

Cultural Intersections and Postmigration Trauma in Marina Budho's *Ask Me No Questions*

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Abstract

Migration is a process of displacement that can occur either voluntarily or involuntarily in a person's life. It brings forth an extremely challenging and decisive socio-cultural scenario for anyone involved. Migrants confront spatial and cultural dislocation forcing them to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. Culture plays a major role in shaping the experiences of immigrants in the new location as they navigate the complexities of identity crisis and social isolation. *Ask Me No Questions*, the novel by Marina Budhos, is an interesting investigation of cultural intersections and postmigration trauma faced by South Asian Muslim immigrants in America after the 9/11 attack. The Ahmed family's encounters may be applied to dig into the complexities of trauma that extend beyond individual issues to include cultural elements. Nadira chronicles the story of her family's migration from Bangladesh to America, and the anguish they experienced in the displaced land. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how cultural intersections significantly contribute to the postmigration trauma of immigrants when maneuvering a culture that frequently perceives diversity with skepticism.

Keywords: Culture; Intersections; Migration; Trauma; Identity

Introduction

Migration is a process that results in the displacement of individuals from one place to another. It can happen as a choice or due to circumstantial requirements. Looking for a job, better living conditions, and educational opportunities can be some of the possible reasons to experience migration as a choice whereas natural disasters, war, epidemics, poverty and forceful evacuation might be the reasons to make it a circumstantial requirement. Irrespective of the reasons, migration brings a range of serious concerns to be addressed which eventually lead to a condition of trauma in the life of migrant people. Cultural intersections and postmigration trauma need earnest critical attention as migration and the issues of migrants often attract global attention in the contemporary world.

The novel *Ask Me No Questions*, authored by the American Marina Budhos narrates the story of a Muslim Family who migrated from Bangladesh to America in the prospect of a better life. The setting of the novel is in the backdrop of post-9/11 American socio-political conditions. Nadira, a fourteen-year-old teenager narrated the tale of her family with poise and composure

describing the difficulties and struggles they experienced in their attempts to survive. The whole family including her father, mother and elder sister had gone through the serious problem of cultural estrangement and ended up experiencing the condition of posttraumatic trauma. This paper aims to explore the cultural intersections and the posttraumatic trauma experienced by Nadira's family in America as portrayed in Budhos' novel.

Discussion

In the modern world, the concept of postmigration is viewed as a tool for handling social transformations and cultural struggles that the migrant people experience in their life [1]. The struggle concerned with cultural intersections and social adaptation is a major challenge that every migrant must overcome to fit into the new living place. If the sociopolitical and cultural environment of the chosen place becomes unwelcoming, day-to-day survival will be a challenging task for the migrants. It makes life a series of continuous struggles, failing to fight will bring about fatal effects on the existence of the individual.

Nadira's father migrated to the US from Bangladesh to find better living conditions and more educational opportunities for his daughters. He aims to find resources for the social, cultural and economic development of his family. But the post 9/11 American society failed to offer them what they earnestly desired. The unwelcoming attitude of the Americans along with their racial, religious, linguistic and national prejudices made life a kind of ordeal for every Muslim family including Nadira's.

In America, Nadira and her family members felt a strong sense of disconnection from their homeland, just like anyone who misses their home country. Nadira shares her strong sense of sentiments associated with her memories of the boroi tree outside their house in Bangladesh, the stone wall where her mother used to slap the wash dry and the metal cabinet in which her father kept his school books. She remarks, "Even though we left when I was seven, sometimes if I close my eyes, it's as if I were right there" [2].

Nadira and her family did not have the feeling of belongingness in the new country. It was true for both the young girls that they found everything strange including the culture, language, lifestyle, food and dress code. Aisha was very much disturbed as the identity crisis posed a threat to their life. Cultural estrangement led to social isolation and the family got secluded in the American society. They feel that they "don't really exist here" (8) and it's not their home.

Despite the opportunities that America offered, life was not comfortable for them as they lacked the necessary legal proof to authenticate their presence. Post 9/11 America witnessed very stringent regulations regarding migration and visas. In the US, there was a rise in prejudice and discrimination against Muslim groups, and citizens of Muslim-majority nations began to be treated with distrust. Nadira and her family live in constant fear of being caught and imprisoned since their father possesses an outdated passport. Their immigration status was a continual source of apprehension and uncertainty for them. They were traumatized by the persistent fear of impending deportation, which made them preoccupied.

Children and women become the easy victims of postmigration trauma and their experiences are truly inhumane. Nadira's mother had a traumatic experience as they landed at the airport for the first time in America and her reaction revealed how insecure they felt in the country that they chose to lead a secure and comfortable life. Nadira explains, "How her mouth became stiff when the uniformed man split open the packing tape around our suitcase and plunged his hands into her underwear and saris, making us feel dirty inside" (7). This kind of experience upon their arrival filled them with agony and stress. Though Nadira's father did every available menial job to support his family, they lived with the fear of arrest and deportation looming over their prospects. It created a situation of trauma which affected the girls the most. Nadira and Aisha were at that point in life when they were about to spread their wings to explore the world to shape a bright future.

The sense of insecurity brings shadows over their dreams.

In America, Nadira's family experienced cultural alienation [3]. Nadira and her sister, being youngsters, found it difficult to cope with the changed scenario. As they were not welcomed by the native American families, Nadira and Aisha used to spend their weekends with the Bengali children of their parents' friends. Aisha was very particular about earning respect and recognition from others, especially the natives. So, she started imitating the American natives in terms of dress style, accent, food, and accessories. Aisha was deeply disturbed by the fact that her Bangladeshi heritage continued to keep her a target of discrimination in American society.

Trauma refers to the condition when an individual loses a safe place to retreat to process his or her emotions and feelings eventually resulting in a state of helplessness [7]. Trauma may emerge at different levels such as psychological, physical, individual and collective [4]. But it is significant to notice that all these are interrelated and an individual who experiences trauma at a particular level will get navigated to others in the later phases of the suffering. In *Ask Me No Questions*, the whole family suffered different traumatic experiences. When the father was jailed and the mother was forced to enter a public asylum, they were left feeling helpless [6]. Nadira's family and their post-migration trauma concerns were typical of the thousands of such families who immigrated to the United States from Muslim nations.

After the 9/11 terrorist attack, America tightened its emigration rules and they took strict actions against the unauthorized inhabitants without valid documents. Many migrants of Muslim descent lost their jobs and found it difficult to make money. Nadira's father with his expired visa included in the list of unfortunate victims and it forced them to live in a state of continuous fear. Many migrant families from Bangladesh who had some source of shelter to go back, returned to their homeland. But such a thought was beyond imagination for Nadira's family, as they sold their home and properties in Bangladesh before being migrated. They felt unwanted 'other' in the US [5].

In their school, the girls encountered prejudice and discrimination. Aisha was focused on doing well in her studies and had high standards for herself. But initially, the terrible incidents and experiences in their lives made her lose interest in learning and accepting responsibility for her life. The girls experienced significant psychological difficulties as a result, and the effects were evident. With their mother in custody and their father behind bars, they experienced fear and depression. As they took refuge with their uncle, he was apprehended and imprisoned as well. When they learned of their uncle's ordeal following his incarceration, they became afraid and were unable to sleep soundly. Regarding Aisha's reaction, Nadira says, "That night Aisha yells out in her sleep. She thrashes beside me, her hair springing up in wild coils. Her eyes look strange and unmoored" (Budhos 102). These words vividly portray the severity of the

psychological trauma experienced by them.

An identity crisis is something that can put any individual into a state of existential dilemma. Nadira and her family members experience this issue in its worst form. Being Bangladeshi migrants in the US keeps them secluded and alienated. In their school, workplace, and society they experience its effects. In her valedictorian speech, the only thing that Aisha asks the audience is to accept her for what she is and recognize her identity. "All I ask of you is to see me for who I am. Aisha" (152). This statement reveals the depth of her longing to be acknowledged in her identity. This represents the desire of thousands of migrant victims who struggle to get identified because of cultural interjections and geographical displacement. In the new nation, the migrants are excluded from and marginalized inside the dominant social and cultural discourses. They lose their status as first-class citizens and are denied access to the benefits enjoyed by native people.

Conclusion

After the 9/11 terrorist attack, the United States of America has tightened its security and brought many changes in the migration policy of the country. These changes posed several challenges to the migrants from all over the world who viewed America as their land of opportunity. Ask Me No Questions meticulously portrays cultural interjections and trauma of migrants, especially those of Muslim descent, in the US. Nadira and Aisha, the two teenage girls in the novels are caught between their Bengali heritage and the

demands of getting assimilated to the modern culture of America. Their experiences expose the problems of confronting cultural conflict when attempting to fit into a non-native setting. The novel further discusses how the family's Muslim identity, faith and cultural background often make them victims of social and legal exclusion. They easily become the targets of suspicion nullifying their sense of belonging in the new destination.

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