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**IDENTITY CRISES IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES: A STUDY  
OF SELECTED POSTCOLONIAL NOVELS**

*(The Inheritance of Loss, Digging to America)*



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**ABSTRACT**

*In the current study the subject of identity will examine as one of fundamental phenomena surround postcolonial literature. At the time when immigrant/ migration numbers have increased in the modern world, issues like: Identity, hybrid nations, and constitution of countries with different cultural diversities, the longing of identity subject came into the surface. In this study, the identity crisis will analyze in Dasia's "The inheritance of Loss" and Tyler's "Digging to America" from a postcolonial*

*viewpoint through the nationalism and national identity concepts. The analysis focused on the physical, cultural, psychological dislodgment due to traveling, space exploration, and colonization. The theories and views of Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhaba, Franz Fanon, Edward Said, etc. were also referred to during the analysis. The method of this study undertakes by applying postcolonial theories on the two novels mentioned above.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Post colonialism, Identity, Hybridity, Mimicry, Orientalism.*

## RESEARCH PAPER

### 1. Introduction

Since this research focuses on the concepts of identity and identity crisis, one needs to highlight some of the important definitions of these concepts so that they are effectively elucidated. Identity, according to Castells, is “the people’s source of meaning and experience” (Castells,2011). If one explores the various meanings of identity, it comes to light that identity, whether of objects or of people, develops out of a sense of belonging or association with a group or assemblage due to some common denominators. At the same time, identity is also based upon the notion of being different from some other entity, which leads to moments of intense recognition. According to Kath Woodward Identity is marked by similarity that is of the people like us and by difference, of those who are not. [...] identities are necessarily the product of the society in which we live and our relationship with others. Identity provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live. Identity combines how I see myself and how others see me. Identity involves the subjective, and the external. It is a socially recognized position, recognized by others, not just by me (Woodward,2008). Thus, identity remains firmly entrenched in both the subjective and the collective substratum of an individual’s being. This study mainly focuses on two postcolonial novels. They are: (1 Kiran Desai’s Booker Prize Winner *The Inheritance of Loss*, 2 Anne Tyler’s *Digging to America*).

### 2. Postcolonial theory

Postcolonial literature and criticism has appeared during and after many countries gained or struggling for their freedom. The most prominent themes that both deal with are race, gender, ethnicity, identity and culture. Postcolonial criticism as Habib in *Modern literary criticism and theory a history* argues, has taken a number of aims: most fundamentally, to re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers; to analyse the process of decolonization; and above all; to participate in the goals of political liberation, which includes equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities (Habib, 2008: 739). Terry Eaglton states that “Post-colonial theory is not the only product of multiculturalism and decolonization, it also reflects an historic

shift from revolutionary nationalism in the third world” (Eagleton, 2011:205). It is interesting to mention that from the 1950s onwards, many of well-known writers and theorists were not came from Britain or America, but they were from former British colonies such as Sam Selvon, Salman Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and etc.

One of the most contested issues of post colonialism is the question of identity and culture. In the modern world with the increase of immigrant numbers, hybrid nations, and constitution of countries with different cultural diversities the question of identity came to the surface. In their *Narrative and Identity* Jones Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh argue that the notions of identity stand for a large area of intellectual problems that have been studied in a variety of disciplines and from diverse theoretical points of view. The rise of the question of identity became a major theme not only in literature but in the whole area of life, also it was because of the colonial impact as Pieterse argues After World War II, at the time of decolonization when imperial identities were decentred, "the question of the Other" became critical and prominent theme” (Pieterse,22). In the relation of self and the other —Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses (Hall 1989, 10). Franz Fanon in his theoretical argument about the consequences of colonialism and the change formed by the experience of immigration, "examines the experience of having to wear "white masks' to get by Europe, of having to bend one's own identity so as to appear to the colonizer to be free of all taint of primitive native traits." ( Ryan,117-118) . Edward Said's central point of identity construction, which is under the influence of Foucault's idea of power, is the ability to resist, to recreate oneself as a postcolonial, anti-imperialist subject and this recreation of the self needs to be contextualized because it is the construction of identity that constitutes freedom and human beings are what they make themselves, even if they are subjects of repressive discourse. (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 112). Another postcolonial theorist is Homi Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* who developed his theory by shifting from the binary opposition of Edward Said, which based on the power and knowledge of Foucault, and presented the concept of hybridity, and hybrid identity for Bhabha rises from the "interweaving of elements of both colonizer and colonized challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity”

(Meridith,1998: 2). Homi Bhabha also discusses that there is a third space which is "in between the designation of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains the difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy"(Bhabha,1994: 4). Glissant for his part in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* stresses instead the idea of continuously shifting identity, with his rhizomatic theory of culture: the construction of identity is an ongoing process and the result is an unpredictable, fractal zing hybrid (Gyssels,2001). Moreover, making use of theories concern francophone colonies related to the interrelation between both in respect of cultural identity and representation as it is emphasized by Angela Bruning in her dissertation that "striking connection exists between Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean representations of issues of migration, cultural identity and the uncovering of Caribbean history (Bruning, 2006: 11).

### **3. Result and discussion**

#### **3.1 Digging to America**

Anne Tyler was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on October 25, 1941. Her Quaker activist parents, Lloyd Parry Tyler, a chemist and Phylis Mahon Tyler, a social worker moved around the Midwest for several years (Croft, 1995: 1). Anne Tyler was their first child, to be followed by three sons (Bail, 1998: 1). In 1948, they moved to a cooperative community in the mountains of North Carolina called Celu. In this small community, Anne and her younger brother Israel were taught at home but attended the local school for one year. The isolation of the community developed in Tyler both a sense of distance and the habit of observing the world objectively as an outsider (Croft, 1995: 1). Her family lived in a succession of communes, or experimental Quaker communities, seeking like Thoreau a "simpler life"—an alternative to the competitive, materialistic lifestyle they saw all around them (Bail, 1998: 1). Anne Tyler says "I think the fact that I had a fairly isolated childhood influenced me considerably. I learned to be alone and to entertain myself by imagining, and when I left the commune I looked at the regular world from an unusually distant vantage point" (cited. in. Bail, 1998: 1).

Anne Tyler's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Digging to America* deals with themes like family, self-identity, cultural conflicts and multiculturalism. It is a fictional account of individuals grapple with ethnic identity that creates confusion among them while

maintaining familial bonds within different cultures. Tyler explores the issue of identity crisis in the backdrop of themes like dysfunctional familial relationships of the American family. The main characters in *Digging to America* suffer from loss of identity and yearn for their proper identity. The question the novel repeatedly asks is; “whether an immigrant can ever feel completely at home in America, or he /she always feels like an outsider; whether identity is a matter of one’s choice or inherited culture and history”. The novel is a story of two Baltimore families the complete American Donaldsons and the Iranian born Yazdans. They both adopt baby girls of Korean origin. The Donaldsons represent America whereas the Yazdans represent Iran. The Yazdans, though American, are visibly foreign to others. At the airport they are unassuming and concerned only with the picking up of their adopted child. On the other hand, the Donaldsons are a stereotypical Caucasian American family. They make the arrival of their child an event and celebrate it.

The primary character Maryam Yazdan, represents the conflicting identity of being Iranian-American in America. She desires to be loyal to Iranian roots while simultaneously she appreciates the freedom and family life that American life gives. Although she has been living in America for about thirty years she looks at American culture as a new one. For her the amalgamation of two cultures is like a conflicting notion. She is unable to adjust herself in the family structure as she faces identity problems in her family. The complication becomes further grim due to her gender as a woman. Maryam’s character is juxtaposed with another Iranian- American Mrs. Hakimi. Mrs. Hakimi represents what American expects of an Iranian immigrant- humble, passive and polite. This is not at all acceptable to Maryam. Farah is another woman who comes into contact with Maryam’s life. She embodies Iranian culture to the extreme. Farah holds Iranian culture and traditions dearer than American culture; she rejects the concept of fusion of two cultures and therefore gives rise to issues of identity and multiculturalism.

The issue of identity crisis works in terms of language also. Ziba is Mrs. Hakimi’s daughter. She frequently interrupts her mother’s conversations in Pharsi. She becomes nervous when the mother begins to speak in Pharsi in various social settings. She wants her mother to speak in English. This tells us the new generation’s approach to their past

cultures. Thus, the novel examines the perils as well as the promises of the American dream of a society that would be free from perplexity among the native-born Americans and the immigrants (Tyler.2005).

### **3.2 The Inheritance of Loss**

Kiran Desai is one of the most talented writers of her generation. She won the Man Booker's prize for her novel „The Inheritance of Loss“. Desai was born on Sept 3, 1971 in New Delhi, India. She left Columbia University for several years to write her first novel, „Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard“. It received 1998 Betty Trask Prize from the British Society of Authors. After more than seven years of work, she published „The Inheritance of Loss. When she was about nine years old her family was shifted to Delhi. By the time she turned fourteen, the family moved to England. A year's later, they shifted to the United States. Kiran Desai completed her schooling in Massachusetts. She did her graduation from Hollins University and Columbia University. Her maiden novel, “The inheritance of loss” was published in the year 2006. It was an amazing piece of work for which Kiran received many accolades.

Kiran Desai's 2006 Booker Prize winning novel The Inheritance of Loss deals with the themes of “alienation, rootlessness, disillusionment and death”. Man's life on earth has never been a bed of roses. It is full of sufferings, sorrows, pains and pangs. These sufferings are sometimes brought by fate and sometimes they come owing to ruthlessness and cruelty of other people with whom one come into contact during the course of one's life. The predicaments of an individual assume more serious dimensions when he/she is out of her home place/country or when he/she undergoes a cultural dislocation. The pains of life are also due to the ambition of man to achieve something beyond his reach. These realities of life are unfolded in a superb manner through a variety of stories in The Inheritance of Loss. The novel “manages to explore, with intimacy and insight, just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence.” The central event of the novel is the life of Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired judge. The stories of Lola-Noni sisters, Sai-Gyan affair and Biju's sojourn in America are parallel narratives that are woven around the main story. The events are mostly set in a place named Kalimpong at the foot of Himalayas in the northern province of West Bengal. Some more events are set in New

York, America and England. The time covers the pre-independence period and immediate post-independence period in India.

Jemubhai is brought up in a village, Pilphi, in Gujarat. His worldly-wise father arranged Jemu's marriage with Bela, the daughter of a rich man, before Jemu sails to England to pursue ICS in England. Jemu comes back with an ICS and joins the British Govt. service as a judge in India. The process of cultural dislocation sets to work from the very beginning. Jemu throws away the packed food his mother gives to him when he sets out for England. Now westernized, Jemu fails to accept the traditions of his own country. He undergoes a superiority complex, therefore, others appear inferior and unacceptable to him. Instead of 'roti' he forms the habit of eating 'ham roll', 'Tuna fish soufflé' and 'khari biscuit pie' (Desai, 2006:17) He begins to dislike his rustic wife and now considers her "Just a county bumpkin" and "incredibly stupid". He says "she is unsuitable to be my wife" (Desai,2006:306) Therefore he harasses, tortures and finally abandons her. She gives birth to a girl-child. Her daughter is educated in a convent. She falls in love with one Mr. Mistry, they get married and have a daughter named Sai. Sai loses both her parents in Russia and comes to India, studies in a boarding school and finally reaches her only relative, her grandfather, Jemubhai who at that time spends his old age at Kalimpong with an only companion, Panna Lal, his cook. In the end we find him beating his cook, for his negligence in safe-guarding his dog Mutt which is lost. It is ironical that he feels the loss of the dog so deeply that he is unmoved at the loss of human relations. He stands nowhere and without any sense of belonging. What he inherits here is merely 'loss.'

For reasons like education, employment, trade, marriage and other political or economic motives, often, man moves away from his location to other places and encounters other peoples and cultures. Very often his dreams of finding a congenial atmosphere in the form of ideal and perfect human beings are shattered. Most of the times, he finds the world around him selfish, cunning, deceptive and exploitative. Therefore, he is caught in no places and in the state of unbelonging. Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, though in fictional terms, puts these realities on record.

## **CONCLUSION**

To sum up, searching for own identity is one of the important issues that newly freed nations from colonial authority obsessed with. Different perspectives and arguments

presented by the theorists and novelists themselves about the issue of identity. But, in all cases there is general agreement that crises is one of the aftermaths of colonialism and its policy in which conducted during their ruling of colonized countries. The crises in one way or another also related to the fact that societies and individuals once were colonized, now they are confused to find their real identity. They find themselves between past and present, they feel they detached from previous history and not attached to present atmosphere of decolonization.

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