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Cultural Conflict and Identity Crisis in Select Postcolonial British-‘Asian’ Fiction

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Abstract:

In this paper, I wish to explore this very complicated structure of enforced endorsements with a particular emphasis on the self- conflicting nature of immigrant and diasporic existences with a simultaneous strive for conservation as well as assimilation. Under the critical gaze would be the experiences of the second and third generation sub-continental migrants to the British Isles and their inherent conflict between the culture borne out of their traditional identities and the identity they form by interacting and assimilating with the culture of the adopted land. This will be done with the help of some novels like *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi, *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali etc. and some theoretical concepts like ‘Cultural Hybridity’ of Homi Bhabha, Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘Cultural Capital’ and Edward Said’s works on the relation between Culture and identity.

Keywords: Culture, identity, conflict, crisis, post colonial, assimilation, resistance, ghettoization

The Postmodern globalised world is, essentially, a world struggling to find affiliations among contrary pulls of a globalised economy and an inherent human urge to adhere to some specific identity, distinguishing him from the global milieu. Thus, the concept of identity in a globalised economy is problematic in itself as the inherent heterogeneity of the concept is at odds with the craved homogeneity on the economic plain. The second problem arises when this search for identity affiliations is tried to be met with through the currency of culture – the canopy term with all its various and varied implications and connotations – placing it as one of the main facets of defining identity. That is why, in the globalised times that we are living in, culture and identity seem to be two of the most hotly debated topics on the planet, forming a maze of complications, chiefly born out of the plethora of diversities that enrich as well as erode simultaneously. Globalisation has rendered multiculturalism as an almost undeniable part of a post – colonial, postmodern society, placing it, as it was, as the litmus test of the liberalism of any society. It is this concept of multiculturalism which has turned the matter of culture and its association with identity to be really problematic. Nowhere else does this problem become more tangible and apparent than in the case of a post-colonial diaspora trying to find its legitimacy in the land of its erstwhile colonisers. It is no different in the case of the British – Asian diaspora. It is worthwhile

to keep in mind that in the British parlance, ‘Asian’ mainly refers to people of sub-continental origin, from the countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The migration of people from the sub-continent to the British Isles began in the second half of the eighteenth century and has evolved and expanded over the centuries in both quality as well as quantity. One of the most authentic documentation and explication of this process and the complicated state of a postcolonial diasporic existence is captured in the literature produced by the British writers of sub – continental lineage. This tradition began with a certain gentleman by the name of Dean Mahomet who, in his *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794), put to words, the experiences of the earliest sub-continental immigrants to Britain. The current crop of British – Asian writers are, in a sense, the extended legacies of Dean Mahomet and, it is in their writings that we find a vivid portrayal of the cultural limbo and identity crisis that characterizes a diasporic existence. In this paper, the problematic question of culture and identity pertaining to the British – Asian diaspora would be analyzed and discussed with vivid references to Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), with passing mentions of a few other literary works. In trying to understand the cultural identity of a diasporic people, the most important theoretical base that needs to be taken into account is the concept of ‘cultural hybridity’ as propounded by Homi. K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994). In this book, Bhabha applies the physiological concept of hybridization to the socio-cultural domain and defines the term as the direct result of colonial forces at work, transforming our idea of cross-cultural relations. This becomes very interesting in a postcolonial setting in light of Bhabha’s own argument that colonialism is not something lost in the past but something whose histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present. Bhabha’s hybridization is a continual process of evolution in a perpetual contact between a dominant and a dominated culture, giving rise to continuously newer forms of cultural denominations. Thus, the study of the culture and identity of a diaspora is most vociferously defined by this theory of hybridity and the factors facilitating and controlling the nature and dimensions of hybridization. This has been aptly defined by John Hutnyk when he says:

With relation to diaspora, the most conventional accounts assert hybridity as the process of cultural mixing where the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform, and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or ‘hybrid identities’. (Kalra, Kaur, Hutnyk 71)

He describes the performative principle of hybridization when he says, “hybridity is better conceived as a process than a description.” This process of hybridization, in the case of a diasporic individual, acts as a double – edged sword as it carries in itself, the contrary impulses of assimilation with the host nation and an indomitable urge to conserve the memories and cultural legacies of the lost homeland, forming the main crux of the diasporic crisis. This dichotomous situation, peculiar to a diaspora, accounts for the typical identity crisis that forms the leitmotif of the majority of diasporic literature produced around the world. This is true of the British –Asian literature also.

A close study of diasporic cultures point out that like any displaced people, the most common and strongest lure of identity lies with their cultural signs and symbols which, at the shortage of any tangibly concrete denomination of affiliation, act as the only string joining their displaced existence in the new land with the roots that have been left behind in the motherland. Thus, cultural symbols like dressing, language, food, and other common activities like greetings and festivals are all loaded with tremendous values of identity and become the fulcrum of the unifying force of the diasporic community in the land dominated by the 'other' culture. This, it must be said, is augmented by a forceful yet nuanced drive by the dominant cultural institutions of the host land to slowly absorb and assimilate the flailing diasporic community in its own fold, albeit in keeping with the dominant socio-cultural discourses and values. This, says Bhabha, is an essential stage of hybridization where the attempted homogenizing assimilation by the host culture on one hand, and the inherent drive of the diaspora itself to protect and conserve its own cultural legacies on the other, gives rise to the diasporic resistance which is an essential part of hybridization. This contradiction of trying to assimilate with the larger socio – politico – economic broth of the adopted land while putting up an active resistance to conserve their distinct cultural identity is what makes a diasporic community, essentially diasporic. Bhabha explicates this facet of hybridity when, in *The Location of Culture*, he says:

Hybridity is the name of this displacement of value from symbol to sign that causes the dominant discourse to split along the axis of its power to be representative, authoritative. Hybridity represents that ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority. (Bhabha 162)

The act of resistance and conservation is best symbolized by the diasporic reality of 'ghettoes', which has been beautifully portrayed by Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*. Here she presents a brilliantly vivid portrait of the London locality of Brick Lane which is majorly inhabited by Bangladeshi immigrants who are fiercely defensive of their religious and cultural heritage and disdainful of the cultural influences of the dominant community which are 'contaminating' the next generation of British –Bangladeshi youths. This attitude is embodied in the character of Chanu Ahmed who, inspite of staying in London for economic purposes for over three decades never takes favourably to the British culture and constantly blames 'western' conspiracies for the increasing alcohol and drug problem among the Bangladeshi youth of Brick Lane. He even blames western bias against Muslims for his own professional failures in London, whereas we are clearly told that his failures are mainly attributive of his personal disposition of a planner and a dreamer but not a man of action. During the course of the novel, we see Nazneen gradually getting exasperated with Chanu's inaction and the subsequent blaming and cribbing about his failures. His attitude towards the native is always one of reverence yet suspicion; resistance yet awe. In that sense, he is a typical diasporic character. Again, Karim from the same novel exhibits the same resistance in a more social setting and a more openly vocal manner. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in the U.S., a group called 'Lion Hearts' start passing around anti-Islam

leaflets. In response to that, we find Karim forming a group called ‘Bengal Tigers’ to counter their claims and defend his religio-cultural legacies in the face of the cultural onslaught. In Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the father-daughter duo of Anwar and Jamila present two facets of this diasporic resistance. Anwar, a first generation immigrant, is desperate to maintain a semblance of his socio – cultural legacy as he tries to force his independent minded daughter into an arranged marriage with Changez, a true Indian groom whom he has ‘imported’ from India. It speaks a lot of his desperation to continue traditional cultural ethos when he forces Jamila to marry Changez inspite of him proving to be a grave disappointment to himself. Jamila, on the other hand, is a second generation immigrant, who is more feisty and militant in her approach towards resistance. Unlike her father, her fight is not just for conservation of her culture, but also, to attain respect for those aspects of her culture which are acceptable to her. She does not just resist the dilution by the dominant culture, but also, its condescending attitude. When told by a young white man to “Eat shit Paki”, she runs after the “greaser”, “throwing the bastard off his bike and tugging out some of his hair, like someone weeding an overgrown garden.” (Kureishi 1990) She is assertive and courageous but also shares the typical diasporic suspicion and apprehension about the looming threat of the majority population. We are told that:

Under the influence of Angela Davies, Jamila had started exercising every day, learning karate and judo, getting up early to stretch and run and do press – ups...She was preparing for the guerrilla war she knew would be necessary when the whites finally turned on the blacks and Asians and tried to force us into gas chambers or push us into leaky boats. (Kureishi 42)

She is an evolving face of the diaspora whose resistance is more assertive and confident and less crudely self – sufficing than her father’s.

It is pertinent to remember that ghettoization is not just the conservative mechanism of the diaspora, but, even more so the isolating mechanism employed by the dominant populace. It has been so since the genesis of the concept of ghetto in Christian medieval Europe’s treatment of the Jews, who were made to live in hordes, away from the main cities so that they would not be able to contaminate the general population. This process, however, helped in developing a distinct cultural identity and an unhindered legacy among the Jews which has survived till date and which they are fiercely proud and defensive of. In British – Asian fiction, one of the most impressive portrayals of this theme of diasporic resistance is found in Kureishi’s novel *The Black Album* where, the seething resistance of the diaspora reaches its zenith and bursts out in external violence. In this book, Kureishi captures the growing fundamentalism among the youth of the Muslim diasporic communities of London and the manifestation of the same through violent protests on the streets and on university campuses. Written in 1995, this novel is critically realistic as well as brilliantly prophetic.

One of the most common methods of attributing identity values to cultural signs is by claiming them as agents of hereditary cultural legacies and these are concretized by a

perpetuation through a process of repetitions. In the case of Chanu in *Brick Lane*, his habit of repetition lies in his regular remonstrations of the British culture and how it is conspiring to destroy the cultural legacies of the Bangladeshi diaspora through systematically institutionalized acculturation. This is a process of ascertaining cultural identity through negation where, the assertion of one's identity lies in the act of negation of the other. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Anwar is in the habit of repeating the emphasis on everything Indian. Every aspect and action of his is an attempt, along with other things, to authenticate his undoubted "Indianness" in spite of the alien locale of his existence. He imports an Indian groom for his daughter from India. When she refuses to oblige, even his method of coercing her is by going on a hunger strike, a la Gandhi. Thus his every action seems to be a repetitive assertion of his sub-continental roots. This is reminiscent of Edward Said's documentation of the affiliation of identity with cultural signs by the displaced Palestinian community, in his book *After the Last Sky* (1986). Here, he stresses the need of these displaced people to attach identity with culture, through a series of repetitions. In a light – hearted extract, Said sheds light on the serious matter of often fallacious attempts at cultural identification when he talks about how Palestinians often end their letters with terms like 'Palestinian hugs' and 'Palestinian kisses' and states how they are more normal hugs and kisses and less Palestinian ones, and how the forcible "Palestinianness" is an act of desperation to maintain a distinct identity on the abstract cultural plain in the light of absolute dejection on the physical plain.

Nostalgia is an essential characteristic of a diaspora. It comes from the Greek 'nostos' (return) and 'algos' (suffering). Thus, it can be defined as the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return. This acts as one of the most powerful impulses that prompt a diasporic individual to resist acculturation into the dominant culture. This sentiment is present in excess in *Brick Lane* as a faithful portrayal of first generation immigrants like Nazneen and Chanu. Nazneen gets lost, time and again, in the world of nostalgia about her childhood in Bangladesh while reading the letters from her sister back home. Her nostalgia is given a concrete shape through the machinery of cinematic flashbacks. However, the pull of the homeland is strongest in Chanu who suffers from, what Monica Ali terms, the 'going home syndrome'. This touches upon the rare diasporic reality of emigration; of people succumbing to the nostalgia and returning home. This has been given shape through the character of Chanu who, in spite of struggling to find a sense of identity in London for more than three decades, has no other craving but to return to his roots. In his case, the pull of the land is stronger than the pull of blood and he leaves for Bangladesh leaving his wife and daughters behind. In Chanu, diasporic nostalgia reaches its highest intensity. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the sense of nostalgia is not as intense as in Ali's novel. However, we do have occasional reminiscences from Haroon and Auntie Jean. The only overtly nostalgic character in this novel is Anwar whose nostalgia reaches its pinnacle in the character of Changez, who acts as its personification. In this regard, the premise is brilliantly set by Milan Kundera and his memorable lines from the novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* where he says, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

(Kundera 4) In fact, this tug –of – war between memory and forgetting forms the kernel of the diasporic identity crisis and its consequent assimilation or resistance.

Another very important aspect of the study of diasporic culture and the sense of identity attached to it is the gradual evolution of the same, from one generation to the next, and how the generational conflict forms one of the most common bases of diasporic identity crisis. In this respect, Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* act as foils to each other. Ali deals with the experiences of Nazneen and Chanu, first generation Bangladeshi immigrants to England, whereas Karim, the protagonist of Kureishi’s novel is a second generation British Pakistani of mixed descent, having a Pakistani father and an English mother. The conflicts and crises discussed in Kureishi’s novel can be viewed as a much more advanced stage of hybridization than that in Ali’s. However, in *Brick Lane* too, the voice of the second generation immigrant is represented through Shahana and Bibi, the daughters of Nazneen and Chanu. Especially in their interactions with Chanu, we find the typical generational conflict that characterizes any process of diasporic hybridization. Chanu, a first generation immigrant, still has all the sights and smells of the homeland fresh in his memory and is disdainful and suspicious of the infringing cultural influences of the London society. Of this, he gets a first – hand look in his daughters who, being second generation immigrants, are much more assimilated and anglicized individuals, exhibiting those signs of cultural hybridization that Chanu vehemently dislikes. For him, the only source of identity in the midst of a cultural apocalypse lies somewhere thousands of miles away, near the graves of his ancestors. So it is imperative for him to hold on to every aspect of their cultural legacy as the last strands of the hope of redemption. For Shahana and Bibi, however, the pull of the lost homeland is much less owing to the fact that their only attachment to it is through the stories they have heard from their parents. They are born in the adopted land and to them; the immediate physical reality of London is more identifiable than the fabulous legacies of Bangladesh. In that sense, they are more assimilated individuals than their parents. They also imbibe some of the nuances of the dominant culture that their father absolutely hates. For example, in the course of the novel, we find Shahana, repeatedly mocking Chanu over his poor English which smacks of his immigrant roots. She, being born and brought up in London, is not able to identify with the broken nature of her father’s language. Her identity seems to lie more towards the dominant parlance of London rather than the diasporic creole of Chanu. He, in turn, calls her ‘memsahib’, a sub – continental expression meaning a respectable Englishwoman. Here, it acts as a sly way of mocking Shahana through a process of ridiculous affirmation resulting in negation, where, by calling her ‘memsahib’, he wants to assert that she is not really one and states his disgust at her efforts to behave like one. The terminology itself, with all its connotations, smacks of the complicated colonial history of Chanu’s legacy. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, this generational conflict is more elaborately discussed and presented through the father – daughter duo of Anwar and Jamila, and the relationship between Haroon and his son Karim. Anwar is a personification of the reminiscing, nostalgic diasporic individual who luxuriates in the memories of his ancestral land. He is a staunch perpetuator of patriarchy, which he views as a continuation of his cultural

heritage. This places him in direct conflict with Jamila, who has outgrown the patriarchal boundations of her father's heritage and identifies herself with revolutionary ideologues like Kate Millett, Che Guevara and Angela Davies. She fiercely resists essentialist notions of superiority like racism which claims 'natural' superiority of the white race, and sexism which bases male domination on biology. Thus, she is opposed to the white supremacy of the British culture as well as the patriarchal social order of her father's nativity. This makes her, a typically diasporic 'in – between' character, in conflict with the dominant host culture as well as the ancestral legacy. The conflict between Haroon and Karim is a bit different as Haroon is not the typical diasporic father and is less given to nostalgic mourning than Anwar. Karim is also different from the rest as he is a person of mixed descent and, as such, is born into an already advanced stage of hybridization. The conflict between these two arises on the subject of Karim's queerness and Haroon's rigidity against accepting that. This is a result of Haroon's cultural disposition which cannot acknowledge his son's queerness and sees it as perversion, and Karim's mixed cultural roots which allow him to be an adventurous explorer of sexuality.

All the aforementioned processes and characteristic conflicts on the community level ultimately bring us to the diasporic individual and his acute sense of identity crisis. The conflict of the diasporic individual with the diasporic community on one hand, and the adopted society on the other, presents an open playing field for the mechanisms of hybridity and produces inherently hybrid individuals, struggling to find a space of acceptance for their own unique identities. This conflict gives rise to, what Bhabha calls, the "third space" and describes it as "...a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension, and pregnant chaos." (Bhabha 9) The diasporic individuals are the inhabitants of this "third space", intellectually and emotionally caught between two worlds whose two – pronged marginalization negates their belonging to either location. Bhabha describes the status of these individuals very appropriately when he says, "...all diaspora are differentiated, heterogenous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we'. Their living 'in – between' condition is very painful as they stand bewildered and confused and show resistance to the discourse of power in various forms." (Bhabha 184) One of the most pertinent symbols of this identity crisis is the metaphor of *Trishanku*, the Indian mythological king, eternally hung in a state of existential limbo between Heaven and earth. This metaphor of *Trishanku* has been very appropriately used to define the in – between – ness and identity crisis of a diasporic individual, by Sura P.Rath, an American scholar of Indian origin. In his theoretical writings, he uses the myth of *Trishanku* to delineate the processes through which the ideological state apparatuses of the dominant culture, continually propagates and reinforces racial and cultural stereotypes in order to facilitate the diasporic hybrid character of the 'in – between'. In his essay "Home(s) Abroad: Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces", he describes the attitude of his American colleagues towards him, saying:

To them, my mind is a cultural production of some nebulous globalism that waits outside the municipal boundaries of my city, parish and state. The reality of the body, a material

production of one local culture, and the abstraction of the mind, a cultural sub – text of a global experience, provide the intertwining threads of my diasporic life, a neither/nor condition parallel to that of Trishanku. (Rath 2000)

This identity crisis is more than adequately portrayed through quite a few characters in Ali’s as well as Kureishi’s novel. It is the most apparent characteristic of both Nazneen and Chanu in *Brick Lane* where the memory and nostalgia of Bangladesh conflicts with almost all the realities of their adopted home of London, creating an acute crisis of identity in both their lives. In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, quite a few of the characters like Haroon, Anwar, Jean etc. suffer from various forms of identity crisis, but none causes more pathos than Karim. He suffers from such an acute identity crisis that his emotional torment almost becomes a kind of spiritual suffering. Needless to say, his queerness further problematizes the situation as he becomes an aberrant and unaccommodated individual, not just racially, socially, and culturally, but also sexually. Thus, the diasporic identity crisis reaches its crest in the character of Karim and it is only towards the fag end of the novel that he seems to find a semblance of salvation.

This brings us to the concluding part of this paper and the possible ways of resolving the cultural conflicts and identity crises pertaining to diasporic existences. Ali’s Nazneen and Kureishi’s Karim serve as apt beacons in this endeavour as, among the whole array of characters in both the novels, they are the ones who come closest towards establishing a harmonious diasporic ‘third space’. In both cases, they achieve this by successfully detaching themselves from the bipolar alignment of the lost and the new host cultures, but, taking necessary assistance from both to create a unique identity for themselves. Both of them take ethnic cultural symbols and eschew them of all colonial, oriental and postcolonial baggage to make profitable use of them in their unique situations. For Nazneen, it is the Bangladeshi sari which provides economic independence and a sense of belonging in the foreign land. For Karim, the typically oriental character of Mowgli from *The Jungle Book* acts as a source of acceptance, though disturbing to him at first, this role proves to be the one which gets him noticed and kick-starts his career as an actor and takes him to the United States. They take racial and cultural stereotypes and subvert them to turn them into, what Pierre Bourdieu calls, “cultural capital” in his *The Forms of Capital* (1986). For Nazneen, the Bangladeshi sari acts as ‘objectified’ cultural capital whereas for Karim, Mowgli becomes ‘embodied’ cultural capital. In the very last part of *Brick Lane*, the visual of Nazneen getting ready to ice-skate in a sari, provides for a powerful example of the joyous absurdity of diasporic hope. The same sentiment is brilliantly articulated by Karim in the closing lines of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, when he says,

And so I sat in the centre of this old city that I loved, which itself sat at the bottom of a tiny island. I was surrounded by people I loved, and I felt happy and miserable at the same time. I thought of what a mess everything had been, but that it wouldn’t always be that way. (Kureishi 284)

This makes him an effectively harmonious character, a Buddha of suburban London, following a tempered middle path with an unflinching hope of salvation even in the midst of drudgery.

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