

The Postmodern Notion of Gender in Adib Khan's *Spiral Road*

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Abstract

Fascination with diasporic narratives is a never-ending tale. Diasporic novels, short stories or essays decode the fixed way of looking at the institutions constructed by the social norms and values. Nuanced plots using the Third Space as a platform of resistance and reinvention challenge Western stereotypes of Eastern gender roles, and even question Western feminist ideologies that universalize the role of Third World Women. Diasporic narratives provide fertile ground for investigating gender through a postmodern lens, highlighting the performative and layered nature of gender against a background of cultural negotiation, displacement, and hybridity. A sense of plurality in diasporic novels disrupt traditional gender roles and invites constant reframing.

Postmodern notion of gender contends that gender is a cultural construct with performative and context-dependent dynamic ability to transcend beyond the traditional horizon. Adib Khan, an Australian diasporic novelist of Bangladeshi descent has inevitably utilized the postmodern notion of gender in his novels to showcase the shifting sense of self and gender through displacement, memory and cross-cultural negotiation. Adib Khan's *Spiral Road* reflects Judith Butler's influential idea that gender is constructed through iterative acts, rather than expressing a stable inner truth. This study aims to show how the novel *Spiral Road* affirms the postmodern rejection of totalizing discourses about gender and portrays gender as something constructed and deeply influenced by culture, history and personal experiences. The novel's handling of masculinity, female agency, and the conflicts with familial and romantic relationships all point to a profoundly postmodern examination of what it means to be gendered in a postmodern society.

Keywords: Postmodernism, diaspora, performativity, resistance, cultural institutions

INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism positions gender as emerging from cultural, discursive, and institutional practices that are deeply entangled with questions of power and knowledge. Postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler argue that identity and gender are constructed through discourses and subversion of norms. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) indirectly proposes that identity and gender norms are produced through discourse, cultural institutions, and he directly states that sexuality is not biological, but shaped by institutions of knowledge and power. Meanwhile, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) proposes that gender has no stable identities, and defies fixities because it acquires new meaning through

continuous performances with a fluid nature, being socially constructed based on cultural norms. Homi K. Bhabha, a prominent postcolonial theorist, in his best known work *The Location of Culture* (1994), has stated that “It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (55). According to Homi K. Bhabha, the Third Space emerging from contact between two cultures paves the way for fluid identities and cultural subjectivities. Bhabha’s ideas of ambivalence and hybridity act as sites of resistance and transformation in manifesting hybrid gender roles with an unstable nature shaped by the overlapping cultural, political, and historical forces.

Postmodern theorists viewed gender in multiscalar terms questioning the hegemonic forms of power, and accommodating the unstable and subjective form of gender. The postmodern way of thinking characterized by destabilized gender norms, is prevalent in diasporic novels, where the Third Space creates gender identities that are negotiated and allows for an intersectional understanding, especially representing the female characters based on their performativity. Adib Khan, being a first-generation diasporic Australian writer of Bangladeshi origin, has used his novels as vehicles to show how gender evolve into something new or fluid in a postmodern, changing post-colonial world. The protagonists of his novels are mostly immigrants, who have left their homeland and try to cope with issues like rootlessness, cultural hybridity, and a constant quest for identity. In *Spiral Road*, each character is sculpted according to the prevailing postmodern world and its needs. Khan has showcased the subjective and the resistive nature of people both in their homeland and in the migrated country to highlight the impact of culture and social background in defining and deciding one’s gender roles.

Methodology:

Close reading is done to understand the plot, characters, and themes used in the novel. An in-depth analysis of the novel paves the way for understanding the common themes used by the diasporic writers and connecting various circumstances with postmodern theories pertaining to gender and identity.

The Destabilized Notion of Gender in *Spiral Road*

The postmodern notion of gender in *Spiral Road* challenges the fixed gender norms and does not portray gender as a stable one. The novel *Spiral Road* establishes the idea that expected masculine or feminine traits in any society cannot always be satisfied, as they differ from one person to another based on overlapping cultural institutions. Various circumstances in the novel show how one’s identity can be constantly negotiated and shifted. According to Judith Butler, “it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (6). Butler’s idea of gender being inseparable from cultural institutions manifests gender as a social construct and is evident throughout the novel.

Spiral Road, is a postmodern diasporic novel exploring the life of Masud Alam, an immigrant in Australia of Bangladeshi origin, who returns back to his homeland after 30 years to visit his father suffering from Alzheimer’s disease and to know more about his declining family fortunes. After leaving for Richmond, Alam’s life is completely changed, and he has to adapt to the new environment. Alam’s adaptation doesn’t mean he has fully become an Australian; rather, the traces of his traditional upbringing in Dhanmondi, Dhaka, still influence his identity, and his gender roles become a social construct shaped by the conflicting cultural contexts. Alam always feels that “The indigenous man of the subcontinent and the migrant will never reconcile their differences and live as an entity. With each year passing, it becomes increasingly difficult to decide where I’d rather be” (Khan 38). Alam’s inability

to satisfy expected identity or gender roles is due to the cultural clash between his upbringing in Dhanmondi, and later adaptation to an entirely a new environment in Richmond. Alam's identity is negotiated through cultural shifts, leading to a tentative and context-dependent masculinity.

Alam's way of living cannot be the same in Richmond and Dhaka. Alam hails from a traditional zamindari Muslim family in Manikpur, whose ancestors have strictly followed the five primary tenets of Islam, and marriage is considered one of the greatest deeds. On contrary, after leaving for Richmond, Alam has been in a live-in relationship with Amelia, Though Alam has always been good to Amelia and her two children, at some point, he feels detached from Amelia. Alam's indecisiveness is the outcome of his masculinity getting caught in between the traditional expectations of his homeland, and the more liberal ones of the west. Amelia has always accused Alam's indecisiveness, stating that, "Your problem is that you don't passionately believe in anything! You don't seem have any need for anchorage" (Khan 19). After knowing about his father's Alzheimer condition, Alam at once decides to go to Dhaka, and he tells to himself, "To my relief, Amelia pulled out altogether. I would have had an impossible time explaining her to ma" (Khan 20). Alam knows very well that his family members will not accept his acquaintance with Amelia, despite he was in a live-in relationship with her, which shattered her hopes and caused him to fail both as a lover and a provider. His deeply rooted masculinity becomes destabilized and ambiguous due to his cultural hybridity, shaped by both Islamic tradition and Western liberalism. The pluralistic and uncertain notion of gender is reflected in the actions of Masud Alam, as he could neither merge himself into the traditional norms of his homeland nor assimilate into Australian society.

Resistance as a Postmodern Element in *Spiral Road*

Resistance is another major element that defines or modifies the expected gender roles from a postmodern perspective. Resistance operating at the personal, emotional, and cultural levels has reframed the expected gender roles in *Spiral Road*. Alya, a friend of Alam's sister is one of the most important characters known for her resistance against traditional patriarchal norms. Alya is portrayed as a bold independent business women determined to succeed. In her late thirties, she runs a cottage industry in the suburbs of Dhaka and Manikpur, which employs women workers who have been abused and are fighting with family issues. Alya has the potential to guide her own destiny and strives to bring changes in the Bangladeshi society to make it more developed. Alya easily mixes among the workers, has conversations with them regarding their well-being and the changes that need to be implemented for a progressive living.

Alya fights against the Manikpur patriarchal norms, where men deny women their educational rights, honor killings are glorified, and women are tortured by their husbands who are much older than they are. At one instance, Alya meets Mullah Hakim, the village head of Manikpur, to discuss opening a new school; unfortunately her way of constructive thinking is snubbed by Mullah and he rudely says, "Another school is not necessary. We have a madrassa where the children are taught the Koran and about our prophet and Islamic ways of life" (Khan 133). Alya replies at once, "'We need more than religious education', Alya explains patiently. 'The children need to study science and mathematics. English and history. Otherwise we will remain as backward nation'" (Khan 133). Alya is not against religious study; she wishes for a nation with youngsters who can shine both in religious education and also in science and technology, having a pragmatic vision and excelling in their future. Although Alya is criticized by the male-dominant society, for extending her business and opting for new educational

institutions, despite many oppositions and accusations, she remains firm in her norms. Her resistance gets her a new identity, making her gender role different from the fixed submissive role of Alam's mom, and his sister. Alya's performance is negotiated and it goes against the repeated roles validated within a specific culture.

Cultural resistance is another way of resisting, common among migrants to prove that they do not completely belong to any culture, embodying hybridity and in-betweenness. The Third Space, creating cultural hybridity acts as a site of cultural resistance. Alam feels alienated both from his family in Dhaka and his present life in Richmond. He resists being labeled as an immigrant or a Muslim. Alam is fed up with receiving prejudiced views both in his homeland and the place he migrated to. He was a leftist, and as a student he was part of political rallies and supported nationalism. However, after the Bangladesh Liberation War, he underwent emotional and spiritual imbalance, which was the major reason for his migration to Australia. After the war, Alam was given multiple negatives identities. Alam feels, "Once I was among those classified as freedom fighters. Terrorist to some...insurgent to others. I was nicknamed explosive and made it to the top ten on the army's MOST WANTED list" (Khan 27). All these ill-mannered rumors made Alam feel disgusted in his own homeland, and although he had a peaceful environment in Richmond, he was unable to assimilate into Australian culture. His relationship with Amelia failed due to his inability to fully assimilate into western culture. Alam resists patriarchal norms followed in Dhanmondi and Manikpur, which doesn't mean he is mean to towards his own culture because after coming back to his homeland, he remembers his past and cherishes the memories in the present. After his visit to Manikpur, he tells Alya, "I realize my return to Manikpur was like meeting an old lover after years of separation – one cannot hope to revive the passion, but passion, but it is possible to bask in the warmth of recollection" (Khan 156). Alam's cultural dislocation never let him cut off his memories of first love, sweet shops, celebratory lunches, Eid Al Adha celebration and shami kebabs connected with Dhanmondi. Throughout the plot Alam, is unwilling to identify himself with one of the cultures he lived in. He resists committing himself to a fixed identity, which allows him to be a product of liminal space.

The emotional resistance of Amelia and Alya is the strongest weapon they use to make the right choices, and the quality of this emotional resistance is what makes Amelia and Alya to stand out from fixed feminine roles. After learning about Alam's indecisive nature, she was ready to leave his life, and in every way she was prepared to take care of two children. She could have convinced Alam to stay Richmond for the sake of her two children Angela and Skye, who treat Alam as their own biological father. However, Amelia never resorted in acts like blackmailing Alam, stating, that she would file a cheating case, commit suicide or report him in his working place. In contrast, Alya was genuine enough to let Alam go to Dhaka and she was matured enough to handle the problem all by herself. It is always a myth in any culture that women are overly sensitive and jealous beings, but Amelia stood in opposition to both these traits. Amelia used to say, "Woman's personality can be determined by the state of her dressing table. A haphazard clutter of paraphernalia is a measure of self-confidence and boldness, an indication of independence and spontaneity in the way she lives" (Khan 180). Amelia's haphazard dressing table reflects her own life of being a single mother, and her choice of an indecisive person as a second choice, who left for the sake of his family. Still Amelia, with boldness, and spontaneity revamped her life, and stood for her children.

Alya, on the other hand had a clear vision and made the right decision not to marry Alam. Alam's mother wished that he would marry Alya, and often insisted him to take her out for a better

understanding. Alam and Alya went for rides, explored new places, and Alya also took Alam to her cottage industries, where they discussed her business strategies, politics, and other family issues. Despite, discussing everything with Alam, her emotional resistance was strong enough to suppress her feelings for him. Her sense of direction and purpose never allowed her to be captivated by Alam. Alya had respect for Alam, but her goals, dreams, and passion made her a strong independent woman who can do wonders without the support of a man.

Conclusion

Adib Khan has wisely designed the plot and characters of *Spiral Road* to help universal readers understand how hard an immigrant feels both in his homeland and in the land he has migrated to reconcile. Adib Khan, writing the plot from a non-believer's perspective, clearly explains the sense of rootlessness and lack of a fixed identity due to cultural displacement. Studying the life of an immigrant and the surrounding people belonging two different cultures from a postmodern perspective gives us clarity in regards to understanding their behavior, personality, and gender roles which can be easily negotiated and destabilized due to cultural shifts. Understanding a diasporic novel from postmodern perspective is important to know how cultural displacement or migration can affect one's emotional and psychological well being, and it posits that every culture has a value and that people who shift from their homeland due to various reasons are allowed to have transnational identities with destabilized nature.

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