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Place, Hybridity and Identity: A Postcolonial Study of Khan's *Thinner Than Skin*

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of place and displacement are central to Postcolonial literature. The identity of a person or a people has direct link with their sense of place. This research aims at analyzing Khan's Thinner than Skin in the light of its characters' sense of place and displacement, and the resultant issues with their identity causing Psycho-existentialist crisis in them. Conceptual framework has been employed to undertake this research incorporating significant Postcolonial concepts of place, hybridity and identity with certain underpinnings of Bhabha, Fanon and Saeed's works. Since it is a qualitative research, Textual Analysis has been employed to explore how the characters suffer from identity crisis resulting from their reactions to the sense of place and their hybrid personalities and how their personalities are shaped or deshaped due to these facts.

Keywords: Place, Displacement, Identity, Hybridity, Psycho-existentialist Crisis

Introduction

Counter Discourse in postcolonial literature centers especially on the concept of place or displacement being the root cause of psychological/ psycho-existentialist crisis in the inhabitants of the countries which were once colonized. Ashcroft et al. (2007) link the concept of place and dislocation with identity formation or shaping postcolonial human psyche and Bhabha (1994) links the concepts of place and cultural identity with hybridity. Many pieces of Postcolonial literature have explored how place/ displacement and formation of hybrid or transcultural personalities result in different notions of identity formation/ identity crisis. "A major feature of postcolonial literatures is concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being…" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 9).

This crisis tends to be the result of and resultant in racism, racial discrimination, inferiority complex, marginalization, hybridity, and sociocultural discrimination. Formation of hybrid or disturbed identities is often caused by racist attitude and result is hatred (Fanon, 1952) or ambivalence (Bhabha, 1984). People with biracial lineage, especially ones with mixture of one white parent and the other parent of colour, are rooted in either two cultures or two places. They

may be seen as superior in the subjugated culture as the 'aborigine' look at them with awe due to having a part of "whiteness" in them (Fanon, 1952, p.17). Seen in the light of comparison with them, the oborigine view themselves to be inferior or less privileged. Likewise, people belonging to one set of colonial identity may be challenged by those belonging to another set of colonial identity when they move from one place to another (Ilyas, 2018). For instance, hybrid biracial people brought up in Western countries can challenge and be challenged by the people living in Pakistan when they move here. Though both of them have colonial personalities, yet their influence on one another brings identity crisis. Many Pakistani fiction writers like Nadeem Aslam, Kamila Shamsie, Bina Shah, Zain Saeed, Muneeza Shamsi and Uzma Aslam Khan have tried to explore these realistic Postcolonial facts in their fiction. They have linked issues of identity; political, social and cultural problems; transcultural practices; sense of place or displacement; racial preferences; and Postcolonial Psycho-existentialist crisis in their discursive construction of counter-discourse in order to make their readers identify still-present-yet-invisible chains of mental slavery and then break them.

Aslam (2012), despite the fact that at some places she herself seems to be influenced by the Eurocentric constructions of reality like Conrad, has voiced the Postcolonial concern with identity/ identity crisis by linking it with the concepts of hybridity and place/ displacement. She has presented this concern through an enmeshing story of a group of tourists on tour of Pakistani Northern areas. They include Nadir, a Pakistani but living as a professional photographer in USA; Farhana, an American biracial girl born of Pakistani father; Wes, an American; and Irfan, their Pakistani guide. The narrative offers an insight showing the way sense of place, duality of culture, hybrid lineage or personality shape or deshape postcolonial identities.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research study are:

- To explore how the sense of place affects identity.
- To find out how the characters in Thinner than Skin reacts to the dimensions connected with place.
- To explore how their sense of place/displacement and resultant hybridity construct identity issues among them.

Research Questions

- Does the sense of place affect identity?
- How do the characters in Thinner than Skin react to the dimensions connected with place?
- How do their sense of place and resultant hybridity construct identity issues among them?

Literature Review

Postcolonial writings are often based on the issues related to the identity of the once colonized people. As Colonialism is an ongoing process, the postcolonial psyche is still under the impact of subjugation. Place is an extremely important concept in Postcolonial writings because it is in a specific place or in going away to some other place that an identity or personality is built. Ashcroft (2001) rightly points out that place is "a constant trope of difference in post-colonial writing, a continual reminder of colonial ambivalence, of the separation, yet continual mixing of the colonizer and the colonized" (p.154). He suggests that place should be taken as the imperial project instead of a mere location, as place is closely involved in formation and development of identity, of history, and of the 'system of representation' in colonized societies. In the concept of place, is also involved the concept of displacement which is the result of colonization and it eventually results in formation of hybrid personalities who are the victim of ambivalence and mimicry. These terms are now mostly associated with Bhabha; however, they are rooted in the works of Fanon and Saeed. Saeed (1994) calls culture "a source of identity" (p.xiii) and culture, according to him, has direct link with locales, i.e., the West and the East (1978). Fanon (1952) also presented the idea of the formation of identity linked with place, the imitation of the colonizers, and formation of a hybrid personality. Bhabha (1994) rejects the idea of binaries for the colonizers and the colonized and introduces a new concept of the "third space" in which a new identity or personality is built which he calls a hybrid personality having the elements of both cultures. However, according to him, the identity of such persons is not firm or stable because they have elements of completely opposite cultures and their identity is based on mimicry and ambivalence. The colonial subjects always have double feelings towards the colonizers: that of "attraction and repulsion" (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p.10). Mimicry involves copying the manners, assumptions, culture, and values of the colonizers. Result is not positive, rather "blurred copy" resulting in distorted identities (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p.25).

These concepts have been explored by many postcolonial writers in their writings. Krakovsky (2007) has explored link between place and identity in Brand's work. Saha (2015) has studied the consequences of displacement in Naipaul, Desai, and Coetzee's works. Nisar et al. (2021) have explored the concepts of displacement, hybridity and mimicry along with their impact on the identity of the characters in Aslam's selected works.

So far as Thinner than Skin (2012) is concerned, research on limited aspects of this novel has been conducted as it is a comparatively complex novel. Makhdoom et al. (2019) have explored environmentalism and the related aspects in this novel. They have made link between landscape and identity of the characters living there. Rashid (2018) has explored various aspects of the novel which have resulted in image-making of Pakistan in Post-9/11 era with the help of discourse. Tolle (2013) has reviewed general aspects of the novel such as environmental concerns, politics, religious tensions and feminist perspective. However, no recognized research has been undertaken focusing on the links of place, hybridity and identity so far. Hence, the present study is aimed at exploring these elements in this novel and thus bridging the research gap.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This research study is based on the exploration of the impact of place/ displacement and the resultant hybridity on the identity of Postcolonial personality. Conceptual framework has been employed focusing on the concepts of place, hybridity and identity with underpinnings of Bhabha, Fanon and Saeed's theories as propounded in their famous writings. It is qualitative research, and the method of Textual Analysis has been employed to analyze the data which in this study is the text of the novel, Thinner than Skin by Uzma Aslam Khan. Careful coding of related concepts and their interpretation helped in meeting research objectives.

Discussion and Findings

Aslam's Thinner than Skin is a novel which is a strong illustration of the fact as how sense of place and hybridity go a long way in shaping identity of the people belonging to previously colonized countries. This novel presents a special treatment of the concept of 'place' as the site for the construction of identity through every character's different orientation toward Pakistan as a locale. Some of the characters are hybrid as they embody the influence of two different places in them. Following is the in-depth analysis of characters, situations and different phenomena presented in this novel which demonstrate how characters react to different dimensions connected with place and how this sense and the resultant hybridity cause identity issues in them:

Thinner than Skin centers on the conflict which ensues after a half-American and half-Pakistani girl, Farhana, visits Pakistani Northern areas along with her Pakistani-born boy friend, Nadir, and her colleague, Wes. Despite the fact she has never been to Pakistan and has been brought up in America, she is introduced in the novel for the first time as a "nice little Pakistani girl" (p. 17). This expression renders irony the next moment when totally against the expectations of the readers- raised especially by the word "Pakistani"- she is presented as completely Westernized, almost naked on the beach. Daughter of a Pakistani father and a German mother, she left Pakistan in her childhood and grew in America. The 'place' of her upbringing has left indelible marks on her personality but since she has a Pakistani lineage, hers is a hybrid personality. This fact is reflected in her desire to be taken "back" (p. 41) to Pakistan which later she calls "my" country. Nadir is perplexed on her use of the word 'back'. Nadir also uses the word "return" (p. 32) for her coming to Pakistan. It denotes that she feels her roots to be in Pakistan. Another hint of her unconscious attachment with Pakistan is that she loves Nadir because he is "her past" (p. 40), i.e., he belongs to Pakistan. Since hybridity involves mimicry, she, like Nadir, follows all the norms of American society, the place where she lives. Her intimate relations with Nadir, drinking wine, and pattern of dressing are other manifestation of her hybrid identity. Her father feels happy in likening Farhana to her mother who was a German Catholic and he is thankful that she is unlike himself. Even her very appearance is hybrid, "her German-Pakistani ancestry had resulted in a quite Iranian look…" (p. 33). This aspect is reflected in her use of language as well; she uses words like "Dada" and "Baba" (p. 54). Added to this hybridity is the influence of the 'place' (USA) which has constructed her personality quite different from native Pakistani women. Nadir keeps on comparing her with Pakistani women throughout the novel: "She was't like any women I know in Karachi. Her energy was- different. It wasn't sultry, wasn't eastern"

(p. 39). He also compares her with his own sister, Sonia, who in comparison with Farhana, seems to be much less privileged: Farhana is "better educated", "wealthier", and more indifferent than Sonia (p. 27). Their connection with different places and the resultant different opportunities cause an identity issue in Nadir who feels his sister's fortune to be inferior. Fanon's (1967) idea of the challenged identity of the aborigine by the hybrid individuals (who have got some "whiteness" in them) can be traced here. During her stay in Pakistan, she is held in superior position by everyone due to her connection with a 'superior' place, i.e., America. She is called an "Angrez woman" (p. 80) and a "strong woman" (p. 282). When Ghafoor and Maryam talk about taking revenge from the murderers of Kiran, Ghafoor says that he cannot harm Farhana because "she is with the American" (p. 228). However, Nadir cannot escape their wrath as he is a Pakistani national, having connection with a 'weak' place. People of Pakistan are shown having ambivalent attitude towards USA. They hold USA responsible for all the disturbance in Pakistan in post-9/11 scenario, but treat Americans in the most hospitable manner. It is mainly due to their belonging to a 'place' which exerts power in this world. Despite the fact that both Nadir and Farhana are responsible for Kiran's death, people direct their anger toward Nadir by calling him "Fareebi" (p. 206) and boycotting him, but they treat Farhana and Wes with all possible hospitality and love during their stay in Kaghan and at the moment of their departure. "They blessed Farhana and embraced Mr. Whistly" (p. 226). Suleman cannot refuse Farhana's request to take Kiran with her to the boat because he thinks that he cannot refuse a 'guest' (a strong one in this case as this guest belongs to a strong place). Farhana's own attitude towards Pakistan as her place of birth is ambivalent, which shows her disturbed identity. She is attracted to Pakistan when she is in USA but she finds faults with the way Pakistani women live. "She decided that Pakistan was a place where women couldn't survive" (p. 104). When the news of a bomb explosion in a hotel results in the death of one foreigner and seven native Pakistanis, her sympathies are clearly more with that foreigner (p. 28).

Nadir is another character in whose case sense of place and dislocation result in a disturbed identity. He is a Pakistani national who is staying in USA, trying to make his fortune as a professional photographer. This dislocation has resulted in making him a hybrid individual who tries to strengthen his position in a foreign place by leaving almost all norms of his native place. He is often regarded as a Latino or an Arab due to his appearance. When he is asked by a Latino whether he is a "Moozlim or what?", he replies sarcastically, "Or what" (p. 12). He develops a kind of ambivalence toward USA. Surely his roots are in his native place, yet he is attracted towards this foreign place, accepting almost all of its social ways. However, this liking for America is not wholehearted. He does react when his native identity and sense of belonging to his native place are challenged. He is told that the Americans are interested not in his landscape photographs, rather they want him to show, in his photographs, "the dirt. The misery" of Pakistan, his "home" (p. 13). He is advised not to waste his time in photography of nature, rather he must use his "advantage" (p. 13). He is also told that he needs to put "authenticity" in his photographs by shooting "the beggars and bazaars or anything that resembles your culture" (p. 14) and war in Pakistan. This is how they remind him of his 'place' in the professional world by reminding him its visible face. When at the same place, he sees the nature landscape photographs of an American photographer, Linde Waidhofer, it causes harm to his identity and he feels disoriented. In utter dismay, he questions himself, "A Waidhofer can be a nature photographer of

the Wild West but a Shiekh must be a war photographer of the Wild East!" (p. 15). He is also reminded that he is 'lucky' in that he comes from "a place always in the news" (p. 26) due to War on Terror. Though interested always in seeking a successful career in USA, he cannot stand the idea that someone should slight Pakistan. His sense of belonging to his native place is evident when in the bomb-blast incident, he weighs on the side of the death of 7 locals in comparison with one foreigner. Similarly, when Farhana criticizes and points out surviving condition of Pakistani women, he reacts by mentioning that 85 million women are surviving there. Still he doesn't want to be reminded of his link with a disturbed place (Pakistan). Quite ironically, he thinks that he loves Farhana because she does not remind him of his past. His past is linked with his native place and is a definite, unavoidable part of his identity. His hybridity is also revealed in the fact that though he is having intimate relations with Farhana without marriage and is planning to marry her, yet he does not let his father know this fact and introduces her as Wes' sister. He thinks that his father would not approve a daughter-in-law who is travelling abroad alone with a man even before marriage. So, he presents her as Wes' sister to make her acceptable to his father. It clearly indicates his shaken identity. He remains the victim of it throughout the novel. Another source of disorientation on his part in his bitter realization that only he is regarded guilty of Kiran's murder because of his connection with a weak place (Pakistan) and the other members of his party are exonerated only because of their relation to a strong place (USA).

Next, this novel presents the impact of place on identity very impressively through depicting nomads or Gujjar tribes of Kaghan. Khan stresses the fact that though this community settled in the Northern areas of Pakistan thousands of years ago, yet they would keep on being regarded as "grazers" (p. 238). Since they are dislocated twice in a year and have no permanent place to belong to, they are marginalized and do not enjoy basic rights and a nice living, "they were always wanderers… They are still considered outsiders" (p. 187). "They're not from anywhere. They're nomads" (p. 170). They migrate to highland areas in the summer and have a "less transient home, near Balakot (p. 157) in the winter. Since they do not belong to any 'place', they don't have identity and rights. Farhana and Nadir go unpunished despite drowning a Gujjar child only because of their dislocated position and the resultant lack of identity and strength. Irfan rightly describes them as people having "no land, no nation" (p.189). According to him, if Nadir had killed a child of a nation, he would not have gone unpunished. They are maltreated for another reason that they have not been able to develop an individual culture. This problem is again linked with their place of living. They reside an area near the Silk Route where there is interaction of people from different nations, i.e., Afghanis, Chinese, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs. It has resulted in a kind of hybrid culture due to the impact of different nationalities. Maryam and Ghafoor are the true representatives of this tribe. Maryam knows all the legends of this place, takes part in pagan rituals and is closely associated with that place. Her complex personality is the result of this geographical fact. Ghafoor keeps on moving between Almatey, Bishkek, Andijan, Tashkent and Kaghan, so has no fixed identity.

The connection of place and identity is further demonstrated by Khan through different phenomena and situations in this novel. Farhana constructs a colonial discourse when she says that an owl may be a symbol of both "evil and wise", and then says "ours" is wise (pp. 9-10).

Her western identity has been endorsed here as an owl is the symbol of wisdom in the West. Nadir thinks that geography is capable of constructing a person and it really happens when he and Farhana spend a terrible time in post-9/11 Northern areas of Pakistan. Another dimension of the concept of place in Postcolonial writings is its link with time. Since this novel is set in the Northern areas of Pakistan hit by 'War on Terror' in the time after 9/11, the tour of the main characters of the novel turns highly disturbing causing serious issues to their identities. Irfan rightly calls this fact "An accident of geography" (p. 72). It is also a hint to American Neocolonialism. In Irfan's case as well, Aslam links the interpretation of his plight to the sense of place. Irfan's state of mind (due to loss of his wife in a dacoity) might have been interpreted by a psychiatrist in USA as the need of a settlement. However, people in Pakistan are of the view that he "needs God" (p. 48). Farhana's father also, being a hybrid person, demonstrates a sense of belonging to his native place, i.e., Pakistan. He is strange, unpredictable, and teasing due to an identity crisis he is suffering from. His reference to the Holy Prophet's forbidding of drawing images, his narration of his father's disturbed life due to his psychological and physical displacement, and his description of the "goorna" (p. 57) of the First World toward the Third World, are all indications of his hybrid and disturbed identity due to displacement.

Conclusion

This is how Aslam becomes one of the voices of the Postcolonial Pakistan who are 'writing back' to the center thus highlighting the issues still prevalent in the result of previous colonization. Moreover, the possibilities of Neo-colonization are also suggested through placing the story in post-9/11 'War on Terror' setting and thus showing its repercussions for Pakistanis and the resultant identity crisis in them. The analysis of all the characters and situations in terms of place, hybridity, identity issues and their interconnection has been traced in this paper, hence, all the objectives have been met and justified. This study may prove significant as it has highlighted basic reasons behind the formation of a postcolonial personality resulting in Psycho-existentialist crisis and it may go a long way in helping once colonized people to identify the chains of mental slavery to get rid of them.

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