

**MOTHERHOOD, MOTHERLAND AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE:
ALLEGORICAL IMPLICATIONS OF “THE FEED” BY AHMAD NADEEM
QASMI**

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ABSTRACT

This research study attempts to explore the various allegorical implications of “The Feed” by Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi- its maternity narrative in relation to nationalism, motherland and the related issues of distributive justice especially in the scenario of third world countries. The association of the mother and the homeland, both of them nurturing, offers a wider perspective on the role of the biological mother in terms of motherland. The linkage of the mother to motherland with its multidimensional interpretations serves as the backdrop to the thematic concerns and dominant tropes of the age. A mother provides food and shelter to her young ones and so should a motherland. Through his deft poetic skills, Qasmi articulates universal paradigms into the with its division into two distinct parts: the mother bird's dilemma and the breaking apart of the grain, that add layers of meanings with an implicit allusion to nuclear reaction. In this context the poem becomes a cautionary tale as well as an impassioned plea voiced by a poet who loves humanity, encompassing grave global human problems of poverty, hunger, population explosion and absence of any practicable solution, so emphasizing the urgency to reassess the strategy to tackle all these enigmatic issues on humanitarian grounds.

Keywords: Allegorical implications, distributive justice, backdrop, tropes, dilemma, implicit allusion, nuclear reaction, cautionary tale, humanitarian grounds.

INTRODUCTION

“The Feed” by the legendary Urdu and English Pakistani poet, Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, offers an insight into the maternity narrative in national as well as international context. “Motherhood” as a metaphor for creativity, reproduction, identity and responsibility to nourish, will be the primary framework for the analysis of the selected poem. The mother and motherland are linked because both of them are capable of re-producing and creating a life cycle that signifies the historical genealogy of one’s root. The poem allows the poet to put forward his moral and political point of views. An in depth study gives us an insight into his mind as how he views the world and how he dreams the world to be.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Questions

1. How does motherhood stand for motherland?
2. What objective does the maternity narrative aim at in the poem?
3. How does this poem demonstrate the multifaceted dimensions of socio-economic menaces that threaten the very existence of the poor countries?
4. How far can the nuclear technology be a solution of these problems and at what cost?

No critical study on “The Feed” by Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi, analysing his poetry within the aforementioned theoretical framework and perspective, has been conducted so far, and

therefore this study is an invaluable contribution to the existing scholarly knowledge of the discipline. This study also contributes in another way, as it is the first work in English at this level.

Background to the Problem

Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi (1916-2006), a proponent of Progressive Writers' Movement, deals with some basic human issues in his beautifully yet intriguingly simple short poem "The Feed". Translated into English from Urdu, the poem apparently addresses the problem of a mother bird that has only one grain of food to feed her ten baby birds. Who should the mother give the grain? Which of the young sparrows should receive it? How should the mother satisfy the hunger of all the babies and that too in a justified way with only one grain of millet? These are the questions embedded into the easily comprehensible language and can be explained at the allegorical plane as the predicament faced by the poor mothers and countries all over the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The linkage of a mother to motherland has been common in various literary forms. The poem bears resemblance in thematic preoccupations and literary devices with a majority of poets and writers who share the trope of Mother as Motherland.

- The poem "Bread" by the national poet of Palestine, Mahmoud Darwish, (March 13, 1941, Al-Birwa- August 9, 2008, Houston, Texas, United States) written to his mother, is one of his strongest poems. In this poem Mother is acts as a metaphor for his homeland Palestine with a very iconic subject in Middle Eastern culture: Bread.
- "Letter to Ba (Letter to mother)," by Chandrakant (or Chandu) Shah (1956), a Boston-based Gujarati poet and playwright, tells of a newlywed Indian woman in the United States writing to her mother back in India and trying to convey all she misses about her home and homeland.
- "The Joys of Motherhood", a novel (1979) by Buchi Emecheta (July 21, 1944, Lagos, Nigeria) provides excellent insight to the effects of colonialism on native Nigerians and reveals the pleasures derived from fulfilling responsibilities related to family matters in child bearing, mothering, and nurturing activities among women side by side highlighting the anxiety, obligation, and pain involved in the process implying the responsibilities of state in this respect.
- The association of the mother and the homeland, both of them as the providers of survival elements and thus being oppressive is clear in Jamaica Kincaid's, Antiguan-American novelist, essayist, (May 25, 1949) first piece of fiction, a story entitled "Antigua Crossing"

The Caribbean Sea is so big, and so blue, and so deep, and so warm, and so unpredictable, and so inviting, and so dangerous, and so beautiful. This is exactly the way I feel about the women in my own family. (1978, p48)

Kincaid's literary work, "Annie John", "Lucy", "At The Bottom Of The River" and "The Autobiography Of My Mother", deal with the recurrent themes of biological mother in terms of colonial motherland.

METHODOLOGY

Areas to Study

An in depth analysis of the literary, economic and social scenario of the period has helped me to achieve the objective.

Resources and Methods

I have conducted the qualitative research while using the following resources, in order to collect the target information. After that, I have examined that set of information critically, tracing the correlative link with the poem under discussion.

- Library catalogues
- Literary Histories, Encyclopedias.
- Literary Journals
- Internet
- Snowballing.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Albeit the poem is comprised of simple imagery at the literal plane, yet the entirety of the poem is devoted to show the various challenges and stumbling blocks when examined microscopically. In fact the poem does much more than presenting the plight of the mother bird and is endowed with multifold allegorical significance. Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi was a renowned Urdu and English Pakistani poet. His poetry was known for its appeal to the common man and his ability to humanize. Thus, the mother bird represents the predicament faced by mothers all over the world.

Semantically, the word “mother” suggests a source and an origin- one’s earliest memory, blood relation, and even primordial identity- all are associated with mother. In biological terms, a mother is the only one to provide food and a protective home (womb) at the pre-birth stage and satisfy infant’s instinct for survival. A mother offers, namely, the protection and nourishment. It is not only a biological mother but also a motherland that gives a life and is expected to be an active force in shaping and guiding its citizens’ lives while satisfying their needs for survival. So the poet is intelligent enough to shed light on the desired subject through this literary cannon for the highest effect while sensitizing the issue.

The metaphorical connotations of “Feed” include an instinctive desire for meal as well as all the basic needs for survival including shelter, health and education etc. The poem reflects mother’s love and concern for her children. The mother sparrow tries to feed her children and wants them to grow well, be prosperous and independent. She tries to teach them how to get food and eat it. The parents have deep love for their young ones. They feed them. They help them to grow and to become young. They cannot see them die of hunger or thirst. They have equal love for all of their young ones. It not only refers to the natural parental love in all living beings but also the responsibility of a motherland for the provision of all possible resources for the prosperity and well-being of all of its individuals

The poem bears a striking resemblance with “Bread” by Mahmoud Darwish in title and thematic implications to a great extent. Bread is a metaphor for human survival. In this instance it has been used as a metaphor for mother’s love, motherland, balance and peace. In

many cultures of the world bread is considered holy and respected in ritual, especially in the destitute countries that lends it even more importance. It reiterates how much the poet misses his mother and country when he writes at the peak of his emotions:

I must be worth my life
At the hour of my death
Worth the tears of my mother.

The prescient point in the third line is astounding in that Darwish wanted to be worthy of his mother's tears when he died or again he wanted to be worthy of his people and his country. In several lines the commanding use of simile brings the poem so close to "The Feed" amazingly:

Without your blessing
I am too weak to stand.
I am old

The overpowering strength of his emotion in this poem, and the use of simple vocabulary make "Bread" impressive and accessible to every reader, like that of Qasmi, who knows the love of a mother and motherland and thus is eternal. The verbal snapshots of various enigmatic problems in "The Feed", though narrated in a light tone, make us concentrate on the global issues faced by the poor countries through the mother bird's quandary. Qasmi manages to elaborate his premise further through a careful word choice- "the young ones...", not the young birds; "When they cry..." not chirp or howl; "With whom should she solace...", not support or help. By attributing a humanizing effect to his vocabulary, he enables the reader to look beneath the surface, gaze beyond the words and read between the lines to look into and try to resolve the human problems.

"The tiny and small" birds allegorize the under developed nations and countries who are fighting the battle of survival with their meager nutritional resources. "From head to toe they are beaks" depicts the acute hunger that strikes them and the "mother bird" holding only one "grain of millet in her beak" has to decide as how to follow the highest standards of distributive justice and divide that single grain among "ten young ones" is in fact the conflict of the fair allocation of resources by the state to its individuals. "To whom the mother sparrow should feed?" underlies the huge responsibility of motherland to satisfy all the needs of its citizens irrespective of their origin in order to make them successful ones. Rawls's "general conception of justice", which is that "all social values - liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect - are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage": injustice "is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all". (1999, 24).

With the realization of the seriousness of the problem, many governments are known for dealing with issues of distributive justice, especially countries with ethnic tensions and geographically distinctive minorities. Post-apartheid South Africa is an example of a country that deals with issues of re-allocating resources with respect to the distributive justice framework.

The poem also highlights the fact that the inhabitants of third world countries struggle to give the most basic essentials to their children. When the food and water are limited, which of the children or citizens grasps the succour from the mother/motherland-a hard choice for the bird or the human mother or homeland?

The poem is also a covert reference to the series of grave resultant problems which the failure of such a practice and inequality may cause in form of poor health, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, political and economic instability, thus eroding the existential roots of a country. This literary portrayal of Qasmi fits quite well in the international scenario when only a few hundred multinationals in the world have their coffers 50 percent of the world's GDP and hence the ever rising rate of poverty in Pakistan and the third world countries should be a matter of great concern for a poet whose life-long literary pursuit has ever been motivated by the humanitarian drive.

“One grain to be fed to the ten young ones”

Through the description of “ten” baby sparrows waiting anxiously to be fed by their mother, Qasmi seems to be rightly alarmed by the “ticking bomb of population” that has gripped the whole world in its monstrous clutches. The problem of over-population is really threatening as the current world population has crossed the limit of seven billion and “is projected to increase by 1 billion over the next 12 years and reach 9.6 billion by 2050” as noted by “World Population Prospects: the 2012 Revision”. Overpopulation hampers the economic growth and causes decline in per capita income following no balance in according to Demand and supply, so investment suffers. Such a stagnant economy results in closing of factories and business and thus maximizing joblessness and poverty. Greater population means more hungry souls to feed that gives rise to dependency ratio. In words of Anna McKenzie, hunger “means never having enough to eat”. “Hunger And Population Explosion” seems to be the bleak destiny of the poor under developed countries.

The apprehensions of Qasmi are quite genuine about which the concern has ever been shown, no matter whether it be in the form of Dr. Ehrlich’s verbal punch to the gut: “The battle to feed all of humanity is over” or Malthusian assessment of the whole issue that population growth generally expands in times and in regions of plenty until the size of the population relative to the primary resources causes distress:

“This constant effort as constantly tends to subject the lower classes of the society to distress and to prevent any great permanent amelioration of their condition”.(1798. Chapter II, p 18)
No less important is the effort by Harry Harrison, who seems to join hands with Qasmi in his attempt to enumerate the same issue in his science fiction novel “Make Room! Make Room!” (1966) that explores trends in the proportion of world resources to population growth, depicting a world where the global population is seven billion, subject to overcrowding, resource shortages, and a crumbling infrastructure.

All these voices emphasize the urgency for a practicable solution of the embarrassing problem and the eradication of all its ill effects for the maximum benefit of humanity. How should we proceed towards it? This question adopts an ironic rather haunting dimension when the poet draws attention to the tragic fact of “Fissuring the atom” that refers to the splitting of an atomic nucleus into approximately equal parts, either spontaneously or as a result of the impact of a particle usually with an associated release of energy which abounds in the nuclear ambitions of the production of the atomic weapons at any cost. The atomic bomb is both a life guarantee and an item of great prestige for those who sacrifice the bread of their masses for bomb without thinking about the havoc played by such an exercise to the survival of the masses. The metaphorical reference of “splitting the grain” is the extension of the same practice which can ultimately cause a nuclear reaction and the loss of human life. The humanist Qasmi hints at the more perplexing choice of the extermination of the problem

through fissuring the atom by the extinction of the subject masses or the division of a grain of millet equally among all the receivers. These realities are not far to be traced in a world that has been split into haves and have-nots and filled with hunger, poverty, and no solutions. Unfortunately, the impoverished face their children every day with the question: How do we split the food so that each of the children gets an equal portion?

It is no more than to feed the bomb and starve the people. The alarmingly high level of malnutrition observed in the sub-Saharan Africa and South Asian countries, where millions of children have been identified as under-weight, stunted, and wasting because of hunger, poverty and disease, pose a question mark at the prospect of continuously pouring undisclosed billions into conventional and nuclear weapons by their states. "A nuclear technology that would serve military purposes cannot be for welfare, but for absolute evil and a den of terror." (Safa Haeri Iran, US: Fissures within fissures, 2005)

“The young ones are so tiny and small,
From head to toe they are beaks,”

Qasmi's depiction of the young birds as "so tiny and small" that "From head to toe they are beaks" is an apt portrayal of the picture reported jointly by UNICEF, the World Bank, and USAID, that 50 per cent of children born in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan in 1999 weighed less than 2.5 kg who could rarely be expected to catch-up in weight and height later. These poor, helpless souls seem to make a plea, "Why don't they drop a bomb on us as well to relieve us from the misery that we are in." It is to make a choice between the bomb and bread, keeping in mind the historical fact that thousands of nuclear weapons did not prevent the Soviet Union from disintegration after it failed to feed and clothe its citizens especially following the policies of Stalin to allocate huge resources to the nuclear program at a time when his country lay in ruins during the post war reconstruction phase.

Professor economist Michael Ellman (July 27, 1942) claims that the hands of the Russian government could have fed all those who died of starvation if the policies of Soviet regime had been different. Ellman claims that the famine resulted in 1 to 1.5 million lives in addition to secondary population losses due to reduced fertility- the consequent outcome of the Soviet obsession of the nuclear development and its hazardous effects. 'The Arduous March' in North Korea (1994-98) with rampant malnutrition that caused a decade of hunger leaving seven year old North Korean children eight inches shorter and 20 pounds lighter than those in South Korea, trying to use the public distribution system to augment the food shortage, surprisingly seem to match the themes of the poem. Sauvage's report provides not only further evidence of North Korea's inability to feed its people, but also bolsters critics who say that the government should be spending on food security instead of testing rockets, building up its military, and pursuing a nuclear programme.

The prophetic vision of Qasmi with a humane approach makes the readers mindful of setting and defining our priorities whether the key global challenge for us to meet is of hunger or nuclear proliferation. The heedless race of nuclear weapons leads to skewed access and distribution, leaving millions in desperation. As a result many developing countries are forced to face tremendous external debt that exacerbates hunger crises. The main victims of international trade imbalances are the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Governments have to often decide between feeding people and paying off external debt; the unrelenting pressure from lenders results in constant hunger and poverty which the poet is so worried about.

The recent studies confirm the poet's worry as they predict that global agriculture would be so negatively affected by such a nuclear war and a global famine would result, which would cause up to 2 billion people to starve to death. It is also conjectured that a nuclear war would create such extreme long-term damage to the global environment that it would leave the Earth uninhabitable for humans and most animal forms of life.

CONCLUSIONS

The poet envisions the grim future of humanity through this literary portraiture. Wrapped in the allegorical cover, this simple poem encapsulates the global concerns about the institutionalized poverty, wealth inequality, war, and empire, with heightened emotional culmination through the puzzling situation of the mother bird about how to feed ten young ones with a single grain. It is a suitable summation of the huge responsibilities of a motherland to provide all the socio-economic resources to its citizens in order to make them grow and mature into vibrant centers of human capability and possibility. Qasmi engenders extreme sensitivity to his narrative by the portrayal of the mother bird's choice of splitting the grain of millet to satisfy the hunger of all babies dependent on her that symbolically refers to the escalation of the conflict faced by the underdeveloped poor countries whether to nourish the hunger stricken souls or resort to the development of nuclear programme, so causing the ultimate destruction of their individuals. Through this literal depiction of a bird story, the poet points towards the world's futile stockpiles of fearsome nuclear weapons that are built up to levels far beyond any conceivable purpose and only seem to add to the misery, uncertainty and instability of the age. Instead, what the staunch humanist, Qasmi, seems to argue is the just division of all resources among individuals by the state so that the economic means may be used to resuscitate and rebuild our struggling impoverished communities and to restore our faith in humanity with a humanitarian relief.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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