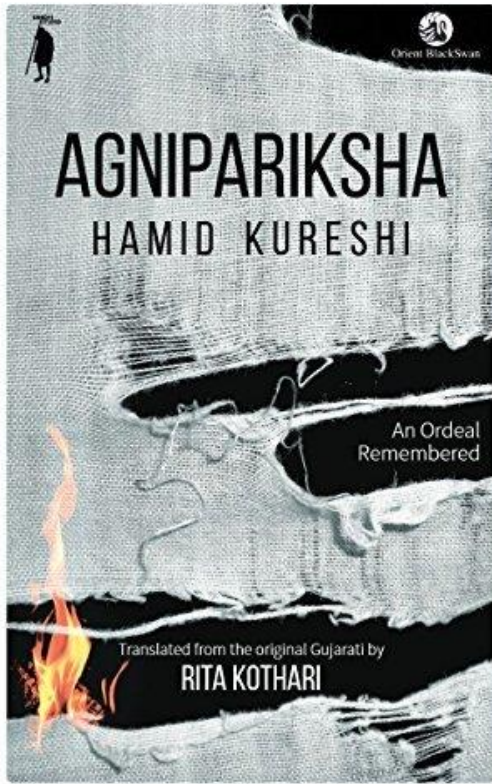


# Agnipariksha by Hamid Kureshi: Translated by Rita Kothari

A memoir of trauma and hope set against the 1969 riots of Ahmedabad.



Senior advocate and trustee of Sabarmati Ashram and Preservation Memorial Trust, Hamid Kureshi, penned down a detailed account of his life during the 1969 Gujarat riots. Hamid Kureshi's *Agnipariksha* is a testimony to how in times of despair and adversity, kindness, unity and companionship surpass every ordeal; how it is human nature to rise after every fall, to see the light amidst darkness. The 1969 Gujarat riots are witnessed once again through the eyes of Kureshi's personal account spanning over a period of five to seven days. The book, narrated in first person, describes the monstrosity and cruelty subjected by a section of society on to the other. Despite the rage, anger and hatred surrounding the atmosphere in the riot inflicted Gujarat; Kureshi's personal story incites no violence or fury rather a sense of belongingness and sensitivity amongst the Hindu brothers and sisters. As Narayan Desai writes in the preface for this book, *'HamidBhai has presented his experiences with great restraint and yet managed to highlight acts of sensitivity and compassion in the midst of rage, hatred and suffering. This story of humanity is a welcome addition to humanitarian*

*literature.'*

The year is 1969, and Hamid Kureshi is on his way to the High Court. Little does he know that a seemingly normal day would soon turn catastrophic in the days to come. Being married to a Hindu, Hamid lived a secular life. Believing in the goodness of humanity, the communal riots that led to assaults on his mental as well as physical self left an indelible scar. For the first time, he was seen not as a lawyer or a contributing law abiding citizen of the society but as a Muslim; a target. The anger and hatred towards a minority of the society took away the last shred of hope from him.

The ideological principles governing Hamid reflect his Gandhian principles of love over hatred and peace over war. Growing up during India's struggle for freedom, his participation in the Quit India Movement followed by imprisonment turned Hamid into an ardent believer of the Gandhian principles. His grandfather, Imam Abdul Kadir Bawazeer, was a close companion of Gandhi and was called 'Sahodar' by him as a term of endearment. After the death of Imam Saheb, a house was built in the precincts of Gandhi's Ashram, which came to be known as Imam Manzil. The Kureshi family then took permanent residence in this house. In 1969, when the communal riots spread, his house in Swastik Society was burned down and the Ashram had also

been attacked. Hamid Kureshi then writes, “*I am thinking if the Imam Manzil in Gandhi Ashram is not safe, then where can I possibly seek shelter? I am bewildered. I shut my eyes.*” This moment, perhaps, can be regarded as the most painful moment in a series of heart-wrenching events. Imam Manzil was under-threat, challenged by those who preached violence and practiced hate. The paradox, here, is unbelievable. At the end of the day, Imam Manzil surfaced unscathed and protected by the members of the Ashram. The sheer power and support of the Hindu community at such an unfortunate time has been narrated by the author with compassion and gratefulness.

Translated from the original Gujarati by Rita Kothari, the book takes us through the riot-torn areas, lanes, and roads of Ahmedabad. Kureshi’s writing style is articulate, providing a picturesque and detailed sequence of events as they unfolded. From the minute he realizes the seriousness of the riots, we learn and experience life through his eyes. The horrified and fear-ridden atmosphere of his family members, the calm and composed demeanour of his father, the negligent attitude of the Government and police department, the places he passes by—staring as the shops are set ablaze and areas which are no longer recognizable, give us a clear projection of life in 1969 Gujarat.

Hamid Kureshi ends his memoir by focusing on the silver lining; that good that still exists within each and every one of us. By choosing joy over grief, believing in peace and harmony, we can emerge victorious.

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**Blurb:** A memoir of trauma and hope set against the 1969 riots of Ahmedabad, Agnipariksha recounts the experiences of an eminent Gujarat High Court lawyer who lived in both word and spirit a life of religious and cultural pluralism. Hamid Kureshi grew up in proximity to Gandhi in a family whose devotion to the nation and to Gandhi, was absolute. During the riots, when perhaps for the first time, Kureshi—a third-generation Gandhian and a non-practising Muslim married to a Hindu woman—is reduced to being only a Muslim, he struggles to comprehend the hatred and rage directed at his community even as an entire legacy of Gandhian syncreticism stands challenged.

In this matter-of-fact, restrained, yet poignant first-person account, Kureshi provides the landscape of a violence-ridden city, as also a glimpse into the many lives associated with the Gandhi Ashram. In an atmosphere of terrible fear and uncertainty, he recounts how his family’s struggles for self-preservation were buoyed by the constant shielding presence, concern and affection of Hindu friends and neighbours and the Ashram community. This memoir is an assertion of human kindness, friendship and dignity amidst mortal danger, hatred and fear; and Kureshi’s narration, untouched by bitterness or resentment, leaves the reader moved.

Agnipariksha is a valuable addition to Gujarati literature and a welcome companion to Gandhi and Peace Studies. This translation by Rita Kothari—a reputed cultural historian, author and translator—makes a rare document of a period, a city and inter-faith relationships accessible to a wider readership for the first time.