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The Problem of Identity Crisis in the Selected Poems of Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock

Sajeesh K

Assistant Professor,
Co-operative Arts and Science College,
Madayi, Pazhayangadi, Kannur.

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Abstract:

Identity is the distinguishing character of a personality. Modern man gives highest prominence to this trait. What constitutes our personality is a matter of concern in the modern era; it is set of values, qualities, or beliefs, but do they ever come to save us in a period of chaos? Are we able to highlight these traits during a troubled situation? If not, what they are for? What we are trying to project is our deepest individual impulses, but what we are trying to suppress or hide will dominate us. In an age of mass migration identity crisis is deeply rooted. We are trapped in a place that we are not part of, we are forced to use a language that we are not familiar with, the problem of acclimatization and the problem of identity goes beyond our level. Searching for an identity both cultural and national is also a concern for an individual. Though a hybrid identity is adapted later, the sense of being a stranger shape a different outlook. This paper attempts to give a sense of identity crisis as seen in modern era. The dispersive experiences felt by the New Zealander poets Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock and their selected poems are analyzed. What they want to internalize fails and a new identity always dominate them. The migration and identity crisis underwent by these writers are evident in their writings.

Keywords: Identity crisis, simulacrum, migration, fragmentation.

Introduction

Identity is a construct. It is set of beliefs, values and outlooks that one keeps up. It has affinity with one's birth, surroundings, racial and cultural heritage, gender and sexual preference. While certain components of identity come naturally and socially, some aspects of identity are constructed. This constructed identity plays a crucial role in our way of approaching a social institution. Modern man always projects the constructed one and boasts of it. But at the same time,

the modern man tries to cover up certain components of identity and highlights the constructed one.

In an age of war and violent atrocities, caused by many mechanisms and forces, modern man fails to project the constructed identity. An internal anxiety began to plague him in the turn of the century. In a sense modern man is emotionally wounded owing to great distress. This sense of identity crisis is the mark of modern era. We live in a place, a very native place, but we are not fully familiarized with it. Everywhere, modern man is a stranger. He began to lose his surrounding, society and other social institutions. The troubled anxiety makes him suspect of everything. He is living under a threat, at any time, anything may happen. This is what war gives to modern man.

How does a person come to lose his identity? Many reasons are contributed to it; war, the resultant migration, xenophobia, racist attacks, the pervasive influence of films and graphic images through which reality can be distorted. Along with these, political, religious, geographical and cultural problems further intensify the situation. In the words of Jean Baudrillard, modern world becomes a simulacrum. As a result, a group of people, a community or an individual is being dislocated and this dislocation is a move to upward or to downward. Mass migration becomes a regular process in this world, where refugees are recurring phenomenon. In establishing an identity people are forced to move from one place to another and this changed identity status make them live a despair life.

The anxiety of modern era and the constant search for a shelter is a matter of concern for scholars and writers in academic circle. The modern literature discusses this loss of identity or a new identity in an alien place, acclimatization and cultural adaptation, theme and problems of exile experiences. It inflicts pain on those who have it and at the same time it arouses a new way of thinking. It provides readers untold stories and experiences of those rootless people. The feeling of being an outsider raises the question of identity; hence it leads to a hybrid identity. Many contemporary writers face the anxiety of expressing their instincts and impulses once they lost their identity.

Apart from these a group of people faces another strange situation; one becomes out of place in one's own place, another group live with a perennial exiled life. The former is apparent in settled colonies where native inhabitants are being alienated; a process of 'othering' in one's own native land. In countries like New Zealand and Australia both the native people and European

descendant settled people face identity crisis. While the former group is being estranged and uprooted, the latter is striving to find a space in the changed circumstance. These two problems cannot be addressed together because of their divergent ways of life, outlook and culture. This paper is an attempt to analyze the problems where the poets Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock reach a critical phase unfamiliar to them. New Zealand had a colonial background where identity crisis is prevalent both to native people and the descendant people.

The identity as chief concern in the lives of the Maori and the European descendants

Though the Maori people were the early settlers in New Zealand who probably arrived between 1200 and 1300 AD, they internalized the climate and the island by settling a life. This Polynesian group formed the Maori tradition in the land and led a life similar to the stone-age until the arrival of the White Europeans in the latter half of the 17th century.

In the beginning of the 20th century New Zealand was transformed from the Maori world. The encounters between Europeans and Maori continued and sailors referred to New Zealand as the “Cannibal Isles”. Following the fight, the treaty of Waitangi made Maori weak. They were forced to sell their land, thereby estranged in their own land. They were homeless and uprooted, but on the other hand the newly arrived British people prospered their life and condition and took the formers’ place. While the Maori faces homelessness and dislocation, the Europeans face a strange crisis of not having in their proper place. This crisis is the chief concern in the writings of Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock.

The theme of national and social identity, cultural integrity and racial issue are central in New Zealand literature. Both Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock possessed a strange identity which they did not like to have. Though they embraced English identity, their New Zealander identity troubled them. On the other hand, the Maori writing struggling to find a space in the land with a strong sense of tradition. It is more concerned with the preservation and documentation of their culture that were being eroded by the Europeans.

Allen Curnow and his feeling of homelessness

Thomas Allen Munro Curnow is a wise, remote person who had decided what New Zealand poetry should be. His first collection of poems *Valley of decision* in 1933, his early verses and social satires were published under the nom de guerre Julian and Whim Wham respectively. From

his early personal poems and political satires, Curnow then began to centre more on New Zealand and its history and his notable publications include *Enemies: Poems* (1937), *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939), *Island and Time* (1941) and *Sailing and Drowning* (1943). In his writings he identified a number of distinctive national themes as New Zealand progressed beyond a strictly colonial identity.

In the beginning of the 20th century New Zealand was trying to form a distinctive national culture and it is a common belief that artists can help to define New Zealand. The 1930s saw the emergence of a new breed of writers, whose works were a reaction against established ideas and conventions and they were also influenced by recent trends in literature, notably modernism, and by social and political events such as dislocation and mass migration. Along with a growing sense of nationalism, the sense of being an outsider was a great concern for these writers who still looked to England as “Home” and felt a lost identity. Some among them were Allen Curnow, Denis Glover and Fleur Adcock.

The spirit of exile is the essence of Allen Curnow’s many poems. Three of his poems are taken here to analyze the theme of exile and they are “House and Land”, “In Memoriam, R.L.M.G” and “To Fanny Rose May”. In “House and Land” Curnow treats the characters, especially the older generations, sympathetically. Curnow finds their problem still relevant. It depicts the world of a Pakeha household in New Zealand visited by a historian, apparently searching the origins of colony. People live in a place that does not belong to them. Never is the pathetic aspect of this colonial theme as clear as it is in the figure of old Miss Wilson, the owner of the household in question. The poem begins with the historian in the property’s cowshed, asking the cowman “Wasn’t this the site, asked the historian, / of the original homestead?” From the cowman’s reaction, we come to the conclusion that this is the original homestead. The cowshed is in fact the homestead in which Miss Wilson was born and raised. This implies that Miss Wilson’s origins were mean, uncomfortable, and poor. The cowman does not answer, but said “I just live here”. The prefix “Miss” further hints at her unmarried status, which is also an idea about her economic status. From the cowman it is clear that her mother preceded her father in death, and the cowman has only worked for her since the old man has been dead.

The present state of the homestead is explained in the next stanza. The “moping” of the dog sets the mood and atmosphere, followed by “under the bluegums, and the colour blue is

associated with depression. The dog is symbolic in some way of the old woman who is psychologically shackled to this place, a stagnant privy being a fair comparison with her life. The images like the chained dog, the privy, the fowl house all give us the impression of depression and of being trapped.

The third stanza shows us Miss Wilson, sitting below pictures of her kinsman in England, “the baronet uncle, mother’s side”. The England’s class-based society is revealed here. She would not be the first colonial to claim an upper-class origin in England. The picture of “The Hall” represents a typical ancestral residence of the English aristocracy. Her concept of home lies in England, unlike this place in which she lives. Though she has been living here she does not identify New Zealand as her home country. The baronet, the hall, the silver teapot and all these images create an impression of wealth, grandeur and aristocracy but the tragedy is that the house might fall at any time. She is living in an artificial world and Curnow satirically describes them.

“People in the colonies, she said, /Can’t quite understand.../It was all my father’s land”. But the fact is that the great expanse of land was here for millennia before her father’s arrival. It was settled land and his ownership remains after his departure. So, what she tries to convey is that as she is a colonial she tries to vindicate her own denigration. From the evidence, the historian concludes that the “spirit of exile...is strong in the people still”

The final stanza describes the cowman and the rabbit. The rabbit is supplying the household with meat and this is interesting that Miss Wilson still pretends her aristocracy. The symbolism of the confined dog is reinforced as it now looks “lost and lame” just like the old woman. The “great gloom” at the end of the poem is an intensification of the depressed atmosphere of a land of exiles.

In “In Memorium R.L.M.G” Allen Curnow brings out a similar idea. The poem is taken from “Tomb of an Ancestor” and it is honouring the poet’s eternal grandmother. This poem is treated with a positive mood. While “house and Land” reflects a sense of lost, this poem is treated in a gentler way. During the course of time the poet had come very close to this country. The picture of RLMG is entirely sympathetic, without the touch of satire found in Miss Wilson.

The picture of her homesickness for the mother country is effectively carried out. The opening of the poem states her nostalgic feeling for the mother country: “...burst into tears and

cried / Let me go home". The image of home is crucial to the oldest generation and what they desire for is native identity. But the grandmother is forced to stay in the changed circumstances and each of the ships that are passing is painful for her, further she knows that she cannot claim anything in her home country.

Where she could finally reach is the yellow grave: "she died by the same sea. /...she led us... / to the yellow grave". The poet knows that this is the ultimate fate of all European descendants who once settled in the island and unable to return. All her home country feeling ended with her death, so as the present generation and in the latter such a nostalgic feeling is futile. Unlike the oldest generation, the poet and his generation attempt to live in the island: "...our feet/ were seen to have stopped" and he continues to say that even the street is like an ink-blue river; the colour blue here too associated with depression and desolation and the feeling of depression reflects "in the heat to the bay, the basking ships, this isle of her oblivion, our broad day". Nostalgia for a lost national identity of the older generation is typical of his poems.

The grandmother's lost desire frequently haunts the poet. Though the degree of nostalgia towards the lost home, from older generation to the present generation is diminishing, it is indispensable. The spirit of exile is permanent and therefore it is kept in every European descendant. He concludes the poem by reiterating the influence of his deceased grandmother's home feeling: "...she stretched like time behind us, or / Graven in cloud, our farthest ancestor".

The companion piece of "In Memorium R.L.M.G" is "To Fanny Rose May" and it is addressed to his great aunt. While the older generation struggles to cope up with the serious problem of homesickness, the present generation like Curnow accepts the reality that New Zealand is their homeland. The old generation finds sweetness in their lost fabulous old England. The voyage which took the English sisters to this new land deserves attention and praising. After settling in the island, the memories of their mother country continue to haunt them, a painful reality only old generation suffers. Therefore, they call the alien land "barbaric".

A note of lamentation is apparent in the companion poems. It is evident in the poems: "Let me go home", "watching...ships after ships", "fabulous old England". But a growing acceptance of the homeland is taking place in the present generation. Curnow calls New Zealand "My mountainous islands". He is indeed demonstrating the effort of habituating the climate as well as the culture. This anxiety has been one of his chief themes: "A million years old memory, but there's

/ Neither memory nor world here, but that hill...I grow (here) and this praise flows, this blood, this name”.

Fleur Adcock and her craving for English identity

The state of misplaced identity is further taken by many European descendants and Fleur Adcock is a prominent figure among them. Though she was born in New Zealand, she spent much of her childhood in England. She received her education from England and she has been writing full-time since 1989. A collected edition of her poetry, “Poems: 1960-2000” was published in 2000. In 2008 she was named Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for service to literature.

In her writings, she questions identity. The sense of being a New Zealander and the English root is a crisis she faces in her poetry. She loves being in England but resists when her family moves back to New Zealand. Therefore, a search of identity and genealogy is a matter of concern for her. The subject matter of her poetry is contemporary events in order to explore the dilemma of an exile artist. She rejects modernist tendency of TS Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Her experience of a white immigrant is a matter when she comes to know her New Zealander identity. The same poet, when she returns England, finds the English identity an escape from New Zealand. Though she was not oppressed and discriminated on the basis of race and ethnic, she chose England as a self-imposed exile in the country of her ancestors.

The question of identity and belonging reflect in many of her poems and two of her poems are analysing here to discuss ancestry, geography, displacement and the natural world of England and New Zealand.

“Immigrant” as the title suggests is about her own experience when she arrived in London from New Zealand. She feels like a stranger in her dream country. Published in 1979 in her “The Inner Harbour”, the feeling of a person in a new culture is highlighting here. She tries to become English by all means but inside, the New Zealander identity is troubling her. On the one hand she deserves to be a genuine Londoner and on the other hand she struggles to lose her New Zealand accent.

Arriving in London she “pause on the low bridge to watch the pelicans”. Like the speaker pelicans are non-native birds. Though they resemble typical English swan like birds when they float, it is awkward when it comes to putting their large beaks into water. The image of pelican makes her aware of her immigrant identity. When this identity comes out within her, she tries to cling to her outward English identity: “I clench cold fists in my Marks and Spencer’s Jacket”. This ambivalent identity is awkward for the poet, a dandy game.

The poet then goes on to confirm her English identity by secretly testing her accent: “Secretly test my accent once again: /St Jame’s park; St Jame’s park; St Jame’s park. She knows that she has not quite mastered the English accent yet. Many immigrants from New Zealand are aware of their accent. Some believe their accent is wrong and it is not up to the standard of British accent. This is why she repeats the English word thrice to ensure the quality of accent. All these create a sense of dislocation in the poet.

Fleur Adcock’s elegy on the death of her contemporary New Zealand writer James K Baxter shares a similar ambivalent nature who was a poet and a playwright. He is known as an activist for the preservation of Maori culture. While writing this poem she faces a personal dilemma. Though she is attracted by the English literary style, she praises the contribution of Baxter, who stands for Maori tradition. Her style changes here as if she is speaking to someone in an informal way. The poem is taken from the collection “The Scenic Beauty” (1974).

The poem, she says is a farewell letter, written in Shakespearean form. As she is not a trendsetter, she uses iambic rhyming for writing this letter poem. “What better models have we...?” Dylan and Eliot were not his model, but North American Lowell was his favour. Fleur was influenced by English tradition and not by Baxter. She knows that she has New Zealand blood, “our ocean is called Pacific, not Atlantic”. Therefore, when thinking about Baxter she writes this farewell poem. She doesn’t know whether to approve a Maori poet or to go with English tradition. But his death is a shock to her as he is Fleur’s husband’s friend. She places him with New Zealand and “destruction can’t delete an image”. Fleur still recollects him though she is a hemisphere away from him. She knows him for the last 20 years.

The poet minutely recollects all her memories with Baxter and his “generous comments on my verse”. She doesn’t call it a dirge, but a letter though she knows “those tolerant eyes will register no more”. Even in this condition the poet is not sure and finally she says: “but praise all

that you gave to the tradition?" The uncertainty and contradictory attitude are apparent in the poem. Though she wants to strengthen her English tradition, she cannot completely root out her native identity.

Conclusion

The exile experiences of both Allen Curnow and Fleur Adcock and the resultant identity crisis are less harmful though painful at personal level. In an age of mass migration people experience the problem in many ways. For some, a permanent shelter is their destination, and for other identity crisis is their concern. It varies from person to person and region to region.

Both Curnow and Fleur share the problem of cultural and national identity crises. Their condition of being in-between or hybridized identities is more personal. Rootlessness and cultural displacement therefore become their frequent subject matter. Curnow deals with the problem of defining his New Zealand identity and he accepts the position where he stands and Fleur on the other hand does not want to have her national identity and tries to embrace her ancestor's traditions that of an English.

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