



The Spaces In between; Psychoanalytic Perspective Of Alvi's Presents From My Aunts In Pakistan

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Abstract

Poststructuralism views human subjectivity as a continuous process where different discourses continuously shape it. The poem Presents From My Aunts in Pakistan by Muniza Alvi, represents the dilemma of crisis heterotopia and reveals indecisiveness on part of the poetess regarding her national/cultural identity. The differences of two cultures and her mixed feelings towards her origin continue to haunt her, resulting into a psychological conflict. The two different cultures, as two different discourses, in the poem are analyzed at psychological level in the light of Lacanian Psychoanalysis. The study concludes that the poem is a psychological reflection and expression of a split subject.

Introduction

From early childhood, individuals are shaped and taught as per the dictates of sensible social norms. Human identity is hence a dialogical social and cultural outcome, controlled by the discursive structures/functions and Ideologies of the society. We live and exist according to the social roles/positions assigned to us by the society and therefore, become who we are. It is an act of collective creativity.

Moniza Alvi was born in Lahore in Pakistan, the daughter of a Pakistani father and an English mother. She moved to Hatfield in England when she was a few months old. She didn't revisit Pakistan until after the publication of her first book of poems, "The Country over my Shoulders", from which is selected the poem Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan, for the present study. In various interviews the poetess has unfolded her confusion as a child with respect to her socio-cultural identity and her need of belongingness to a fixed origin. The selected poem also deals with the confusion of the poetess as a child regarding her mixed identity.

The 'Subject' as a Discursive Construction

We define ourselves in relation to other people. The identities we fight over are produced in what contemporary theorists have understood as an economy: a shifting interchange of meanings and desires, a perpetual give and take of values and images. In this way, the relation between self and other is highly charged and volatile. When we represent ourselves, we inevitably, even if tacitly, represent others. (Fuery and Mansfield, 2000, p. 144)

Human identity is essentially a dialogic construct, we perceive ourselves as who we are not only with respect to how different we are from others, but also in relation to qualities that we share with others, as members of specific groups, cultures, nationalities and religions. All these differences and similarities we share with others make each one of us unique individuals. The self therefore, does not originate in the vacuum of human perception rather; it is created and sustained through a chain of interaction, communication and relations with other members of the society. The immediate contextual components of identity are therefore, society, group and culture.

An important Poststructural assumption is that of subject formation when it comes to personal identity. John Lye (1997) observes that persons are culturally and discursively structured, created in interaction as situated, symbolic beings. The common term for a person so conceived is a 'subject'. With further reference to identity formation, he claims that subjects are social in their very origin: they take their meaning and value and self image from their identity groups, from their activities in society, from their intimate relations, from the multiple pools of common meanings and symbols and practices which they share variously with their sub-cultural groups and with their society as a larger unit.

The Decentralized crisis-hit Subject

Identity is not something fixed and stable, it is a process that will never lead to completion. Identity not only is subject to constant change, it can also never be coherent. (Bertens, 2001, p. 162)

Hermans, Kempen & Loon (1992, p. 30) state that "the dialogical self has the character of a decentralized, polyphonic narrative with a multiplicity of I positions." Since the self is made of several smaller selves, it is always subjected to a position of decentralization, and consequently, the different selves keep swaying between these different identity positions. The human identity can thus be never stable or centered; instead it is more like a lifelong process of interchange between different subject positions and transition from one to another. Laclau and Mouffe (cited in Philips and Jorgenson, 2002) observe that it is through the chain of equivalence that individuals develop their identities thereby, becoming subjects as per the social make up around them. This chain of equivalence offers not only the comparative attributes but also the contrasting elements through which subjects recognize themselves as who they are and who they are not. For example, the discursive construction of 'man' equates with 'dominance', 'strength', 'sports', 'office', etc., in society,

and contrasts with “woman’ who is equated with ‘cooking’, ‘passion’, ‘passive’, etc. Following is their summary of subject and its formation (Jorgenson and Philips, 2002, p. 43):

- The subject is fundamentally split, it never quite becomes ‘itself’.
- It acquires its identity by being represented discursively.
- Identity is thus identification with a subject position in a discursive structure.
- Identity is discursively constituted through chains of equivalence where signs are sorted and linked together in chains in opposition to other chains which thus define how the subject is, and how it is not.
- Identity is always relationally organized; the subject is something because it is contrasted with something that it is not.
- Identity is changeable just as discourses are.
- The subject is fragmented or decentered; it has different identities according to those discourses of which it forms part.
- The subject is overdetermined; in principle, it always has the possibility to identify differently in specific situations. Therefore a given identity is contingent that is, possible but not necessary.

Thus, the subject is always split/ decentered/ fragmented, and can never be fully a whole because it is in a continuous state of flux between different social identities/positions, each of which requires certain socially expected behavior patterns. The subject identity is therefore, constructed and represented the way socio-cultural norms/traditions allow it to be. It is also discursively associated with attributes assigned to its different roles and differentiated from those of others. A ‘woman’ is equated with ‘fragility’ as opposed to ‘strength’. Such equivalences and differences create a form of behavioral expectation from women in general and restrict their roles in society. The subject identity is therefore, not fixed but essentially unstable as it flows between different roles and social positions.

The Orders of Psychological Development: Lacan

With respect to the identity development in children, Lacan (1966, cited in Bertens, 2001, p. 160) traces three orders with reference to the child’s understanding of self and others; the Real order, the Imaginary order and the Symbolic order. The Real is the phase of union with the mother which must be broken up in order to build culture. The Imaginary is the Mirror stage in which the child grasps the idea of others, and begins to understand otherness as a concept or structuring principle. This otherness also formulates the notion of self as a different entity from the other.

Finally, the child enters the Symbolic order which is an acceptance of language, social and cultural systems that prevail in the environment. Language shapes the child’s identity as a separate being and moulds his/her psyche. From the symbolic order, the child starts accepting his/her position as subject. Through language and socialization, the subject

formulates and understands who it is, and thus forms an identity. This identity further not only decides the place and role of the subject in society but also the expected mode of behavior. The subject is, therefore, always split/fragmented/decentered with respect to this identity because it identifies on the basis of not just similarities but differences from others as well. Bertens (2001, p. 161) explains the Lacanian notion of identity formation as:

For Lacan, we need the response and recognition of others and of the Other to arrive at what we experience as our identity. Our 'subjectivity' is constructed in interaction with 'others' that is individuals who resemble us in one way or another but who are also irrevocably different. We become ourselves by way of other perspectives and other views of who we are. We also become ourselves under the 'gaze' of the 'Other' or 'great other'. This 'Other'—'the locus from which the question of [the subject's] existence may be presented to him'— is not a concrete individual, although it may be embodied in one (father or mother, for instance), but stands for the larger social order.

Lacan thus, also focuses on the dialogic nature of human subjectivity. We become who we are because "others" view us or want us as such, and also because culture, religion, social order, norms and traditions form us to be the way we are. It is under the gaze of this great Other that we are constantly being formed or deformed.

In exploring subjectivity as a process, Kristeva (1982, cited in McAfee, 2004, p. 45) proposes the idea of abjection; for her, the abject is the intermediate phase/moment between the subject and the object. It is the process of self-identification by which an individual recognizes the boundaries of his/ herself and starts perceiving one's own self as a separate being. It is the stage, for the infant, of differentiation between "self" and "other" by detaching him/herself, both physically and mentally, from the mother's body. "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be." However, this process of self-recognition is not easy, rather is marked by extreme psychological violence that continues to haunt the individual as an adult also. It is what disturbs identity, system, order, and what does not respect borders, positions, rules. Abjection is what enacts the borders between the self and the others for the first time, and hovers in the consciousness for all time. McAfee (2004, p. 57) summarizes Kristeva's notion of abjection as:

As a process, expelling what is deemed "other" to "oneself", it is a means for defining the borders of subjectivity. But, as a phenomenon that never entirely recedes, abjection also haunts subjectivity, threatening to unravel what has been constructed; one's own sense of self is never settled and unshaken. To keep hold of "one self", a subject has to remain vigilant against what may undermine its borders.

Even before its birth, the infant feels unified with the environment and the mother's body. After birth, it sticks to the same feeling of oneness with its environment until a specific time period in development. "The infant comes into being without any borders. These must be developed." The borders that make possible the distinction between "I" and "them" are developed by abjection. The abject as a dividing stage is a violent psychological and cognitive change, both horrifying and "seductive" for the child as well as the adult. It is for this reason that the self is almost always at the brink of breakdown, for any minor referent to the abject might lead to identity and meaning collapse.

This psychological confusion is taken to an extreme in subjects belonging to split societies, split families, split nations, split religions and war-torn regions, placing him/her in a physical and psychological diasporic situation, which ultimately leads to a state of identity crisis. Ochs (1993, p. 298) claims:

We can understand "identity crises" as anxieties over one's inability or failure to achieve some identity through failure to act and feel in some expected or desired way or through the failure of others to ratify those displayed acts and feelings.

It is this failure to conform with any fixed and accepted social identity standard which creates a sense of no where, a feeling that one does not belong to any one or any place.

This caught up identity and state of liminality leads to 'crisis heterotopia' (Foucault 1967). Physically, heterotopia is the foreign space or the space of otherness, a place that can be a combination of different spaces in one place, for example, a garden is a heterotopia as it comprises of different environmental patches for various plants of different origins and requirements. Countries like UK, US, Canada, etc., where people from all across the globe meet with different origins, religions and cultures, can be thus understood as heterotopias. Individuals in crisis fall, both physically or mentally, in places that may be termed as "crisis heterotopias".

Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan: A Psychoanalytical Perspective

The content of the poem is the reflection of the heterotopial state of mind of the poetess. She is swinging in between dual boundaries, both physical and psychological levels, which turn out to be two opposing psychological forces. The belongingness to Pakistan has a very strong and early impact which determines her psychological confusion while the immigration to England and exposure to a different environment comes into the direct conflict with her early psychological imprints. This state of conflict or perplexity is the major theme of her poem and the text of the poem is arranged to portray this psychological confusion of the poetess.

Alvi as a Pakistani-British has a dual as well as no fixed nationality simultaneously. The demands and expectations of two different cultures challenge her fixed identity in the society. She cannot fully adhere to one society and her connections to different cultures

create a split in her identity. She lives in England but the memories of Pakistan, and her position in English society as an immigrant deprive her of any fixed, stable identity. Such liminality becomes a haunting psychological force which determines her subjectivity.

In Lacanian terms, two opposing psychological forces arise due to the lack created during the transference of real order with imaginary stage which turns out to be desire in the symbolic stage. In other words, as the lack generated due to the loss of mother, the small other, cannot be fulfilled and it drives subject's behavior throughout his/her life and the exposure to language and culture further widens the gulf between the lack and fulfillment.

In the context of the poem and poetess' immigrant status in England, the abovementioned Lacanian concepts can be clearly observed in the text of the poem. Pakistan in the text can be regarded as the lost mother of the real order, in other terms the small other. As in the real order there is no conflict and the child enjoys total control over the inseparable environment. Alvi in the beginning of the poem enjoys the same unity of thought and there is no signs of hybridity or duality; the first stanza, for instance, contains the apprehensive vocabulary for Pakistan. The colorful description of the gifts she received from Pakistan shows her nostalgia and a strong belonging bond to her past. The present on the other hand is in contrast to her past which creates the conflict in her mind and gives origin to the liminality.

The conflict bulges to the surface with Alvi's return from her nostalgia to her present in the second stanza where the colorful dress becomes a source of remorse for her ' I could never be as lovely as those clothes' , the symbolic order's effect is clear in the Alvi's psychological state of mind. The contrasting culture does not allow her to appreciate her longing-past. She tries to fulfill that gap with the denim and corduroy.

If language is split from reality, then when the subject acquires symbolic language, s/he becomes symbolized: the language speaks the subject. In order to be spoken, the subject must experience Loss (of the Forbidden Mother) and Gains entry into the social order. An Exchange, based upon Lack, has been made, the bargain has been struck and the ego or the subject does not and cannot exist.

The following stanzas reflect the mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion of the poetess towards Pakistan. The duality of her nationality and belongingness to the two different patches of world divide her feelings. The attraction is almost always followed by a remorse that shows the available psychological conflict between the natural attractions towards real order that is embedded into unconscious. While the remorse is reflection of the ideological revulsion that is the outcome of symbolic order. The duality of feelings and two contrasting expectations and demands from different cultures leave Alvi amidst towards attaining a fixed identity.

Alvi's conflict ends up in hybridity and she is not sure which part of the world she actually belongs to. In Lacanian terms she can be regarded as a split subject. The void created by the loss of mother, equivalent in this case with her Pakistani origin, remain in the unconscious which drives her behavior. Alvi is aware of the two opposing forces and she

finds herself helpless; as she confesses herself in second stanza 'My costume clung to me and I was aflame, I couldn't rise up out of its fire' .She cannot get rid of her origin which regularly haunts her through various reinforcements like gifts, memories and photographs and at the same time her contrasting cultural context increases her dilemma. Her school friend does not like her dress and this takes Alvi into further guilt-ridden feelings, she begins to see Pakistan with her English friends' eyes. With this perspective she enters into a state of 'abjection' where her social self splits psychologically between two origins. This state of abjection further creates an alienated state of mind depicted in the line, 'In my English grandmother's dining room, found myself alone.' So, in a huge foreign space the poetess feels alone and nothing/no one to relate with. This leads the split subject into a vacuum of isolation where the crisis of the being needs to be resolved.

The feelings of attraction and repulsion can also be symbolically interpreted in the text. The Shalwar Kameez, camel skin lamp, mirror-work, and the photographs revoke both love and regret in poetess' mind. For instance,her admiration of the mirror work immediately follows the flashback of sailing to England which aggravates the situation for her. She remembers how England has been a different society for back-then, 'found myself alone playing with tin-boat' . This triggers her psychological conflict and feelings of admiration is once again replaced with revulsion.Alvi has used effective imagery in the poem to highlight her 'half english' psycho-social situation and placement. The imagery of cultural identity crisis present in the text is presented in the following table:

The old photographs of Lahore increase her agony for the small other and the use of vocabulary like 'conflict, a fractured, throbbing, beggars, sweeper girls' reflect her resentment towards Pakistani culture. The same stanza contains the feeling of admiration/envy for the beggars and sweeper girls as they, unlike Alvi, have a fixed identity.

Conclusion

This study reveals how Alvi undergoes psychological conflicts due to her dual nationality and connections with two different cultures. She cannot escape or deny the effect of both societies and in result becomes a subject of two different discourses. The liminality in her personality can be observed in her psychological state of mind where appreciation and revulsion for the same culture occupies her mind.