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Ideas of Contemporariness and Friendship: Re-imagining Democracy in Abdul Bismillah's "Atithi Devo Bhava/Guest is God"

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Abstract:

Democracy in popular consciousness is understood both as a set of rules, procedures, and institutions, and as a group of officials and functionaries who manage the democratic system. This paper argues that legal and constitutional procedures are not the only means of understanding democracy. The research examines how Abdul Bismillah's short story *Athithi Devo Bhava* explores alternative ways of conceptualising democracy outside the realm of legality, viewing it instead as a site of continuous negotiation. To achieve this, the study critically engages with ideas of contemporariness and friendship as parallel frameworks for reimagining democracy as an ongoing and evolving process.

Keywords: Democracy, contemporariness, negotiation, friendship, public sphere.

There is an urgent need to "de-realize" democracy, that is, the discourse surrounding democracy must be reconstituted. While there is no contestation that democracy and the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity it upholds must be situated within the realm of law, but how does one comprehend events that fall outside the purview of jurisprudence, yet still threaten the fundamental human right of equality? Moreover, the judiciary works through a violent

process of interpellation, wherein the individual is hailed into pre-existing frameworks. The court, which functions within "the grammatical requirements of accountability," risks reducing the discourse of human rights to the act of prosecution. (Butler 156) In this act of prosecution, the violent history of religious oppression is often subdued. Therefore, there is a need for a political imagination that transcends the discourse of protection and accountability. This does not entail rejecting the realm of law, but rather finding alternative spaces where deliberations are possible.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to rethink the ideals of democracy and critically examine its exclusions. How, then, should one imagine the state? Do we perceive it solely within its electoral and representative domain, or through symbols that signify state power and evoke emotions of nationalism and patriotism? This essay proposes an alternative imagination of the state, grounded in the idea of a nation that understands democracy an ongoing process to be achieved. Democracy must extend beyond elections, which are only one of its many facets. Instead, democracy should be imagined as a collective space where people can voice their everyday concerns. The nation is thus fictive in the sense that it can be imagined as a creative stance, embracing new modes of existence. This essay explores how religious inequality manifests in the mundane social interactions of everyday life, while also engaging with the ideas of contemporariness and friendship as parallel processes for reconstituting and imagining democracy as a collective. The essay further examines how Bismillah's story defamiliarizes the known notions of space and language. Additionally, the essay discusses how the story creates the possibility of reimagining democracy through friendship, moving beyond the male-dominated idea of fraternity.

Homi K. Bhabha, in his essay "Democracy De-realized," proposes a different lens of engaging with democracy, that is, to consider democracy as something "de-realized rather than unrealized" (29). This perspective suggests that democracy should be seen as an anticipation,

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and the discourse surrounding it must be reconstituted in such a framework. Bhabha uses the term "de-realized" in the Brechtian sense of defamiliarization, where objects, people, or events are placed "in a context not of its making, in order to defamiliarize it, to frustrate its naturalistic and normative 'reference' and see what potential that idea or insight has for 'translation', in the sense both of genre and geopolitics, territory and temporality" (29). This potential of translation can be found in Abdul Bismillah's short story "Guest is God." Bismillah's story illustrates the prejudice embedded within the social fabric of society. It narrates an episode from the life of Mohammad Salman, a Muslim, as he unexpectedly visits the home of his student, Mishrilal Gupta, a Hindu. Salman is initially surprised and eased by the hospitality extended to him by Gupta's neighbour, a Brahmin Woman, who welcomes him into her home in Gupta's absence. However, once Salman's identity is revealed and the word "Muslim" is uttered, the hospitality is silently withdrawn. Though there is no physical violence, the subtle shifts in behaviour, such as the replacement of the steel tumbler with a glass one and the woman's quiet retreat into the kitchen, suggests the painful mental violence Salman faces.

The story through its narrative creates an unsettling atmosphere from the outset, as Salman must travel in the scorching heat to reach Gupta's house. The journey can be interpreted as a metaphor for the journey toward democracy, where one must constantly and continuously negotiate their place in society. The heatwave in the story is described as disrupting "the city's social and economic life" (Bismillah 186). At one level, as Simona Sawhney notes, the heat can be seen as symbolising the soul-crushing effects of communal violence. On another level, particularly in the current context, inequality not only disrupts the public life but also invade private spaces, with a sweltering effect that disturbs interpersonal social interactions. Additionally, the narrative describes how "the roads were like a tawa on the chulha" but the "rich had khas screens on their doors" thus shielding them from the scorching heat. (186) In

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contrast, the poor had to seek refuge under the overbridge, waiting for the sun to set. Thus, the narrative lays bare the stark inequality present in society.

Moreover, Salman willingly undertakes the difficult journey because he anticipates a positive outcome. He imagines that when Gupta sees him, he will wake up from his nap, "open the bolt still blinking and then hasten to touch his feet" (189). However, this never happens. He never meets Gupta and is left feeling disrespected by Gupta's neighbours. The journey, though a tough one, is always described with an underlying sense of hope. As the narrative tells us that Salman "remembered Gupta's house number but not its location. And yet he hoped to get there" (187). He is attacked by a "hot blast" and is left "baffled and confused" in the process of finding Gupta's home. Along the way, he encounters a shopkeeper who "without bothering to spit the paan juice out of his mouth" (188) informs him that he has passed the house. He is met with indifference when he asks a girl for direction, who "had no time to reply" (189). Finally, he meets a gentleman "who noticed his uneasiness" and pointed him in the right direction. The entire journey can be seen as a metaphor for democracy. A journey towards democracy as a process that might hold promise (in this case the wishful thinking that he'll meet and surprise Gupta) of a positive outcome but is at times tiring and the outcome elusive. It is in recognizing this "fragility, rather than in failure, that its creative potential for coping with trials of the new century lies" (29). Additionally, Giorgi Agamben's concept of contemporariness speaks to the idea of perceiving and negotiating darkness, which ultimately opens up a field of subjectivities. Thus, Salman's character can be considered a contemporary, as "to perceive this darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability" (45). The story then through the process of defamiliarization creates a potential to translate itself into newer creative forms.

The text defamiliarizes the familiar notions of space to subvert ideas that consider city spaces as arenas devoid of inequality. In terms of spatial organisation, the small town where

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Gupta and Salman Saheb lived was controlled by societal norms of sanitation and social separation. The town had separate spaces for eateries, one for Muslims and another for Hindus. Similarly, there were separate educational institutions constructed based on this binary-Banaras Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University. One observes a similar kind of segregation in the city space. Salman's expectations of city life as a more liberal one, are questioned in the narrative. He expected the women sitting on the charpoy, whom he asked for directions, to "rise in deference, as was usual in his town" (188). However, these women were quite indifferent to his presence. Pandeyji, Gupta's neighbour, is preoccupied with rituals and outward signs of Brahmanism. He wears his sacred thread and recites the Hanuman Chalisa. Yet, Pandeyji isn't "Brahmin" enough; he mispronounces the verses from the Gita. Thus, it is through his bodily performance that he adheres to Brahmanism. Initially, Salman was pleased with the hospitality, as "in his small town a Brahmin wouldn't offer food to a stranger without knowing his religion and caste" (191). But we see that Pandyeji rejects the idea of treating the *Atithi* as God. He is indifferent and looks at Salman with suspicion. He is eager to learn about Salman's religion, and as soon as he realizes that he is a Muslim, he retracts whatever little hospitality he had extended. In this way, by making the Brahmin bereft of the naturalised quality of Brahmanism, the story challenges the essentialist tendencies of identity formation, while also revealing how the people occupying city spaces are no less hostile than their village counterparts.

The state creates its identity through the process of "othering." Bhabha notes that "subalternity" does not work by the process of "othering," it does not make its demand in opposition to the rights of the dominant class of the society. Rather it "intervenes in state practices from a position that is 'contiguous' or tangential to the 'authoritarian' institutions of the state-flying just below the level of the state" (30). Furthermore, for Bhabha, "contiguity" opens up a "third space" where cultural experiences are situated. The subaltern perspective can be said to occupy this "third space," where their existence is marked by "variability," and their

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creative agency lies in linking "the past, present and the future" (Winnicott). It is the contiguous nature of these spaces that encompasses the cultural practices, allowing the category of "human" to remain in a transitional state. Thus, the figure of the *atithi* and the space that he or she occupies can be perceived as a "third space."

Simona Sawhney in her essay "Religion and Hospitality in the Modern: Thinking with Abdul Bismillah," notes that the phrase *atithi devo bhava* cannot be understood solely within the context from which it originated, that is, a "brahmanical and patriarchal" context. Doing so would ignore "the significance of the *a-tithi* as the undated or untimely" (215). According to Agamben contemporariness is marked by citation, meaning it is simultaneously connected to both the past and the future. It can "tie together that which it has inexorably divided- recall, re-evoke, and revitalize that which it has declared dead" (50). Contemporariness also involves situating the "archaic" within the context of the modern and attempting to understand it. Thus, contemporariness is a "historical becoming and does not cease to operate within it" (50). Therefore, understanding the present requires a framework of archaeology, not with the aim of returning to the historical past, but to return "to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living" (51). Because of this relational association with the "archaic," the contemporary has the agency to "cite" history differently, thereby creating his or her own personal relationship with the past. Thus, the figure of the *atithi* denotes contemporariness, and as Sawhney notes, the sign *atithi* "cannot be accommodated or contained within the context of the Taittiriya Upanishad" (215) which perceives the *atithi* solely in patriarchal and Brahmanical terms.

For Sawhney, the *atithi* is an essential figure because "s/he makes a claim to a home that is not hers, and hence perhaps reminds us, not of our belonging, but instead of our own analogous but infinitely more profound un-belonging" (215). This analysis views the space of home not as a space of fixed identity, but as one where identities are in a constant state of flux.

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Moreover, the significance of the *atithi* lies precisely in the unexpected nature of their visit, where one is caught by surprise and has no time to put up a façade. In this state, one is not conscious of the identity that the guest embodies; instead, the entire focus is on making the house presentable and comfortable enough for the visitor. One is quite literally arrested in a moment of vulnerability, and in the story, this happens quite literally: "She had only a petticoat and a bra on and hurried from the veranda into the adjoining room. She quickly wrapped herself in a sari and came out still trying to fasten the hook of the blouse" (189). The story thus forces us to place ourselves in this unexpected situation and imagine a nation where one is not forced to assume any identity and where everyone is merely a guest. Like the *atithi*, we too must leave this land, and thus, the figure of the *atithi* also serves as a "reminder of mortality" (215).

Another aspect that the story highlights is how restricted hospitality ceases to be hospitality at all. The hospitality once offered by the Brahmin woman is withdrawn out of fear, and the steel tumbler is replaced with a glass one, something less intimate. As Sawhney notes, the story brings about "a certain kind of everyday sociality and its continuing exclusions" (216). "Othering" in the story takes the form of self-identification in the story. Salman Saheb is depicted as someone who is at ease with his Hindu counterparts. He teaches Gupta Sanskrit, and the central episode of the story involves him trying to surprise Gupta with a visit to his home, signifying his closeness to Gupta. The narrative also tells us about a dream he had, in which he was trying to help a Yadav teacher in his Islamiya School. But as Sawhney observes, "such a Muslim is forcefully made a Muslim, put in place and marked as Muslim, by the Brahmin" (213).

However, this does not mean a rejection of the idea of hospitality. Rather, it can be seen as having the potential to encompass transformational identities. As Sawhney notes, it can be read as "a site for staging of the social itself - the social being the space where quality is not simply claimed or denied in an abstract juridical language, but practiced, enacted, played out,

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in a language of intimacy and idiosyncrasy, of the domestic, the quotidian, and the kitchenly" (216). Sawhney also notes how hospitality comes naturally to women because of the performative gender roles they have been indulging in. Instead of being critical of these gender roles, this can be seen as a positive stance, where women, through praxis, have developed the skill of being hospitable. Thus, their inclusion in democracy is of utmost importance. This aspect of imagining democracy as a collective, wherein women play a crucial role, will be further discussed later in the essay.

Another instance of defamiliarization in Bismillah's narrative occurs when the unquestioned connection between Sanskrit and Hindutva is questioned by making a Muslim character a learner of Sanskrit. Bismillah, in one of his interviews, expresses his pain and disappointment when people introduce him as "Hindi ka Muslim Lekhak." For Bismillah, there is no specific *dharma* of a writer; if there is one, it is simply the duty of being a writer. The fact that language is tied to religion is, for him, an unfortunate reality. In the story, due to the quirks of the Indian education system, Salman ends up studying Sanskrit. The narrative thus "reminds us that Sanskrit is, before all else, a language, hence, in principle, a language that may be learnt and spoken by anyone, at least in a democratic modernity" (216). Moreover, as Sawhney notes, it is Sanskrit that is "untimely" in the modern context. The story disturbs Sanskrit's "naturalised bind to the Brahmin, the land, the nation" (216).

Additionally, Sawhney draws from Ambedkar's ideas and discusses "the profanity of the social sphere." She argues, "if the equality of men in the eyes of God has no meaning in the social sphere, in the actual lives of humans on earth, it can only be because God himself has been rendered entirely irrelevant to the social sphere" (255). While social life is heavily influenced by religion, everyday interactions are not conducted as though one is under the divine gaze. In the short story, for example, pictures of gods are hung on the walls of the room where household goods are kept. There is no sperate space or room for the gods. Commodities

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are conjoined with divine, and it is only the rituals that Pandyeji performs in this room, such as burning incense and chanting prayers, that imbue them with a sacred quality. Furthermore, Mushrilal Gupta never materialises in the story in physical form. He is only evoked by his neighbours and Salman. This can be seen as positioning Gupta as a sign of God, as he never physically appears. The impartial Gupta, described as a person with radical ideas who flouts societal norms, who was "the first in his family to eat meat and drink tea in a Muslim restaurant" (187) never enters the narrative. In the final part of the story, after Salman faces disrespect, there is no mention of Gupta. The act of picking up his plate to clean it, and the acceptance of the withdrawn hospitality, seems to symbolise the rejection of divine intervention. Sawhney's question is of extreme pertinence here: "Bereft of God, what hope can there be for equality in the social sphere?" (225)

Hannah Arendt argues that if inequality unfolds and remains confined to the social realm, the political realm can be protected. She writes, "In any event, discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right. The question is not how to abolish discrimination, but how to keep it confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate, and prevent it trespassing on the political and the personal sphere, where it is destructive" (Arendt 51) Arendt's argument is based on the premise that the government should not have the power to control the social or private domains, thus "preserve a sphere where one makes free choices" (228). However, Arendt's argument assumes that the social and political spheres exist in complete isolation from each other. In reality, these two realms influence one other. I argue instead that the legitimacy of inequality in both the social and private sphere should be challenged and reconstituted as spaces of hospitality and friendship. It is only when the social sphere is constructed in terms of equality that it becomes possible to imagine a just political sphere.

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So, how does one imagine a collective that is not based on homogenising tendencies? One way of reinstating democracy is through its connection with the political. The confluence of politics and friendship, and the phrase "politics of friendship," seems like an oxymoron in the current state of affairs. This essay highlights the pertinent relationship between these two elements of social life. It is important to note that friendship and politics were not always as inseparable as they seem today. Political alliances in the pre-modern era were often based on friendships between different political members. Thus, friendship, as it unfolds in everyday social interactions, can be considered "to be a fully-fledged political idea, ideal, phenomenon and practice; and also, how it fits together with other terms of the political lexicon" (Devere and Smith)

The short story seems be point us toward the potential for a healthy political friendship between different people, but one that remains unrealised. For Derrida, friendship is never stagnant. He writes "Friendship is never given in the present. It belongs to the experience of waiting, of promise, or of commitment" (110). The story suggests that although Gupta is absent from the narrative, there remains the possibility of imagining a relationship of equals. It hints at the possibility that the coming together of people who have "associative, rather than oppositional stances" (Sawhney 214) is possible. Additionally, friendship is deeply embedded in the past. As he says:

> Without this absolute past, I could not, for my part, have addressed myself to you in this way. We would not be together in a sort of minimal community ... speaking the same language or praying for translation within the horizon of the same language... if a sort of friendship had not already been sealed before any other contract: a friendship prior to friendships, an ineffaceable, fundamental, and bottomless friendship, the one that draws its breath in the sharing of a language (past or to come) (110)

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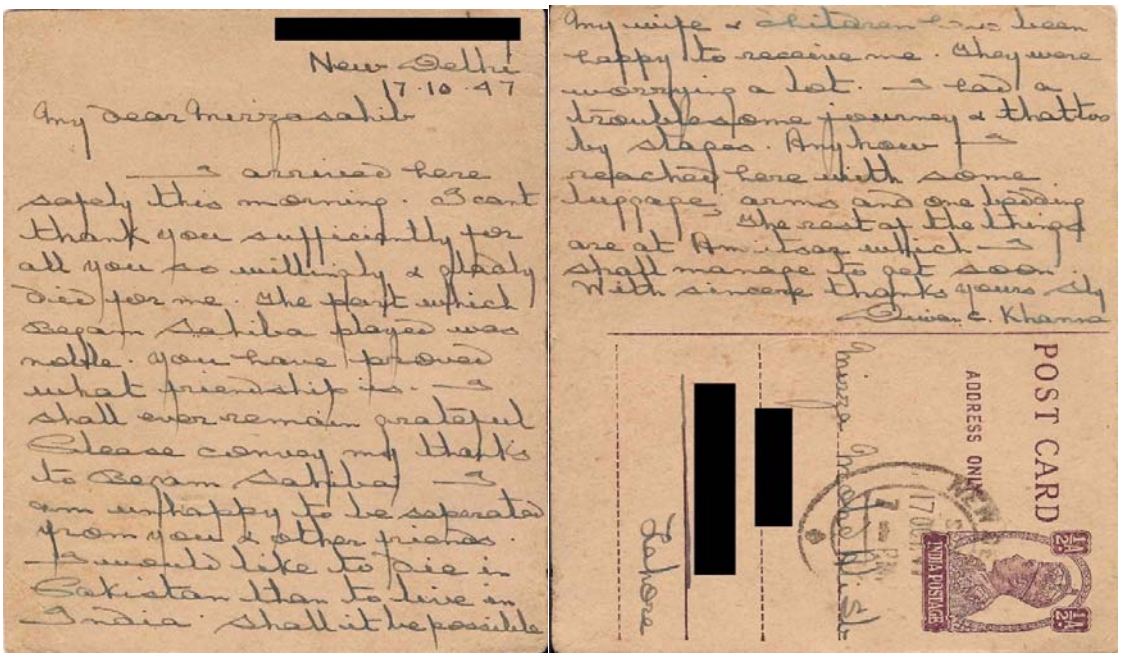
One such form of friendship that "has already been sealed before any other contract" can be seen in this letter. This postcard can be read as a symbol of the bond of friendship between Mohammad Ali Mirza (Lahore) and Diwan C Khanna (New Delhi). The letter captures the feeling of gratitude that Khanna feels toward Mirza and his wife. He writes, "you have proved what friendship is. I shall ever remain grateful." The act of helping Khanna that Mirza and his family engaged is a form of hospitality that, as Derrida writes, "must not pay a debt, or be governed by a duty: it is gracious, and "must" ... open itself to the guest (invited or visitor) ... without imperative, without order and without duty". (63)



The postcard from Diwan C Khanna in Delhi to Mirza Mohammad Ali Sahib in Lahore | Source: Hamza Shad, December 9th, 2018

This linking of the past, present, and future aligns the subaltern perspective with what Giorgi Agamben calls "contemporariness." He defines it is as a state of being that exists in the present but also incorporates the past and the future. It resides in the in-between or "third space." Hannah Arendt, in one of her works, notes that when each "can understand the truth inherent in the other's opinion; …seeing the world from the other's point of view is a political

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kind of insight" (Arendt, 2004 [1990, 436] Thus, this essay calls forth for a different form of democracy that is porous, more hospitable, and moves beyond "the dominant concepts of national identity, citizenship, national borders, and immigration laws that now prevail" (John d 187). The democracy imagined here is not based on rights but rather as "a task predicated on a promise but not on the certainty of its fulfilment" (Limbu 96). Political theorist Sheldon Wolin is of the opinion that democracy should be perceived as "an ephemeral phenomenon rather than a settled system" (Politics and Vision 602). Moreover, friendship is a form of relationship where the markers of the "other" are not violently erased. One can have a holistic relationship with someone, albeit being different. The self/other binary remains intact in such a discourse. One cannot truly eradicate the "other" as the idea of the "other", of one's marginalised position, is required to talk about injustice and violence meted out against them.

Additionally, for Derrida, democracy must take the form of friendship that escapes the confines of the fraternal and family models. Derrida asks whether it's possible "to think and to implement [mettre en œuvre] democracy, that which would keep the old name 'democracy', while uprooting from it all these figures of friendship (philosophical and religious) which prescribe fraternity: the family and the androcentric ethnic group?" (306). At this point it is crucial to engage with the question of the woman in democracy. By showing how the woman suddenly withdraws her hospitality from Salman, and immediately looks at her husband, who is thoroughly dissatisfied by the entire episode, suggests an anachronistic marital relationship based on hierarchy, where the woman is answerable to her husband. Sawhney notes how Pandyeji's "wife, more attuned by gender and training to the role of the host, is from beginning more welcoming than her husband" (214). Here the performance of being a host, though influenced by social norms that expect this of women, places the woman within the social structure capable of imagining a democracy rooted in hospitality. As Bishupal Limbu notes, "The friend is like a brother; the woman as sister lies outside fraternalist and androcentric

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politics" (96). So, if we have to imagine democracy based on the ideas of friendship, it cannot happen while excluding the women.

Friendship that does not culminate in marriage, or where marriages are based on friendship, can be seen as alternative mode of relationships founded on mutual respect for each other's choices. The story also suggests a way to imagine democracy where women are included as active, agential members. It is interesting how the discussion about the Punjab problem occurs outside the domestic space, in the public sphere, where women are seated on a cot. This setting imagines a public space for women, based on a friendly, conversational approach to political discourse. It can be seen as an alternate form of an informal collective for women, akin to the "adda" for Bengali middle-class intellectuals, where men gathered for intellectual discussions. Additionally, Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, argues that friendship is a relationship between equals, distinct from relationships that takes place in military, parent-child dynamics, or government. Wollstonecraft seeks to alter the nature of kinship by incorporating friendship into it, moving away from the binary separation of kinship and friendship. Much of feminist activism has taken place within family structures and the spaces of the home. Kamla Bhasin notes how women's organisations such as Saheli and Jagori operated out of the homes of their members. She writes:

> Since our activism took place in the homes of friends, many of our families were drawn into our activism. Activism for us was part of our personal lives, and not a separate arm outside it. My daughter Meeto was about 18 months old and perched on her father's shoulder when she participated in an anti-rape demonstration and carrying a placard saying Balaatkaar Mitao, Mera Bhavishya Bachao (Stop Rape, Give me a Secure Future). In fact, most of our socializing was also with other activists. If Jagori's work took place after office hours or during family time, the children were around. Our

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> friends were maasies and mamas (maternal aunts and uncles) for our children. Some of our homes also hosted feminists from other cities and countries.

Thus, the social sphere is inseparable from the political sphere. It is by imagining the social sphere as a space capable of fostering equality that we can envision equality in the public sphere.

In conclusion, we have explored how religious concepts are not static; they can be rethought to engage with the emerging challenges of society and to reconsider notions of equality, hospitality, and fraternity. The short story suggests the possibility of imagining a democracy infused with the values of friendship. Ultimately, it highlights the necessity of having women as active participants in democracy and demonstrates how the personal is inextricably connected with the political.

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