

Redefining the Notion of National Belonging: A New Approach to the Identity Problem in Pakistani English Fiction

Mahira Hajiyeva¹

¹ Department of Literature of Foreign Countries, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan

Correspondence: Mahira Hajiyeva, Ph. D. Candidate of World Literature, Department of Literature of Foreign Countries, Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan. E-mail: m.hacieveva@adu.edu.az

Received: June 4, 2015 Accepted: June 28, 2015 Online Published: August 31, 2015

doi:10.5539/ells.v5n3p51 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v5n3p51>

Abstract

Pakistani English Literature, with its multicultural character, gives us a unique chance to explore notion of national belonging which is often underlying cause of conflicts stemming from intolerance and ideology based on stereotyped images. As literature provides a chance to live various kinds of experience unlimited in space and time, a reader becomes a part of the narration and is given an opportunity to form his/her own concept of cultural belonging and national identity. The purpose of the paper is to research Pakistani English Literature from these perspectives and display the ways Pakistani writers use to achieve to discuss the above mentioned ideas and provide the reader with a unique opportunity to foresee the future of any society that fails to approach the canonical fixed notion of borderline between cultural and national identities. By this way, they prove the ideological power of literature as a part of cultural process which may serve to create liberal or on the contrary, conservative outlook.

Keywords: cultural belonging, ideology, literature, nationalism

1. Introduction

Considering the fact that, existing international tension in the world mainly stems from intolerance towards “the others”, we may say that today, belonging to a particular identity group brings about an accusation. The notion of belonging is a complex combination defined by class, gender, ethnic origin, geographical position, religion and so on. Which of these aspects plays the most important role in the formation of identity depends on historical and political factors. National identity is usually accepted as a general term to denote national belonging and national bigotry is often based upon differentiating between oneself and others and even upon hatred to others. No doubt this process mostly bears political character and instigation of differences is the leading force of this policy. McLeod mentions that, borders between nations are deliberately formed and, “... are constructed, defended and (in too many tragic cases) bloodily contested by groups of people.” (McLeod, 2000, p. 69) We may as well, pay attention to McLeod’s choice of “groups of people” rather than “nation”, fighting over borders to reflect relative and vague nature of the idea of national belonging. We are going to discuss the idea of national belonging not from the single perspective of national identity but distinguish between political national identity and cultural belonging.

Having found its distinct reflection in literature as an effective medium for formation and an impressive stage for demonstration, national belonging is also regarded as a coercive element, making the notion more complex, thus obliging to determine a more progressive approach to the given idea. Aijaz Ahmad tries to explain this abstract notion which has acted as a cover for various ideologies and policies, distinguishing, “... between progressive and retrograde kinds of practices.” (Aijas, 2000, p. 7) Aijaz Ahmad draws our attention to the fact that, as in comparison with the categories like economy, law and management culture in general, and literature in particular has power to lead to idealization. He names it cultural nationalism that is, national belonging expressed through culture and mentions that, the ideal of cultural nationalism is based explicitly on this singularizing tendency which due to this nature can easily lead to parochialism, inverse racism and indigenized obscurantism. That is, having acquired a political ideological power culture in general and literature in our discussion, can be regarded as means to overstate nationalism and belonging as we have seen in imperialistic ideology and thus, make it a retrograde practice or as a medium by the help of which more liberal postmodernist atmosphere can be established inspiring to define a different point of view to the idea of national belonging and create a progressive

type of the practice which Aijaz Ahmad tries to explain. From this point of view, literature gains significant ideological importance. That is why, we will carry out our discussion through the analyses of Pakistani English Literature as cultural process to find out the way progressive and liberal approach to the notion of identity dilemma finds its reflection in contemporary Pakistani literary thinking and aims to create progressive type of the of the practice.

2. Method

The methodology to be used in this writing this paper helps to conduct a thorough research and make a comprehensive discussion of the given ideas. The resources we use are academic books and journals and examples from Pakistani English Literature. Academic books and journals help us to identify national and cultural belonging as consistent elements forming concept of identity and explore it on the background of Pakistani English Literature. We are going to discuss Mohsin Hamid's "Reluctant Fundamentalist" and Kamila Shamsie's "Burnt Shadows" to achieve our objective to explain new approach to identity dilemma expressed in Contemporary Pakistani English Literature.

3. Discussion

When we talk about identity dilemma in former colonized countries like Pakistan we mean a concept that comprises a multicultural society originated by variety of ethnic groups and different religious communities where self-expression is based on ethnic cultural roots giving a specific character to it. National belonging is the object of attention in the literature created by this multicultural society and despite the fact that the English language has become a uniting factor for the former colonized people, we may say that, ethnic national identity on the foreground of Pakistani English literature determines its place in the literature written in this language in the world today.

While talking about identity one should bear in mind that it is not a fixed, unchangeable notion but keeps undergoing formation and transformation. This idea helped to create new approach in the artistic thinking of the former colonized nations. While striving to get rid of European ideological influence newly independent nations turned to cultural heritage as main source of identity which on its turn led to close knit ties between culture and identity. Literature, by obtaining a part in this formation process, gradually acquired a significant character as an efficient cultural ideological medium through which national identity found its reflection. In this case, we observe two types of formation: the first united political national identity of different nations bearing the same cultural values (for example, as a centralized country Pakistani national identity) and the second, cultural belonging stemming from ethnic, linguistic or religious values which cannot be defined by geographical location and which establishes cultural belonging forming a hybrid identity which may and may not be relevant to the political national identity.

3.1 Pakistani English Literature as a Medium of Self-Assertion

Generally speaking, the concept of national belonging has a special historical importance for Pakistan as for this country this notion has been defined through the struggle for independence. Cara N. Cilano writes, "...idea, nation and state. In the Pakistani context these three terms interrelate; the boundaries between them blur." (Cilano, 2013, p. 2) Cilano grounds this thought on the "two nations" theory, which guarded the idea of independent muslim state in the subcontinent. This was the idea which led the muslim community from community to nation and finally to the formation of a country defining its political national identity.

But, in the example of Pakistani English literature we observe that the dilemma of identity still remains undefined notion. The notion of nationhood stems from an idea and as we have mentioned, in the case of Pakistani nationhood this idea was born in the process of struggle for independent country. As a cultural process literature has been an integral part of this struggle. Asma Mansoor draws our attention to the fact that, muslims had been the rulers of the sub-continent before the consolidation of the British rule in India, after colonization they were naturally eyed with suspicion and disfavor. She goes on saying that, in order to dilute this scepticism and distrust that was visible in the hearts and minds of the British, "the Muslim writers had to adjust and modify their styles of writing to carve a niche within the newly established system." (Mansoor, 2012, p. 15) Hence, we may say that Pakistani English literature stemmed from the muslims' need for self-assertion and acted as a medium through which national belonging found reflection. But we have to take into account that Islam philosophy did not serve to enclose the literature in limited mythical outlook, it rather presented wider ideological base than that of colonialism, free of space and time which was largely discussed in Muhammad Iqbal's works. He regards Islam, as a cultural movement and notes that rejecting the old static view of the universe Islam presents a dynamic view. He notes that, it rejects blood-relationship as a basis of human unity, because, blood-relationship is earth-rootedness. Thus, "Such a perception is creative of fresh loyalties without any ceremonial to keep them

alive, and makes it possible for man to emancipate himself from the earth.” (Iqbal, 2013, p. 63) So, English Pakistani Literature may have formed as a form of self-assertion of national belonging strongly related to religious belonging, but this does not hold it limited in theme and form.

Iqbal’s ideas also present new approach to the idea of identity noting that it can comprise several elements, rather than be based on blood relationship or land of birth. This helps to investigate another problem that has often been discussed while talking about Pakistani identity, especially identity problem aimed at Pakistani expatriate and diaspora writers—the discussion around national belonging without taking into consideration that belonging is also comprised of cultural identity which does not necessarily coincide with political national identity shown on identity card. From this point of view, Pakistani English fiction provides an interesting angle to this discussion. For example, Zulfikar Ghose’s creative works requires a careful consideration. It reveals a fact that, “...the critical culture, at least in certain quarters, is still more tribal and ethnographic than national—cosmopolitan—and is not sufficiently well equipped to deal with more sensitive issues of expatriation and exile.” (Hashimi, 1990, p. 269) Thus, his creative world should be regarded as a milieu where various cultural values blend, producing a complex cultural belonging rather than being reviewed as a reflection of problematic national belonging. These values find their depiction throughout Pakistani English literature, in Ahmad Ali as mixture of Eastern and Western cultural influences, in Suhrawardy as English–Persian–Bengal experience, in Bapsi Sidwa as perfect combination of the Panjabi–urdu–gujrati–english languages and in Mohsin Hamid as an interesting Pakistan–American worldview. When Alamgir Hashimi says, “The matter should thus make one raise questions not only about a Pakistani idiom in English, but also about “Pakistaniness”, what constitutes this, that and the other? And who may best exemplify these?” (Hashimi, 1990, p. 269) he tries to clarify the point we are discussing, what can be taken as a decisive aspect of national belonging or identity?

Frantz Fanon writes, “For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.” (Fanon, 1963, p. 44). It is a fact that, the land may be regarded as a primary designation of identity and that is why Zulfikar Ghose in “The Murder of Aziz Khan”, Nadim Aslam in “The Season of the Rainbird” or Moni Mohsin in “The End of Innocence” describe it from this perspective. But, what happens if one day one starts feeling as an alien on the land of his birth, as we observe in Bapsi Sidwa’s “The Ice–Candy Man”? What determines one’s national identity when he becomes a stranger in the consequence of social political circumstances? That is the main source of the feeling of alienation we often observe in postcolonial literature. Thus, if the detachment from the land deprives an identity of fulcrum we are left to search for an alternative definition of belonging. That is why, in contemporary Pakistani English literature, for example in Mohsin Hamid’s and Kamila Shamsie’s characters, who if we consider belonging as a category determined by land of birth, despite living on the land they belong to, face identity crises resulting from assumed differences between social classes and cultural values and display the idea that identity cannot be determined by one factor but is composed of various aspects and is in constant formation process. Here we observe that the land is no longer regarded as a determiner of national identity, but global belonging or hybrid identity stemming from various cultural heritage and influences come into focus. It can be taken as the most apt answer to identity crises discussed in postcolonial methodology. Considering this, we may say that, the phase of turning back to history in search of roots or regarding geographical location as defining factor of belonging is already over, contemporary Pakistani English literature depicts the complex formation process of national belonging and identity where past, including colonial experience, present and potential future find reflection, displays the writers attitude and using unique opportunity provided by literary techniques invites the reader to take part in narration and consider individual approach to the matter.

3.2 A New Approach to the Concept of National Belonging in the Contemporary Pakistani English Literature

As the notion of identity is in a constant formation process its depiction in literature also acquires abundant styles of reflection and by this way literature does not focus on mature idea of belonging, but on process of its formation through language, social behavior and value systems. As Ashcroft puts it, “the imperial gaze defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalternity and powerlessness.” (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 141) So, we may as well say that, the way we are approached by others influence the formation of our sense of belonging. From philosophical point of view it is in fact, the attitude of the surrounding that adds meaning to geographical location and defines it as a modifier of national belonging. Namely, this elaborate or instinctive attitude of others intensifies the main character of Mohsin Hamid’s novel “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” Chengiz’s inner conflict which arises from binary cultural values and forms his feeling of cultural belonging. By depicting experience of cultural hybrid, practice bearing no difficulty for the author himself, Mohsin Hamid displays the above mentioned new approach to the notion of belonging as a relative concept, as the only multicultural solution to the problem. If the society fails to

develop such an understanding of the discussed idea it will have to face agitated identity crises in individuals, "...without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless." (Fanon, 1952, p. 218) or problems like extreme nationalism and fanaticism stemming from past, imagination and myths, as the world has once gone through at the result of colonial ideology based upon the ideology feeding on national discrimination and generalization, and experience the same human trauma once again. This is the type of belonging which has undergone a formation process described by Frantz Fanon as, "...the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense of which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self." (Fanon, 1952, p. 109)

As the cultural environment we live in plays an unquestionable role in personality development when we change our location or as it happened in colonialism the place we live undergo cultural changes personality needs to find ways to adjust to new environment. Chengiz as an Eastern person living in an Western world strives to find his place and nearly achieves it until favorable condition disrupt his newly acquired resolution. By saying favorable condition we mean the social attitude Chengiz faces in America after 9/11. Chengiz, who could achieve self-assertion through hard work, determination and introduces himself as a New Yorker can no longer hide his inner identity conflict partly due to this condition and his Pakistani self finds overflowing statement in his appearance and attitude. Existing literature examines acculturation process revealing two predominant formulations, termed as the unidimensional model and the bidimensional model. "The primary difference between these two approaches resides in how they treat the relation between the culture of birth or upbringing, referred to here as the heritage culture, and the predominant cultural environment, or mainstream culture." (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000, p. 49). According to unidimensional model, the people who undergo acculturation process has to choose between heritage culture (in the example of Chengiz Pakistani values) or mainstream culture (for Chengiz American culture) and according to bidimensional model, they may acquire multiple cultural values depending on how much cultural belonging is important for them. In the beginning of the novel we see Chengiz who seems to have passed acculturation process through unidimensional model and feels comfortable with living in America and works hard to be accepted as a member of the society. But, as we continue reading, we get closer view of the inner conflict Chengiz constantly experiences. He himself unexpectedly realizes how foreign his colleagues look to him and feels he was "play-acting when in reality I ought to be making my way home." (Hamid, 2007, p. 77) This urge for going home displays how gradually Chengiz loses his control over the inner conflict between heritage and mainstream cultural belonging. That favorable condition we mentioned above, which showed itself in American nationalism, "...the mighty host I had expected of your country was duly raised and dispatched- but, homeward, towards my family in Pakistan." (Hamid, 2007, p. 106) after 9/11 provides a kind of opportunity for Chengiz to choose between these two poles of belonging and decide which of them provided "home". What he decides is that as he could establish his relations with Erica pretending to be her diseased boyfriend, with America too, he could get adjusted to that country if he pretended to be the one whom he actually was not, losing his identity. But, the most interesting thing is that after quitting his work and returning to his motherland Chengiz cannot find mental peace. So, Chengiz's conflict is not related to geographical location, but the presence or absence of cultural belonging which in its turn makes the location native or foreign. "Berry (1980, 1984; see Berry, 1997, for a review) observed that acculturating individuals are faced with two fundamental questions: 'Is it of value to maintain my cultural heritage?' and 'Is it of value to maintain relations with other groups?'" (Ryder, 2000, p. 51) From this point of view, Chengiz tries to acquire mainstream culture and find a meeting point between it and his heritage, but shocked for being viewed as an object of racism and hatred in spite of his status in society he gradually faces Berry's second question. Is it worth assimilating to the society that rejects him? We can explain Chengiz's sudden exposure of nationalism by Frantz Fanon words, "This culture, abandoned, sloughed off, rejected, despised, becomes for the inferiorized an object of passionate attachment. There is a very marked kind of overvaluation that is psychologically closely linked to the craving for forgiveness." (Fanon, 1963, p. 41). However, he cannot find inner peace as a cultural hybrid even after returning to his family, which in its term displays the depth of identity crises stemming from not only an individual but from the society's lack of multicultural attitude as a whole. The novel gives a unique opportunity to see how the ideological struggle of the East and the West find its reflection in Chengiz's world who is obliged to choose between these two poles as an answer to collective American nationalism. The novel concludes that in globalized world future depends on getting rid of stereotyped images and accepting geolocal belonging. As Chengiz puts it, "It seems a n obvious thing to say. But you should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all undercover assassins." (Hamid, 2007, p. 209)

Kamila Shamsie displays very interesting point of view through her character Hiroko regarding the notion of belonging not as contradictory as it has usually been viewed. The way we appreciate this approach, see the complex nature of comprehending local and global belonging without regarding them as opposite poles leads the characters to find their place in the world or on the contrary, in case they fail to achieve this approach they are left to suffer in fanaticism, extremism and psychological crises. Identity crises Chengiz suffers from is regarded from a new angle by Kamila Shamsie in her novel "Burnt Shadow" character Hiroko Tanaka. The author takes Hiroko through nuclear bombing in Nagasaki to war in Indian Subcontinent, to Pakistani city of Karachi that is in turmoil due to the war in Afghanistan and finally to New York where 9/11 terror attack is experienced. In this way she depicts how violence causes the same pain on human personality, how the events seen as unrelated gets interrelated through their effect on personalities belonging to different nations and the notion of belonging loses its primary importance in the struggle of survival. Hiroko displays the relative nature of such categories like national belonging and that makes it possible for her to live through all the traumas in her life, the only way to survive which could not be achieved by Chengiz in above discussed novel. Kamila opposes Hiroko's this ability of adaptation to that of her husband's for whom, loss of home in India "...made lists of all the sights and sounds and daily texture of Dilli life that he was certain would haunt him forever, making every other place in the world a wilderness of loss." (Shamsie, 2009, p. 134) Kamila Shamsie describes importance of seeing subjective nature of belonging by writing, Possibility of visiting Sajjad's home gives hope to Hiroko that his world wasn't closed to outsiders, "The Burtons weren't entirely resistant to entering an India outside the Raj! And, she, Hiroko Tanaka, was the one to show both Sajjad and the Burtons that there was no need to imagine such walls between their worlds. Konrad had been right to say barriers were made of metal that could turn fluid when touched simultaneously by people on either side." (Shamsie, 2009, p. 82) Hiroko hopes to find a meeting point between locals in Sajjad's character, who could not allow the foreign colonizers to enter their inner world and in the colonizers in the image of The Burtons who can never get closer to the colonized nation, even don't wish to learn the language and establish a different type of relation than that of between the colonizer and the colonized, the assimilation which was easily acquired by Hiroko herself. But, the novel displays that the wall between the two cultures is established by both sides with the same determination and is much more complicated than Hiroko can see. Actually the way Sajjad and Hiroko come together can be explained by the fact that both of them lose sense of identity and are left to recreate a new fulcrum modified by belonging. So, we see the same idea concluding Mohsin Hamid's above discussed novel running through Kamila Shamsie's work and express the need for mutual understanding.

Shamsie continues her story with new hybrid generation, with Burtons' son Harry, his daughter Kim and Sajjad's son Raza who are to face consequences of the choice their parents made, which are more difficult to bear or ignore. Difficulty is crucial for Raza as his mother can easily notice, "There was something she had learnt to recognize after Nagasaki, after Partition: those who could step out from loss, and those who would remain mired in it. Raza was the mirroring sort, despite the inheritance he could have had from both his parents, two of the world's great forward-movers." (Shamsie, 2009, p. 146) Hiroko displays completely different approach to nationhood, which cannot be found in everyone, "...it didn't bother her in the least to know she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan—she had no interest in belonging to anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation—but this didn't stop her from recognizing how Raza flinched every time a Pakistani asked him where he was from." (Shamsie, 2009, p. 204) But we find her son Raza looking for belonging and home struggling his way through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Dubai, America, the travel which ends in Guantanamo Bay detention camp where a belonging is the main accusation.

By depicting the relationship between Sajjad's family members, between those who remained in India during the partition and those who migrated to new Pakistan, now two enemy states and America's involvement in this contradiction to which Raza and Harry served, Kamila displays absurdity of the fixed category of belonging. It is under a question to where this category stems from and in the consequence to whose interests it serves. That explains "...how a nation can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb." (Shamsie, 2009, p. 362) In this way the novel displays that, the war destroying Japanese cities can be lived between India and Pakistan too repeating the history or any other part of the world and if we continue to regard the category of belonging as fixed and unbreakable border without trying to approach the notion from a new angle this violence is never going to end.

4. Conclusion and Result

In this article, we tried to examine problem of identity and concluded that identity is comprised of two notions of belonging—national and cultural belonging. This approach helps to regard the idea of national belonging as

relative and ambiguous one. Cultural belonging on the other hand, may not coincide with national identity, but comprise hybrid cultural heritage.

After the discussion we can say that, unlike political belonging, cultural belonging is not determined by a geographical location, history, language, ethno linguistic factors, religious background or racial relations taken separately. It is a complex notion which comprises past, present and potential future, is in a constant process of formation and incorporates all mentioned systems in arbitrary way. In literature it is a writer's ideological responsibility to achieve the representation of this concept under this light and by this way to serve to the formation of more liberal society free from the tension stemming from individual and collective identity crises. As literature written in global language Pakistani English Literature provides opportunity to reach to a large audience and convey this idea. But, contemporary Pakistani literature is not interested in focusing on identity discussed as a passive recipient of the mentioned attitude, but in emphasizing identity in position to intervene the process as Frantz Fanon mentions, "I am my own foundation. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom" (Fanon, 1952, p. 231). This is the progressive approach to identity problem that we find in Mohsin Hamid's works and KamilaShamise's novels.

References

- Ahmad, A. (2000). *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London, Verso.
- Ashcroft, B. (2001). *Post-Colonial Transformation*. London, Routledge.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5-68. Ontario: Queen's University. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Cilano, C. N. (2013). *Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State*. London, Routledge.
- Fanon, F. (1952). *Black Skin White Masks*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Fanon, F. (1964). *Toward the African Revolution*. New York: Grove Press.
- Hamid, M. (2007). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. London: Penguin Books.
- Hashimi, A. (1990). Poetry, Pakistani Idiom in English, and the Groupies. *World Literature Today*, 64(2), 268-171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/40146407>
- Iqbal, M. (2013). *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mansoor, A. (2012). The Notes of a New Harp: Tracing the Evolution of Pakistani Poetry in English. *Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistani Studies*, 4(1), 14-38. Retrieved from <http://pakistaniaat.org/index.php/pak/article/view/149>
- McLeod, J. (2000). *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Ryder, A. G., Alden, L. E., & Paulhus, D. L. (2000). Is acculturation unidimensional or bidimensional? A head-to-head comparison in the prediction of personality, self-identity, and adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(1), 49-65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.1.49>
- Shamsie, K. (2009). *Burnt Shadows*. London, Bloomsbury.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).