
Images Of Cultural Ambivalence And Double Consciousness In The Novel Barsa By Khadeeja Mumtaz

Postmodern studies focus on the issues of an individual than on a group or community. But in an era which tries to establish ' Personal is Political' (1970 Carol Hanisch), individual problems become social and cultural issue. Barsa by Khadeeja Mumtaz is a novel that focuses on Sabitha and Rasheed who leave their homeland Kerala to work in the holy city of Mecca. It portrays the cultural ambivalence faced by Sabitha who is not a Muslim by birth, but converted to Islam for marriage. When she tries to adapt with a new culture, there is a constant memory of her homeland that creates a double consciousness inside her. So she strives to explore and understand the new culture and religion to fix her identity in a culturally hegemonic society.

This paper tries to showcase the images of cultural ambivalence and double consciousness that affected the protagonist and it highlights the character's ability to overcome it.

Keywords: Post Modernism, Cultural ambivalence, Double Consciousness, Identity, Memory.

Postmodern era of complete skepticism which rejects the idea of definite truth and meaning always tries to deconstruct the existing system of knowledge and finds a new interpretation to it. Barsa is one such novel that revisits the Islamic culture and beliefs through the eyes of a woman who tries to understand the concept of Islam, deviating herself from the available patriarchal epistemological system.

Barsa, the novel by Khadeeja Mumtaz was published in 2007 and it is the first Malayalam novel to be set in Saudi Arabia. Dr. Mumtaz is a retired professor of obstetrics and Gynecology from Government medical College Calicut, Kozhikode and she has received the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for Barsa. It depicts the life of Indian immigrants in the Gulf and reflects the autobiographical elements of the author's professional life experience as a physician in Mecca for seven long years. The protagonist Sabitha, who is not a Muslim by birth but converted to Islam for marriage, goes through a cultural ambivalence. The idea of ambivalence considers culture as a compound of opposing perceptions and dimensions. It is the state of mind with a simultaneous conflicting reactions or feelings towards something. Here Sabitha has this ambivalent condition on her new identity. According to Homi K. Bhabha, an Indian English scholar and critical theorist, ambivalence is a duality that presents a split in the identity of the colonized other, a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the colonizer's cultural identity.

In this novel a typical village girl born and brought up in Kerala, accepts her identity as a Muslim after her marriage and moves to Saudi Arabia with her husband Rasheed, who is an Islam but new to the cultural background of other country which is completely different from India. As an immigrant from India, came to Saudi in seek of job but not to be a citizen of the land was treated like slaves and refugees by the dominant natives. Dr. Muhammad, another important character in this novel tells that

The concept of slavery is deeply entrenched in the blood of the people here. Even though slavery was abolished all over the world, it continued in the Muslim nations. Finally, it had to be abolished formally after the 1924 Geneva Convention. Even then two nations opposed it. No

prizes for guessing the nations – Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In fact one of the first things that the Prophet did was to bring an end to slavery (Mumtaz 44).

Dr. Muhammad says that even though Prophet befriended the slaves and made them generals in his army, the real meaning of Prophet's preaching has lost its meaning. Because Khaddamas, women came for household works from other parts of the world, live like slaves in the land. He feels pity about the sexual assault against. Khaddamas are the maid servants mainly from Indonesia and some from Sri Lanka and India. Sabitha who joined as a gynecologist in one of the hospitals she noticed these beautiful women coming as a group for medical check-up. Then Sabitha realized that they were not patients but they had to get fitness certificate for work, especially a confirmation that they are not pregnant. Sabitha was shocked to hear the words of her colleague doctor Waheeda who disclosed that most of these Khaddamas come there after inserting Copper T or some other implants. She says they were well aware of the dangers of working in a strange place. Sabitha realized that women are already an oppressed group all over the world but they get triple marginalized when they go to a culturally hegemonic land as maid servants. Because as doctor Waheeda said "liaison between employers and their maidservants is not something new. It has been happening in this land for a long time. In the olden days, they were taken as the spoils of war, now they are enticed from other lands by the lure of the petro dollar. It is ingrained in the genetic make-up of Arab men; they have been doing this for centuries" (19).

All these injustice along with the strict rules and restrictions on individuals disturbed Sabitha because the Muslim culture to which she is familiar with is entirely different from this. Sabitha had spend her childhood along with Shahina in Kerala where they did not cover their body entirely and she was familiar with Eid celebrations which had formed a part of her life since childhood. She felt strange to the new culture. This ambivalence can be identified throughout this novel.

The author begins the novel by expressing this ambivalence of Sabitha and Rasheed while stepping to the land of Arabia for the first time. "When they first stepped out like refugees two of them stood hesitantly at cross roads, unsure of their next step. Rasheed glanced Sabitha. He could sense her discomfort in the head scarf and abaya, looking like a lawyer's coat which the Malayali workers at the airport had helped her to buy." (6)

Sabitha has accepted her change in identity but the compulsory dress code of Saudi made her uncomfortable. She started thinking deeply about the Islamic religion and wished to understand the origin and history of her new cultural identity. Gradually she made a probe into how Islam as a religion works on the individual, the family and the society at large in the land where the religion was originated. When she understands the religion in depth she finds many contradictions between what they preach and practice. As Dr. Muhammad remarked she feels that more than a religion Islam was an instrument for social change and to transform and control the people who followed the path of robbery and other sins in a fragmented society. So Sabitha finds the aim of this culture to create a strong bond among its believers and finds it as meaningful. At the same time she thinks about its strong oppression of women which she believes as the result of misinterpretation of their religious text. The patriarchal society has derived its meaning which treats women as a tool for procreation alone. But she realizes the power of every Saudi woman because men had to give bride money for marriage unlike the Indian system of dowry for the groom. The bridal money was double for a virgin girl and man had to pay fewer amounts for an already married women. But women were ignorant about the

outside world but they had power at least in their household. But still Sabitha feels that these women are wearing a mask of power and actually they are treated only as a procreating machine. Sabitha asked herself by seeing the attitude of Saudi women that “could the Saudi women’s fragile emotions and mental fortitude be attributed to a subconscious revolt against the relentless hurts inflicted by men? Or could it be the desperate anger of the captive lioness clawing against the iron grills of its cage?” (84), at the same time women from other countries were ill-treated and ashamed publically. Sabitha had gone through such an incident from her work place when she went to receive her first salary. The superior officer asked the place where she lives in Saudi and Sabitha couldn’t understand the question because it was in Arabic. When she did not reply he asked to write the place as Youkthub halaga which meant market. People around her started laughing and she felt so insulted and it stayed like a stone in her mind. And she shouted to her husband “people from many countries com here, only to be treated like menials. Worms! To them we are slaves they have bought to work for them.” (51) So here Sabitha experiences the actual implications of this religion and the practices of its country. This state of ambivalence is known as felt ambivalence or subjective ambivalence. It is the representation of the psychological experience of conflict, mixed feelings and reactions and indecision in the evaluation of some object. Here Sabitha has a mixed feeling to evaluate her new cultural background. She feels potential ambivalence or objective ambivalence too, because she finds the positive and negative aspects of Islamic culture and there is a simultaneous acknowledgement of both positive and negative evaluations regarding a particular stimulus. When she compares the language system of Arabic she finds that it is rich in beautiful and meaningful compliments. But when, “Sabitha tried to read translation of Quran and books on history. To Sabitha, what she read in books more often than not was in agreement with what she saw with her own eyes, although there were occasions when they were in conflict with each other and tormented her”. (78)

As a result of this cultural ambivalence Sabitha often compares her new ideologies with the past knowledge and customs. She finds the similarities between the two religious perspectives. She often compares the food culture of Saudi and Kerala and she always prefer her native traditional food than Arabic food. When Sabitha and Rasheed visit the apartment of Dr. Muhammad they enjoy “the aroma of traditional home-cooked food drifted through the little flat, tickling their taste buds and nudging the taste-tickling neurons of their brain to life” (22). Even though she was physically at Mecca there is constant remembrance and nostalgia about her homeland which creates a double consciousness inside her. She cannot fix in which cultural identity she belongs to. Derek Walcott, the popular Saint Lucian poet and playwright have argued that the migrant often possesses a double consciousness. Double consciousness is the internal conflict experienced by the subordinated groups in an operative society. The term was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois with reference to African-American ‘double-consciousness’ originated from an article of Our Spiritual Strivings published in his ethnographic work *The Soul of Black Folk*. Du Bois describes double consciousness as a peculiar sensation of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others. Here the protagonist is always judged by others, especially the natives and she feels the otherness. She was always forced to be conscious about the opinion and judgment of others. Once her colleague Dr. Waheeda told Sabitha that “if you show your hair like this I will not be accepted here” (Mumtaz 15). Sabitha, who was already suffocating in the long overcoat which went below her knees and the long sleeves which reached her palms, wondered that everyone there became a perfect moralist when they met someone new. All these internal conflicts disturbed Sabitha so much and she wished to return back to her homeland. When she came to Saudi for the first time and Rasheed was asked to stay in another place till their posting is fixed, Sabitha felt as if she was pulled deeper into a cavern of

loneliness and the unrelenting traditions of centuries and the hot desert winds seems to crush her. She says “oh, for the serene softness of my land! The narrow lanes, the clumps of plantain tress, the rabble of coconut-plucking, the gurgling stream’s pleasant greeting, the journey in the buses- everything now seemed like events of another life, lived long ago, lost forever...Oh God!” (9).

Sabitha becomes intolerant when her husband Rasheed is hospitalized and the Saudi police take her to police station for travelling with another man, who was only a servant of Dr. Muhammad who had accompanied Sabitha to return from the hospital. Finally she decides to resign the job and returns to their native homeland to fix an end to her cultural ambivalence and double consciousness. She imbibes the positive values of Islamic culture and follows the things which will never hurt and torment the freedom and self reliance of others. Barsa in Arabic meant “the one who does not veil her face, the one who does not bow her head, and the one who asks question” (89), and Sabitha represents the same qualities of that mythical character of Islamic religion. Sabitha understands that religion is experienced and practiced differently in different part of the world which gives her a realization to find her own self identity.

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