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Negotiating Home and Exile: Diasporic Identity in The Saffron Kitchen and The Good Muslim

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Abstract

In Diasporic studies, identity and history are intricately linked with past problems and gaps, playing a significant role in shaping a new identity. This study examines two selected contemporary fictional novels: Yasmin Crowther's The Saffron Kitchen and Tahmima Anam's The Good Muslim, which highlight the experiences of their protagonists in terms of migration, exile, and identity issues. Both novels focus on the impact of displacement, whether across international borders or within one's homeland, on individuals or society, posing questions about its wide-ranging consequences.

Yasmin Crowther's narrative about an Iranian woman named Mariam, who lives in England, recounts her experience of displacement marked by trauma, silence and generational estrangement, reflecting the fragmented nature of exile within the space of dislocation. In this context, Tahmima Anam's story, set in post-war Bangladesh, focuses on the challenges of internal exile experienced by the protagonist Maya, depicting the displacement of a transitional nation and divided ideologies within families.

This study employs a qualitative research method and close textual analysis to explore how migration and diaspora entangle complex psychological and cultural processes that profoundly shape individuals' sense of belonging, memory, and identity. Through a critical framework grounded in trauma studies and exile, this study emphasises the protagonists' inner landscape and psychic fragmentation. Thus, this research contends that the relationship between the homeland and host countries is more nuanced than a simple interchange, and the past remains profoundly undisturbed, as revealed by the complexities of diasporic experiences.

Keywords: Complexities, diaspora, displacement, exile, identity, migration, silence, trauma

Introduction

Migration, exile, and diaspora have become a strong literary theme in modern postcolonial literature, and it is a way of expressing the dislocations and negotiations of identity that go hand in hand with displacement. These motifs are not purely geographical but profoundly psychological and cultural; they involve trauma, silence, hybridity, and disputed belonging. These are employed by writers of different traditions to explore how people and societies choose to live in a fragmented past and an uncertain present. Since the diasporic generation adopts Homi K. Bhabha's view that "nations are narrations," diasporic literature has gained widespread recognition in recent years. According to them, displacement blends the concepts of de- and re-inhabitation, which are frequently seen as connected but distinct memory- and identity-formation processes.

Unsurprisingly, the experience of displacement has made them aware of the significance of creating a counter-narrative. Most displaced people turn to writing about their migration experiences or the difficulties they encounter in their new location, particularly to challenge the stereotype that has been "consciously" created in the West.

These concerns are pre-empted in The Saffron Kitchen by Yasmin Crowther (2006) and The Good Muslim by Tahmima Anam (2011) in different contexts. Crowther also places her main character, Maryam, in the Iranian diaspora in England and dramatises the emotional price of exile and its effects on the subsequent generation. Anam, in turn, sets her story in post-war Bangladesh and emphasises the forms of internal exile shaped by ideological divisions within the homeland that the people struggled to gain independence from.

The present paper will argue that the two novels depict migration and exile not merely as physical departure but as a profound sense of identity and belonging. Based on critical approaches by Edward Said, Avtar Brah, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and trauma studies, the paper illustrates that The Saffron Kitchen and The Good Muslim provide an understanding of exile as personal, collective, geographical, and ideological, silencing and resistance.

Literature Review

Migration, Exile and Diaspora in Theory

According to Edward Said, exile is an incurable divide imposed between a human and a native place (Reflections on Exile 173). This perception seems to be familiar to characters in a state of constant alienation, manoeuvring through grief and recollection. James Clifford joins this discussion by defining mobility and cultural translation as the key features of modern diasporas. Homi Bhabha builds upon this concept by making hybridity the logical conclusion of cultural interactions, where identity is formed in the third space of negotiation (The Location of Culture 56).

The notion of the diaspora space, as formulated by Avtar Brah, highlights that diasporic identities are not something that can be transplanted but are produced in the interaction between race, gender, and nation (Cartographies of Diaspora 208). This is further strengthened by Stuart Hall, who argues that identity is a becoming and not a being (225), thus making diaspora a process and not a state.

Silence and subalternity theories also shed light on the depiction of women in these texts. A popular question raised by Gayatri Spivak is Can the Subaltern Speak? emphasizes that women's voices are twice marginalised in patriarchal and colonial discourses (287). Chandra Talpade Mohanty also proposes feminist solidarities that oppose both local and global systems of silencing (Feminism Without Borders 45).

Concerning the subject of trauma, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as something that can be hidden and manifested in a delayed manner, returning to haunt survivors without resolution (Unclaimed Experience 4). This is expanded by Dominick LaCapra, who says that the narratives of trauma appear and disappear (Writing History, Writing Trauma, 41). These structures play a significant role in the analysis of how Crowther and Anam portray the silence, memory, and intergenerational implications of displacement.

Narratives of Diasporic and Postcolonial Women

Feminist and transnational critics, such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Inderpal Grewal, highlight the interplay of migration and gender, in which women are usually left with the burden of silence while simultaneously opposing gender regimes. The works of diasporic women in literature address the heritage of exile across generations and the struggle to belong across national and continental lines.

Criticism of the Novels

The Saffron Kitchen has been examined in terms of the interaction between exile, recollection, and the silence that defines the diasporic relationships between generations. Critics have observed how Crowther combines personal trauma with political exile to portray an ideal, fragmented diasporic identity. The Good Muslim has received praise for its treatment of the theme of post-war trauma in Bangladesh and the clash of ideology between secularism and religion. Nevertheless, there is still little comparative scholarship that situates these novels side by side to demonstrate how migration and exile are both literary motifs in different geographical settings.

Analysis and Discussion

The Saffron Kitchen by Yasmin Crowther

The Saffron Kitchen presents Said's concept of exile through Maryam, the exiled Iranian protagonist who experiences exile as a painful and unresolved break. She does not talk about her past and is unable to reunite with her daughter, Sara, which is what Spivak would call the state of the subaltern, and her voice is repressed at the intersection of patriarchy and displacement. The novel plays out the exile that is not only remembered but lived in the body; Maryam's silences damage her relationship with Sara as much as being physically present in Iran.

During the initial phase of her adolescence, extending until the age of sixteen, Maryam maintains a positive relationship with her father. This dynamic shift when her father proposes marriage to one of her suitors, described as "the son of a nearby merchant and landowner" (Crowther, 2006: 44). Influenced by Persian cultural norms, the bond she shares with her father appears to diminish. These cultural expectations dictate that women assume the roles of wives or mothers, thereby limiting their autonomy and freedom to make independent decisions regarding their personal aspirations.

Maryam maintained a close bond with her father during her early teenage years, up until she reached sixteen. At that point, her father suggested she marry a suitor, identified as "the son of a nearby merchant and landowner" (Crowther, 2006: 44). This proposal marked a turning point, as the influence of Persian cultural traditions began to erode their relationship. These traditions dictated that women should primarily fulfil the roles of wives or mothers, thereby restricting their autonomy and limiting their ability to pursue personal goals.

To navigate her way out of this crisis, she resolutely opposes her father's wishes by declaring her refusal to marry. This defiance in a male-dominated society brings about severe repercussions. Her father employs an authoritarian approach to parenting, striving to mould, regulate, and assess her behaviour and attitudes according to a fixed standard of conduct, typically an absolute one, inspired by theological beliefs and established by a higher authority (Baumrind, 1966: 890). The effect of her father's slap is evident in her journey of social identity formation. With the slap on her face, Maryam comes to the realisation that she no longer shares a sense of belonging with her father, as she has not adhered to his values. Consequently, this negatively influences her social identity.

Straus (2009) suggests that using abuse or corporal punishment might send an incorrect message to adolescents, who are at a pivotal stage in their development, leading them to believe that they can resort to similar methods when their desires are unmet (9). This misleading message that Maryam receives from her father during her teenage years carries over into her adulthood, prompting her to use physical and corporal punishment on both her daughter, Sara and her nephew, Saeed.

Sara was born and raised in England, and her narrative reveals the notion of diaspora space proposed by Brah. She lives in a cultural middle ground in which her Britishness and her mother's Iranian identity are in tension. Stuart Hall's statement that identity is a question of being and becoming can be traced when Sara tries to discover the reasons behind Maryam's silence in the past. Crowther uses Sara to emphasise how it is a generational trauma and an incomplete work of exile.

The symbolism of the novel, especially the use of saffron as a spice which is very much identified with Iranian culture but transplanted in the English domesticity, shows a kind of what Bhabha is saying about the third space of culture negotiation. Maryam is a homeland where she never feels at home. Exile, in this case, is not only a state of displacement but also a state of in-betweenness, in which the identity itself becomes unstable.

The Good Muslim by Tahmima Anam

Whereas The Saffron Kitchen predicts transnational migration, The Good Muslim places exiles in a postcolonial state. The distancing of Maya by her brother, Sohail, can be used as an example of a manifestation of internal exile, in which ideological differences tear apart family and national identity. Said's thoughts on exile can be used here as exile in the motherland because Maya increasingly develops alienation toward the religious conservatism that is overtaking post-war Bangladesh.

The novel illustrates how Sohail's descent into extreme dogmatism causes him to neglect his son, Zaid, while Maya's inability to accept her brother's transformation leads to their estranged relationship, culminating in a tragic family event. This is depicted through the intricate sibling dynamics between Maya and Sohail. Shortly after the war, the family's joy at Sohail's return from his voluntary participation in the Mukti Bahini (the East Pakistan guerrilla) fades as he increasingly embraces religious extremism. Meanwhile, Maya, who also fought in the guerrilla and remains committed to secular Bengali nationalism, opposes her brother's changes, sparking a family conflict that ultimately drives her away. Now, she is a "crusading doctor" (Anam, 2011, p. 55).

The study indicates that the silence between the siblings is attributed to Sohail, who perceives his sister as different, increasingly seeing her as "the other." Maya becomes defensive upon sensing his attitude. Sohail's unwillingness to communicate with her leads Maya to believe that "women are victims of the war too" (Anam, 2011, p. 125) and that he fails to acknowledge her contributions during the war.

Maya has perpetually experienced a sense of being "excluded, confined to a place that is both secure and unremarkable – when the conflict erupted and she was unable to join the military" (p. 143).

Trauma theory offers an important discourse for viewing the characters' displacements. Trauma, as Caruth puts it, tends to recur at a later stage, haunting the present. In Maya, the memories of violence during the war manifest in the form of her activism and agitation, while in Sohail, they manifest as a withdrawal into the faith of fundamentalism. Both replies indicate the unresolved traumas of nations, through which postcolonial conditionality is developed.

The Bhabha notion of third space can be seen in the ideological struggle between secularism and religiosity in Pakistan. The conflicting decisions of the two siblings indicate that national identity in Bangladesh is also a hybrid and disputed phenomenon. The sources of feminist resistance are also familiar to Mohanty: Maya does not want to remain silent and becomes a mouthpiece of criticism against patriarchal and religious authorities, whereas the voice of Maryam is repressed in The Saffron Kitchen.

Comparative Insights

Combined, Crowther and Anam paint exile and the diaspora as complex themes. The physical exile of Maryam in England is the opposite of the ideological exile of Maya in Bangladesh, but both present the

idea that displacement causes instability in the sense of belonging and identity. The texts are united by memory and trauma: just the way the trauma of the Liberation War keeps Maya and Sohail apart, and the silence of Maryam follows Sara.

Women's voices come to the forefront. Maryam's silence mirrors Spivak's silent subaltern, while Maya is Mohanty's feminist voice that insists on speaking out about oppression. The two stories seem to indicate that women are in an unparalleled position to carry and express the weight of displacement.

These novels show that exile is not limited to physical movement. It is also a psychological, cultural, and ideological situation that appears through disintegrating relationships, disputed identities, and lifelong battles of belonging.

Conclusion

The Saffron Kitchen by Yasmin Crowther and The Good Muslim by Tahmima Anam bring out the issues of migration, exile, and diaspora as major themes that are not limited to geography and hence embrace identity, memory, and ideology. The silence and trauma of diasporic existence in transnational exile, as portrayed by Crowther through Maryam, and the context of exile in the fractured homeland of post-war Bangladesh, as presented by Anam, are what they place in their narratives. Together, both works emphasise that exile is both personal and collective, historical and existing.

This paper shows how the motifs of migration and diaspora are used within the literary vehicle as a way of discussing fractured belonging and cultural negotiation by putting these novels in dialogue. This exploration has the voices and silences of women- Maryam and Maya–which are the burdens and resistances of exile. Finally, these novels confirm that migration and diaspora are not just spatial movements but long-term states of the postcolonial imagination, which influence identity and literature in many significant ways.

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