Refiguring Culture In Cross-Border Novels: Metaphor In Shaila Abdulla’s Saffron Dreams

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ABSTRACT
In this cosmopolitan era of movements across borders, cultures become mobile as people move from their cultural spaces to other new cultures. This paper examines how cultures of migrants can be reread and refigured in the face of new cultures and situations. Concretely, the impetus is to show diverse representations of culture in Saffron Dreams. The opinion of Bhabha (1994) is that within the third space, meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity as a scaffold. The impulse is to clearly examine characters in Shaila Abdulla’s Saffron Dreams as the cultures represented in the work, are distorted in the new world. It is discovered that Islamic culture in Saffron Dreams is metaphorically represented in the multiple birth defects of Raian. It is established that religion which is an aspect of culture becomes muted and mutilated in the face of a new world order.

Keywords: Culture, Cross-border Novels, Saffron Dreams, Migration, Islam, Refiguring

INTRODUCTION
Bhabha opines that within the third space, meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity and Brah concurs that culture is a process, a nexus of intersecting significations, a terrain on which social meanings are produced, appropriated, disrupted and contested (198). Since diaspora space constantly defers a clear-cut analysis but embraces a mosaic and forked path scrutiny and provides a variegated platform for the divulgence of the problematic arising from the exodus of peoples, culture, at this juncture assumes a metaphorical outlook. Across borders people, cultures, capital and commodities occupy a space where they can be re-appropriated and contested. Brah is of the opinion that borders are always metaphors, arbitrary constructed and embody a unique narrative. Hence:

The metaphoric materiality of each border calls attention to its specific features: to the geographical and/or psychic territories demarcated; to the experiences of particular groups of people who are sundered apart or affected in other ways by the creation of a certain border zone (198)

Judging from this notion of arbitrariness and uniqueness of the constructions of diaspora space, Shaila Abdullah’s Saffron Dreams embodies a unique perspective of the experience of an individual border crosser, metaphorically created to enunciate diaspora space features and in turn highlight its multifacetedness.

The Ideology of Islamic Culture and Civilization
Culture is a global phenomenon. All over the world people are guided by cultures and traditions. This cultures span every facet of human life; politically, educationally, socially,
religiously, etc. Boayo avers that “The term ‘culture’ in the Western sense is already known by its complete development and acquisition of new and important meanings”. Islam as a religion has a culture which peculiar to her. Traditionally, culture is described as the way of life of a people. It implies therefore that there are specified and acceptable ways of doing things as far as Islam is concerned. According to Baecker, “Culture is a memory and control device of society” (1). Sociologically, a culture represents the beliefs, practices and artifacts of a group.

According Ken Barger “All of us humans share over 99.9% of our genes, and all cultures share basic values that call for us to be a good person with others. When we back off and look at each other as human beings, our differences are very small compared to our similarities”(1). Despite this assertion, certain religions and traditions have made us to disagree that we share the are values, as all over the world, there are pockets war, bloodshed, hostage takings, dehumanization, etc arising mostly from opposite “belief groups”. Among the four major world cultural traditions—Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—Islam appears to have the most pervasive role in contemporary politics.

**Characteristics of Islamic Culture**

The word culture in Arabic is called “thaqafah.” The term thaqafah has been defined in many ways by Muslim scholars and almost all these definitions bear the significance of liberating the concept of thaqafah in Islamic civilization from the Western concept (72). Bennabi stated in Suleiman that “...the term thaqafah was found through altawlid, the procreation of words and has not yet acquire the necessary power of definition in order to qualify it as a science of a particular concept (72). It is clear from the above summarization of Islamic definition of culture that it has the feature of liberation.

The following are some of the characteristics of Islamic culture according to Muzammil:

1. God-centered or theocentric: First of all our culture is God-centered. We uphold strict Tawhid (monotheism). We believe in divine guidance that came to us through God’s many prophets and messengers and finally through the Last Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon them all. We believe in life after death and the Day of Judgment. We emphasize worship and devotion: prayers, fasting, Zakat and Hajj. We also uphold that Allah has allowed us certain things and has forbidden us certain things. We emphasize the Halal and avoid the Haram.

2. Egalitarian, tolerant and fraternal: Secondly our Islamic culture emphasizes that all people are equal. We do not accept any color bias or racialism. We believe in the worth and value of all human beings and all creation of God. We believe in the freedom of religion and accept no compulsion in matters of religion.

Our culture is tolerant of people of all faiths, especially the People of the Book. We believe that all Muslims are brothers and sisters. The sense of brotherhood in faith must be very strong among Muslims, regardless of the geographic boundaries or changing political or economic conditions. We also must keep good relations with all human beings, especially our neighbors.

3. Dignifying and moralistic: Our culture places great emphasis on the dignity of human beings and their morality. We emphasize truthfulness, honesty, modesty (Haya’), cleanliness or Taharah.

We are against extravagance, show off, or extremism. Our Islamic culture teaches self-confidence and self-reliance. It emphasizes charity and generosity. Our culture is family-oriented with great emphasis on good spousal relations, good care of children, extended families, love and respect for the elders. We abhor adultery, fornication, homosexuality, gambling, or use of intoxicants.

Wherever we live at any time and among any people we must uphold these values. We cannot be true Muslims if our culture compromises on these principles.
4. Dynamic, progressive, world affirming and not world-denyng or ascetic: Our culture emphasizes struggle, change, social justice, removal of oppression and evil. Our culture encourages learning, education, seeking of knowledge. Our Islamic culture makes no bifurcation between the religious and secular education. We believe that all knowledge is important. We must emphasize open mindedness and willingness to accept the wisdom from any source. Islamic culture promotes good art, architecture, aesthetics, health, healthy environment and clean entertainment.

5. Non-exclusivist but Da`wah-oriented and optimistic: Finally our Islamic culture emphasizes promoting good things with wisdom and patience. Ours is not a dominating or colonizing culture, but it is also not an exclusivist and isolationist culture.

Refiguring Islamic Culture in Saffron Dreams

Saffron Dreams tells the story of a Muslim woman married to a man through the organized crime known as ‘arranged marriage’ which turns out to be a loving marriage but short-lived by the cold hands of death as a result of the historic September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in America. Pregnant and widowed Arrisa faces the challenges of living in a racial society defined by borders and undignified by culture and cultural practices that constantly mark her as ‘the other’. Arrisa delivers an unhealthy baby, slow, underdeveloped and retarded which increases her alienation and cripples her belonging in the new world. Saffron Dreams, in this section is to be read along the lines of reconfiguration and metaphorical representation of culture and self in Diaspora space. At the opening of the narrative elucidates the events following the death of Faizan and the short-lived love-filled arranged marriage between Fiazan and Arrisa represents metaphorically an imperfect state of culture /cultural practices across borders. The union has been filled with love as opposed to the usual lovelessness that characterizes most arranged marriages but is cut short just when Arrisa is expected to be delivered of their first child.

The death of Faizan marks an epoch of racism, colour consciousness, cultural otherness and discrimination. Arrisa narrates in the opening of the novel, thus:

In all fairness, colors define me. Red reminds of my marriage…But black reminds me of all that is sad and wrong in my life. Ironically, in this country, it validates my state of being a widow. It is also the colour of my hijab-the dividing line between my life with faizan and the one without him. How different lives are from continent to continent (5-6)

This consciousness comes into bare following the circumstances surrounding Faizan’s death. Faizan has been unfortunately killed at the World Trade Center during the September 11th attack on the twin tower. Most migrant novels of south Asian writers capture in the passing an aspect of this event as it affects and inhibits the belonging of South Asians in the West. Since the attack has been claimed to be carried out by Islamic fanatics, every symbol of Islamic tradition becomes a threat to the American society. Hence, despite Arissa’s loss of her husband during the attack, she faces a new wave of rebuffs, repudiation and de-assimilation in a culture where she and other immigrants so much want to be assimilated into. Arrisa explains thus:
After the first list of hijackers’ names and nationalities were published, many Arab and Asian immigrants put up American flags on cars and shops, signs of solidarity laced with the hope of evading discrimination...immigrant cab drivers were spat on and ridiculed...some women took down their hijabs, afraid of being targeted...a few close friends changed their names (60)

This is a symbolic representation of the alienation caused by cultural practices and beliefs in diaspora. To this Arrisa realizes how this plunges the migrant into an in-between space because the immigrant facing cultural alienation and seeking to hide their identities in the midst of borders are plunged in a middle space. According to Arrisa “we couldn’t break free from our origin, and yet we wanted to soar. The tension in our hearts left us suspended in the mid-air” (60)

The attack brings about a shift in the way of life of immigrants in the novel. Arrisa decides to put away her hijab, a cultural sign, which marks her out as different, hinges on her belonging and plunges her into a greater aloofness. She decides on this after a group of teenagers attack her at a subway, regarding her as belonging to a “race of murderers” (61) with a veil that is “all a façade, you try to look pure, but you are evil inside. You are the non believers not us” (62). Arrisa stops wearing her hijab, “her first task” (105) after three symbolic events take place in her life: “Losing Faizan, the attack at the subway station and the ultrasound” (105). These three events shape her existence. According to Arrisa, the hijab places a mark on her chest that says “look at me I follow the same religion as the one who harmed you” (106). Also the ultrasound carried on her pregnancy reveals that her baby would be abnormal and that abnormality alone can be an object of differentiation in this new world. She decides to remove the veil in order to give the child “one less deviation from the norm. Assimilate and accept it all” (105)

In addition, the proclamation that Arrisa’s unborn baby is to be born abnormal with a “heart defect, urinary tract malformations, kidney abnormalities, cleft lip” (67) and all kind of irregularities that will render the child incapacitated, helpless, disabled and totally dependent, is a metaphor of Islamic culture and tradition in the West. The child Raian, growing up in the west with all these disabilities and abnormalities will always be given a second glance and a jeer by his playmates and the society at large. Raian represents the traditions and practices of Islam in the West. Raian’s life shall be viewed from the point of view of this metaphor as he shapes and represents the experiences of Islamic, Arabic and Asian immigrants in the West.

**Metaphor of Raian’s CHARGE syndrome**

Shaila Abdullah reproduces Islamic culture across borders as it struggles through miscegenation and reveals its multifaceted misrepresentations and stereotyping. Culture like Raian, a child born in the west, with high expectations from parents to have a normal healthy life, ends up “abnormal” as a result of circumstances. This becomes a platform for her stereotyping after the removal of her veil. Abdullah’s position in the novel suggests that no matter how hard a migrant attempts to avert discrimination, it is a significant part of the immigrant tragedy. Raian’s syndrome and health condition becomes her cultural identity and cultural identity is a major platform for differentiation and stereotyping. Arrisa observes this in a class she attends with Raian that “Raian and I were the most common-looking folks, but our skin and his disabilities set us apart from the rest” (171). Raian’s syndrome is tagged “CHARGE” (Coloboma, Heart defect, Atresia choanae, Retarded growth and development, Genital hypoplasia, Ear anomalie/deafness) syndrome:
A syndrome that was attached to him and would continue to pose challenges for my child at every stage of his life. CHARGE was an acronym for multiple birth defects. There was no single treatment for all that he faced…our lives were dictated by specialist appointments, checkups, surgical consults, tests, early intervention session, punctuated by frequent feeding therapies as nearly every part of Raian was explored, probed, refined, fixed and adjusted. (170)

Raian’s medical condition and treatment is akin to Islamic culture in America after the attack. The multiple birth defects are the multifaceted problems associated with the Islamic culture especially as experienced by its adherents across cultural boundaries. The new world lost faith in the religion, it becomes “a race gone bad, mad” (154) as its adherents struggle to find an identity, an identity which on the long run is buried in “the interpretation of other, in the hyphenation of our worlds” (154). Just as Raian is subjected constantly to probing, adjustment and case studying as a result of his condition, the Islamic culture is subjected constantly to elucidations, unjust notions and stereotyping. This results in a constant staying off the radar by Muslims to salvage what is left of their reputation. Arissa decries the constant torture and criticism of her culture thus;

I looked on as day after day the media tried, sentenced, and hung my faith. Day after day analysts applied new interpretation to the religion, broke the back of bridges and erected barriers too sturdy to take down or overcome. Gaps widened; our hearts divided, we struggled privately, each one of us, to make sense of our shrinking world. I witnessed the lynching of a religion and race again and again (155)

Raian spends most of his time with children with similar abnormalities, children like him who “struggle, trapped in bodies that limit their potential” (179) just like people from the subcontinents who face similar cultural identity challenges do in the west. Arissa affirms this thus: “in a world of the ones who belonged, we looked for displaced souls like ourselves-the ones who didn’t quite blend-exhibiting a fervent desire to learn their history” (182)

CONCLUSION

The metaphoric representation of culture in diaspora space exposes a unique portraiture of the state of cultural signs and practices across borders. Arissa attempts to hide her cultural identity in order to achieve the inclusivity she so desires, but confronts another face of culture in sculpt of her son; an identity that cannot be effaced as a result of the prominence of the incapacitation caused by the CHARGE syndrome. Her son becomes her culture; distorted in appearance, subjected to constant scrutiny, muted in the face of a new world order and becomes the scaffolding for kaleidoscopic interpretation.

REFERENCES


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