to this vagueness, achieved through focalization, that the text generates a feeling of insecurity in the reader, an indication that the city of Mumbai is threatened. The introduction of a famous gangster boss, a dyed-in-the-wool Mumbai born person, and the rejection of hope for divine assistance by a character who himself is part of the supernatural world, convey one and the same message: the threat comes from inside, and if there is a solution, it will also have to come from the inside. Problems are man-made, and there is no hope of salvation from outside the human sphere.

Violence breeds violence

The third passage is in the third chapter of *Rohzin*. Asrar and his best friend, Muhammad Ali, visit their boss, Musa Patel. While the reader has already been confronted with accounts of the anti-Muslim riots and the bomb attacks in the two preceding passages, this is the first occasion when Asrar learns about them, and when he does, the information is at first rather enigmatic. The device of external focalization ensures that neither the reader nor the protagonist will immediately understand the context of Musa Patel's remark about a person named Yaqoob:

Musa Patel accompanied them until the gate. Before shutting the door, he said to Ali: 'What a wonderful person Yaqoob used to be, but now' He stopped. Frustration showing in his face, he sighed: 'May Allah have mercy on us.' (pp. 86-87)

The vagueness continues even when the narrative is taken over by the omniscient narrator: "Musa Patel had told Muhammad Ali even things which were only known to Yaqoob's family and close friends" (p. 87).

Whatever Asrar comes to know about the riots, he learns from Muhammad Ali who reports what he himself has only heard from others, without always being able to fully interpret it. Thus, Asrar's knowledge is third-hand information. On the basis of such imprecise and not fully reliable information, both the protagonist and the reader only gradually become aware of the role of the character who is named Yaqoob Umar ibn Muqallab Mahiyat in the novel, and another one named "Gullu". The context, never mentioned directly, is the involvement of several members of the Memon family in the events of 1993 when car bomb attacks take place in several areas of Mumbai. Gullu, whose full name is Gul Noor Mohammad Sheikh, was one of the henchmen of the leading terrorist Tiger Memon who is thought to have been one of the master-minds behind the Bombay blasts. Gullu is arrested on March 3, 1993, three days before the attacks are scheduled and, under pressure from the police, he betrays the group's plans. The police does not believe him but, because of his arrest, the organizers decide to carry out the bomb attacks earlier than planned (Zaidi, 2002, pp. 77-79).

Yaqoob Memon is Tiger Memon's younger brother and a successful businessman. A totally different character from his elder brother, he has no criminal inclination originally. It seems that it is mostly his financial acumen that gets him involved in the Mumbai blasts case. After he was arrested in 1994, he was accused of being part of the Bombay blast conspiracy, of having used his know-how and connections for financial transactions to support the operation, and of help with transportation of arms and ammunition. The case was highly political and accompanied by considerable public and media attention. Yaqoob Memon was sentenced to death in 2007, and executed in

2015 (Zaidi, 2002, pp. 229-245). The reader is not part of the conversation between the protagonist and his friend but learns about it through the voice of the narrator from outside the scene:

Despite the heavy rain and the noise of the rushing cars, Asrar could clearly hear everything. For example, that over 1000 people had been killed in the 1992-3 riots, and over 3000 had been injured while the police were standing by. This organized mass murder broke Yaqoob's heart, and who knows what a broken heart can do to a human being. At that time, fires were all over the place. Certain houses were marked and locked from outside before burning them down late at night. (p. 87)

The report by the omniscient narrator suggests rationality and historical accuracy. This stands in contrast to the highly emotional accounts of Musa Patel and Muhammad Ali. Another contrast is present in terms of space. The physical proximity and limited space occupied by the two characters standing under a tree, holding an umbrella against the pouring rain, is counterbalanced by the narrator's perspective which transcends time and the limits of human perception:

Mumba Devi had also witnessed the fire, bloodshed, and religious fanaticism. It was during those days of violence and hatred that Mumba Devi overheard a rishi's soul on the neem tree across the temple window saying to a rakshasa demon: 'Violence breeds violence, and revenge breeds revenge.' According to the rakshasa, the soul was actually that of a brave warrior in Shivaji Maharaj's army. The same rishi had praised Shivaji for the fact that under his flag Hindus and Muslims had been united in the struggle against the enemy. (p. 87)

The paragraph ends with a brief conversation, where Asrar's reaction again triggers a distancing attitude towards the narrated event: "It is wrong, though, isn't it, to kill innocent people" (p. 88).

The relationship between the narrator, the characters and the reader, closeness and detachment, their perception and evaluation of the events which are told in retrospective, change several times within this short passage. While the earlier passages gave a picture of communal clashes and the arbitrariness of the police without pointing to the origin of the aggression, this passage focusses on systematic targeted violence against the Muslim minority during the Mumbai riots, and the subsequent changes in the victims' attitudes. As before, but now with Asrar as a listener, the information about the riots comes indirectly, and hesitatingly. It feels like the memories of the riots and the suffering inflicted on Muslims come trickling out, almost as if it was too painful for the narrator to relate it, and too burdensome for

the listener to digest as a whole, in a simple and straightforward account. For the reader of the novel, the filtered and fragmented account conveys the impression that the Mumbai riots are a traumatic event which has deeply impregnated the collective memory of Mumbai Muslims.

The central message of this passage, however, goes beyond the representation of the trauma. This is the statement that “Violence breeds violence, and revenge breeds revenge.” What makes this a political message is that it is attributed to a soldier of the famous 17th century Maratha warrior, Shivaji. In recent Indian historiography, Shivaji is often stylized as a successful Hindu leader, as a counterpart to the Muslim Mogul emperor Aurangzeb, as a champion of the independence of India and the revival of Hindu political traditions, as well as a promoter of the Indian languages, Marathi and Sanskrit, in court and administration, rather than Persian which was commonly used as an official language in the India of his time. For the Shiv Sena in particular, the Hindu-nationalist movement under whose leadership Muslim citizens were attacked, persecuted and killed in 1992, Shivaji was an anti-Muslim hero and a role model for the establishment of a purely Hindu empire (Masselos, 1994, p. 82; Heuzé, 2011, pp. 13-14). Even today, the great Maratha leader is still instrumentalized to propagate Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim ideas. Introducing the name of this historic personality in the novel thus serves to create a critical link with the Hindu nationalism of the present. The testimony of the fictive eye-witness, a soldier in Shivaji’s army, with a statement which does not distinguish between followers of particular religions, challenges the doctrinal misrepresentation of Shivaji being a Hindu ruler in the sense of excluding Muslims.

Creating empathy with the traumatized Muslims on the one hand, and pointing out, on the other hand, what is hailed as a glorious tradition of anti-Muslim Hindu warriorship, is in fact nothing but a misrepresentation of historical facts. This passage is an emphatic message directed against current Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim politics.

A total mayhem

The last and fourth relevant paragraph is in the 5th chapter. Asrar and Muhammad Ali are on their way home from another visit to their boss Musa Patel. While Muhammad Ali’s voice melts into that of the narrator, the reader learns about events taking place between the 6th and 8th January, 1993.

These events happened during a time identified as the second phase of the riots by the Srikrishna commission which was constituted in 1993 by the government of Maharashtra for investigating the circumstances, events, and causes of the Mumbai Riots. The atrocities included killings of Hindus by Muslim, and killing of Muslims by Hindu fanatics in several parts of Mumbai, as well as mob violence, arson, and attacks on innocent people who happened to live in a particular area or were just passing by. In *Rohzin*, two

incidents in particular are mentioned. In the night of January 7-8, some homes at Radhabai Chawl in Jogeshwari were set on fire, resulting in six people burnt alive, among them a handicapped teenage girl. This became the most publicized case of the riots, and was used by the Shiv Sena and related organizations to justify targeted retaliation against Muslims. On the 8th January, a bomb was hurled at the police commissioner’s car showing that the authority of the police was greatly undermined, and that the situation was far from being under control. The main focus of this paragraph, however, is neither on the events nor on the question of who did what. It highlights two less prominent but important features of the Bombay Riots: the existence of generous and selfless help from non-Muslims, and the destructive power of rumors. A rumor starts, spreads, becomes uncontrollable and, in the end, results in bloodshed and destruction on all sides:

Rumors had spread that Anuradhabai Chawl had been set on fire and six people including a handicapped girl had been burnt alive. The news spread like wildfire, and caused fire [and] bloodshed everywhere. In Pydhonie, Dongri, Jogeshwari, M.R.A. Marg, V.P. Road, D.B. Marg, Gamdevi, Nagpada, Agripada, Byculla, Kalachauk, Worli, Dadar, Mahim, Dharavi, Kurla, Nehru Nagar, Ghatkopar, Vikhroli, Oshiwara, and D.N. Nagar, people were celebrating Holi, not with colors but with blood. In Pydhonie, a dargah was devastated, in Jogeshwari a graveyard, in Byculla and Mahim, Hindu temples. In Pydhonie, the police commissioner was attacked by a crude bomb but he escaped unhurt. For two weeks, it was chaos, looting, destruction, and bloodshed. (p. 138)

In the previous passages, the account focused on violence against the Muslims, and retaliatory violence by them. If the reader could get the impression that only Muslims are concerned, and that it is someone’s belonging to a particular religious community which determines his role in the riots, this passage makes it abundantly clear that communal violence affects all and sundry, Muslims, Hindus, and whoever else happens to get in the way. Both Hindus and Muslims are shown to be actively participating in the riots, and the victims are members of all religious communities. The mere enumeration of names creates the impression that, one after the other, the rioting spreads to all parts of the city.

The political message to be gathered from this passage is that violence, once unleashed, cannot be contained and that targeted violence against one community will never stop there but destroy the whole social framework. It is a clear warning against current tendencies in Indian society to favor Hindus over Indian citizens of other backgrounds. Again, the technique is focalization which shifts from a character of the novel to the omniscient narrator. The reader thus faces at first a more intimate situation which then turns into a seemingly neutral one, thus experiencing two kinds

of trustworthiness: that of the narrative by a friend, and that of an account by the informed reporter or historian, the double perspective making the warning appear all the more urgent.

This passage also ends with a reaction from Asrar, in this case a non-reaction, due to his inability to put his strong feelings into words: “Asrar did not say anything. He was speechless” (p. 139). The shock caused by Muhammad Ali’s account of Muslims being hunted down by fanatics as well as retaliatory Muslim terrorist attacks is instead translated into a dream. This dream combines the two topics of the novel, “Trauma” and “Love”, and also serves to foreshadow the dystopian end of the protagonists as well as the city of Mumbai. That, however, concerns the end of the novel and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Magical Realism

As we have seen, among the characters of *Rohzin*, there are trees, demons, and other non-human persons. In an otherwise altogether realistic setting of Mumbai in 2003-4, non-human beings creep in to become prominent characters of the story, and supernatural events happen within the narrative of a young man whose life is in no way extraordinary or spectacular. Magical realism is a technique which is mostly associated with Latin American and European writers. Urdu literature has a rich tradition of using fantastic and bizarre elements, but only rarely is the term “magical realism” used in this context. However, it is hardly possible to employ any other term for the fantastic elements in *Rohzin*, since their use corresponds perfectly well with the most common, if not the only, definition of a magical realism novel. By that definition, fantastic elements intrude into a realistic setting, with the magic elements depicted as part of everyday life within the novel, and without them ever being rationally explained or “normalized”.

One might ask what Rahman Abbas intended by employing this technique. Is it any more than a fashionable literary device? Supernatural characters appear throughout the novel, but when we analyze the contexts where they occur, we find that their presence is strongest in the passages about traumatic events. Even within the few short passages quoted in this article, we find the minarets of a mosque, the city goddess Mumba Devi, demons of two different classes (*deev* and *rakshasa*), an angel, the soul of a rishi (a sage, or seer), and a tree. Linking the supernatural characters with the events of the Mumbai Riots, their appearance acquires a political connotation. This is, in fact, in accordance with another feature of magic realist novels worldwide, namely their frequent critique of society and political mainstream. *Rohzin* is indeed a political novel, and we have already witnessed how police violence and Hindu nationalism are addressed. However, the magical elements draw attention to an even larger dimension of the dramatic events.

The non-human characters act as participants affected by the events, and as commentators, and they provide background information. Rarely (and not at all in the quoted passages) do they actually cause or influence events. What they do is reflect the historical events, and transcend them. Whenever, in historical terms, innocent people are killed in Mumbai, it will be, in mythological terms, a success for the demonic adversaries of the city goddess. Mumba Devi is a Hindu goddess of minor importance and she is relativized by her freely associating with Muslim demons and angels. The message conveyed by the use of magical realism is that it is not a specific community which is the ultimate victim, neither is the violence limited to a particular party or the opposition between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority, which is the focus of this book. It is the city itself, with all its inhabitants, human and non-human, that is threatened.

Watching the events and commenting on them with the outlook of creatures whose life span is much longer and whose insight is often deeper than that of humans, the non-human characters guide the reader to a wider perspective, leading away from communalism and sectarianism. Through the intervention of magical creatures, the reader is given to understand that the infernal cycle of violence and counter-violence is not limited to one single community or party, nor to a particular place, or time.

The greatness of Mumbai lies in its very diversity which is rooted in its history and the diverse cultural influences it absorbed. In the novel, this is amply demonstrated while the reader follows the protagonists across the city. The wealth of cultural diversity, however, does not apply to the city of Mumbai alone, but to India at large and, in fact, as the reader may infer, to the world we live in. Nationalism, racism, and religious fanaticism are the phenomena present in many countries. So magical realism in *Rohzin* becomes an instrument of political criticism, aiming at alarming trends in Indian politics, but also relevant to global politics and society, and a pretext to alert the reader to the fact that such developments may result in disaster. It is a warning against attempts from any side to endanger the idea of a multifaceted, multireligious, and multicultural society.

As it has been pointed out above, the political events of 1992-3 constitute only a very small part of Rahman Abbas' novel *Rohzin* (no more than 9 out of 354 pages). In the second half of the book, there is no direct mention of them, and yet, they are more than a historical accessory complementing the portrait of a megacity, or a device to introduce some characters. Just as the characters of the novel suffer from trauma experienced earlier in their lives, the city of Mumbai suffers from the interreligious hostilities and atrocities that happened among her inhabitants at particular periods of history. Only after finishing much of the book, the reader begins to understand the significance of its title, *Rohzin*. It is a unique compound created by the author from *ruh* “soul” and *hizn* “melancholy, grief”, and it

refers to the burden of unresolved trauma weighing down the soul, both of individuals and the city (or country) as a whole. The Mumbai Riots in the novel are an expression of this trauma in terms of history. The traumatic character of the riots is emphasized by referring to them in the four passages analyzed in the previous pages. They are never mentioned again, and need not be, because just as early trauma in the subconscious of a person, they remain present as an underlying half-forgotten memory of the city.

Considering the four passages in *Rohzin* analyzed above, we notice a gradual development of ideas in the presentation and evaluation of the events of 1992-3. Starting with a depiction of the Muslim population of Mumbai as victims but also as agents of violence, the novelist goes on to the general observation that violence breeds violence, and ends up with a characterization of the riots as eruption of rationally not justifiable and eventually unmanageable brutality. While in the beginning, the novel seems to focus on Muslim victims of communal violence, the reader is gradually made to understand that it is the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai itself with all its different parts, and its inhabitants representing various religions, cultures, and languages, whose very survival is endangered by communalism. The hounding of members of particular religious communities, murder, rape, and physical mistreatment, the hate and fear of the Bombay Riots which lasted for days and months, as well as the passivity or even involvement of government authorities, and, ten years after the riots, the continuing repercussions of the traumatic events, as in *Rohzin*—all this is part of a multi-layered portrait of the city of Mumbai, along with the political message that the city will be ruined by biased politics and interreligious strife.

The understanding comes slowly to the reader, as its evolvment is controlled and gradually unfolded through literary devices like time frame, focus, and flashbacks. As the reader digs through the novel and tries to see through vague hints and allusions, (s)he is taken through various thoughts and emotions ranging from indignation to uneasiness to horror, until (s)he realizes that all this is neither about uniquely anti-Muslim violence nor about an historical event as a background for a coming-of-age story, but rather a political message for the present. The integration of the Mumbai riots in the novel, and the way this is done, is a device to make the reader aware of the impending danger imminent in political developments of the 21st century. The subtle and gradual way of conveying information makes it more forceful than a direct statement because the reader experiences the message as his or her own insight.

The factor that emerges as the root of violence and as a threat to the future of Mumbai and India is the exploitation of religion as a tool of polarization and political power games. In this way, *Rohzin* is a contribution to the ongoing Indian discussion about the role of religion in the public sphere and about what and who is truly “Indian”. Using overtly non-political literary devices in a fictional work, the author adds a new accent to the

controversy, specifying that it is not a particular religion but the abuse of any religion that leads to communal violence and is eventually a threat to society at large. Published in 2016, after the communal violence in Muzaffarnagar 2013, but before the recent events in Delhi and elsewhere in India in 2020, the novel, among many other aspects, appeals to the readers, especially the Indian readers, whether Muslim or Hindu, to hold on to secularism, in order to preserve the beauty and the freedom Mumbai offers to her inhabitants and visitors.

Note: Since the author is conversant with Urdu, she used the original Urdu text of Rahman Abbas’ novel *Rohzin* for her analysis. She translated *Rohzin* into German in 2018. So far, no English translation of the book is available.

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