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Quest for Identity and conflicting Loyalties: An Exploratory Journey of Lyla in Samina Ali's Madras on Rainy Days



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Abstract

The Quest for identity refers to the existential struggle of human beings to attain meaning and value in their life. It is an inward journey in search of roots and a struggle for self-expression. Literature has the potential to portray the process of identity formation and identity maintenance. In the present world of globalization, the question of identity has assumed new and critical dimensions.

This paper aims at exploring quest of identity and conflicting loyalties in the process with reference to Samina Ali's Madras on Rainy Days. The notion of identity has been critically investigated across a variety of perspectives such as psychological, historical, sociological and literary. Though the reclamation of identity has many challenges, many writers have remarkably handled the theme of identity

and belongingness in their fiction. All human beings have their own image based on individuality and a sense of belongingness. There are different aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, culture, and nation. In cognitive psychology, the term identity refers to one's capacity for self-reflection. If cognitive psychology founds identity on the self, social psychology speaks of an identity negotiation process by which we learn various social roles through personal experiences and come to an understanding of ourselves vis-à-vis our fellow humans. We define our identity with various experiential markers socially acquired and subjectively internalized.

Key Words

Quest for Identity, self-expression, conflicting Loyalties, Journey of Lyla, Samina Ali's Madras on Rainy Days

RESEARCH PAPER

Samina Ali is an award-winning author, activist and cultural commentator. Her debut novel, *Madras on Rainy Days* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux), was the winner of France's prestigious Prix Premier Roman Etranger Award and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award in Fiction. It deals with the Quest for Identity of a young woman through her interactions with various people and situations in her life particularly her arranged marriage and a perpetual struggle to define her existence. This was partly inspired by Samina's real-life experiences growing up bi-culturally in Hyderabad, India and St. Paul, Minnesota. *Madras on Rainy Days* attempts to explore the effect of cultural mingling on the inner spaces of those caught in the crossfire. The segregation of men and women in Muslim society in India and the harsh judgments it passes on sexual misconduct in the novel really portrays the conflicting loyalties faced by an individual to define oneself.

Layla, the chief protagonist of the novel, is controlled by cultural, familial, religious forces. During her journey of life, she begins to distinguish between Islam, as a religion, and Islam as it is practiced in culture. Her learning about her religion helps her, by the end, to become an individual. No matter what religion or culture, people are controlled by familial and societal pressures. Think of ways in which you have sacrificed your personal freedom in face of these outside pressures.

The protagonist of the novel is 19-year-old Layla, whose growing up has been divided between the US and India in an attempt to "inhabit America without being inhabited by it". Layla's father, a doctor, used to beat her since she was two years old. He divorced Layla's mother, Amme, and abandoned her when Layla was just 10 years old. To avoid humiliation, Amme kept this fact hidden from her family and friends in Hyderabad. Her parents prefer to live in America but want to retire in India. They try their level best to raise their children without the influence of the culture of the West. Layla feels that she belongs to nowhere as she

'wore the shirt of one, the trousers of the other, and both sides were shooting at me.' (Ali, 26)

Always, there is confusion due to the differences between the cultures of India and America. In America, she is known as Indian and whenever after each six months, she comes to India, her mates call her as American and for her

'it was like turning a page and not knowing whether to begin reading the script from right to left or left to right, Urdu or English.' (Ali, 8-9)

When she grows up, Layla is pressured to fulfill her mother's dream of getting her daughter married to a nice Muslim boy — a doctor or engineer — from India.

Her mother always imagines about her son-in-law as,

Your husband will be a doctor or an engineer. Your husband will come from a good family. Your husband will be a Muslim. Your husband will be from India. (Ali, 116)

However Layla in order to react to her mother's wish spends a night with her boy friend. She gets pregnant and later has an abortion. The attempt to discover sexuality on her own before it is forced upon her, shattered Layla physically and emotionally. Her family in Hyderabad comes to know of this and drags her to shady mystics to drive the "shaitan" out of her.

Amme fears for her daughter and thinks that Layla is possessed by a devil. She gets angry at her and asks who was her lover and calls her a "Whore!" (Ali, 6) She threatens her daughter that she will throw her out of the house to live as a prostitute. Amme manages to take her daughter to alim to remove the ghost in her. She is very careful that the news should not reach Sameer, the

bride groom chosen for Layla, as there was a danger of breaking of the marriage. So both of them hide themselves in the chadors so that no one can identify them. She also supports her daughter by saying not to worry as her dreams and bleeding will stop and she will be better.

Layla's mother, always, compares Layla with her father as she resembles her father. Before ten years, her husband divorced her as he married Sabana, though it was not known to others. She weeps for a month as it was a shock for her, but has not cried yet since then. She retains her father-in-law's house as mahr and refuses to give up the master bedroom, which her husband needs to share with Sabana, as it becomes her own property as per the contract. Amme loves Layla the most and is ready to kill herself than to see her daughter injured. Her son died after his birth, so she has Layla as the only child. She prays the God to place whatever in Layla's body in her own so that her daughter may not need to suffer.

In the heat and clamor of India, nineteen-year-old Layla and her mother, their faces veiled behind chadors, rush through the narrow alleys within the ancient walled city of Hyderabad. It's two days before Layla's marriage to a man she hardly knows and she's becoming increasingly reluctant to go through with the wedding. Having grown up six months of the year in America, drinking beer and wearing bikinis, Layla had impulsively decided that the only way she would go through with an arranged marriage in India was by first taking on a lover of her choice in the U.S. What she hadn't counted on was that she'd end up getting pregnant. Unable to face the truth of her daughter's predicament, her mother now claims Layla is possessed by a demon and rushes the two off to seek the magic of an alim, a mystic healer. Quickly surmising that no magic will save Layla, the alim advises her to own up to what she's done and cancel the wedding. But in a culture where a woman's honor is a matter of life and death, young Layla is too scared by what might become of her.

However, as her wedding day approaches, Layla is anxious to be accepted by the family of her husband, Sameer. On the wedding night, she discovers that Sameer had known of her pre-marital affair. Surprisingly, he does not reject her but refuses to consummate the marriage. Despite this, a kind of closeness develops between the couple, although there are hurdles from the past which widen the rift between them.

Layla has never been allowed to take charge of her body or her destiny. Daughter of an abandoned woman and an abusive father, she is handed over to her husband's family, as its property and responsibility. Sameer, too, carries a load of expectations on his shoulders. Both, Layla and Sameer, have been forced into a marriage and thus there are areas in their personalities and sexual identities that they have never faced or explored fully.

Layla is torn between clashing identities - the dutiful Muslim daughter her immigrant parents raised her to be, the Indian she fantasizes she is, and the free, independent woman America has awakened in her. At nineteen, her parents inform Layla that a marriage has been arranged for her. Her wedding will be in India, to Sameer, a handsome, ambitious Indian engineer, who knows nothing of Layla's American self and who has some potent secrets of his own. A stunned Layla submits reluctantly, but not before she commits a dangerous, final act of defiance. In the heat and noise of Hyderabad, as her wedding looms, her behavior becomes more erratic. Her mother, fearing demonic possession, takes Layla on a series of visits to alims - Muslim faith healers - hoping to exorcise all traces of rebellion. To Layla's surprise, the ancient and elaborate wedding rituals, her groom's physical beauty, and the warm welcome of her new family fill her with a sense of belonging she has never known before outside, the full horror of the devil's bargain she has made is revealed, forcing her to make painful decisions about her roles as a Muslim, a wife and a woman.

Thus a young woman, torn between the certainties of life in India and the potentially liberating challenges of America, undergoes an arranged Islamic marriage—with disastrous results. While Sameer works to get money to pay for their trip to Madras to obtain his visa, Layla enjoys the household routine and religious rituals. But Sameer keeps disappearing, makes no sexual overtures and their trip to Madras, supposed to be a honeymoon and reveals the truth about him when his male lover follows them there. But Sameer and both families are determined to continue the marriage, even though Islamic law allows divorce. Paralyzed, she allows the wedding to unfold. Afterward, to her relief, her new husband accepts Layla exactly as she is. But he asks the same of her: she, too, must accept Sameer for exactly who he is. During the couple's honeymoon in Madras, as the monsoon rain beats down outside their hotel suite, it is not Layla's American lover who unexpectedly shows up to stake a claim; the intrusive lover turns out to be Sameer's — disguised in a black burqa so short it reveals hairy toes and men's slacks.

The women in the novel are heavily confined to the home and to their limited fate: from the father's house to the husband's house. They have no personal identity other than being someone's wife, daughter, and/or mother. Although it's a reality that women must confine themselves to the stereotypical roles in the society, Sameer also is struggling to define his gay in the society openly as he tells Layla that he cannot be himself in India.

Madras in *Rainy Days* depicts elaborately the social protocols of the zenana sub-culture. The five-day's ceremony lush with the rich traditions of the families' Muslim culture vividly dwells into the elaborate marital festivities within the zenana culture in the Indian walled city of Hyderabad. Behind the scenes of the opulent festivities, the central protagonist was under an emotional constraint in view of her ensuing life with a man below her social standards. Layla, who has spent most of her life in the United States, is deeply conflicted about her parents' desire to have her participate in the traditional arranged marriage. The narrative succinctly depicts her cultural trap as she could feel at home neither in India, where she is viewed with suspicion as an outsider, nor in America, where her parents deliberately segregated her from modern culture. "I was supposed to inhabit America without being inhabited by it," she says. Her sexual encounter with an American boy Nate is serious enough as a transgression considering the restrictive social milieu where she had to live after marriage. The narrative shows that Layla was under a psychological conflict regarding her previous sexual experience with her American lover which had resulted in conception and subsequent prolonged menstrual bleeding due to forced abortion. She feared if the truth becomes public, she will be rejected by Sameer and more dangerously her father a staunch patriarch that he is will abuse and even kill her. But contrary to her apprehensions, Sameer used her menstrual blood stains as a sign of consummated marriage before his family to camouflage his own sexual lack. Layla successfully conceals her previous relationship (and the resulting pregnancy and miscarriage) long enough for her to fit into the traditional structures of Sameer's family. Indeed, much to Layla's surprise, she finds herself attracted to this husband she did not choose and does not yet love. While Layla despite her cross cultural trap moves deeper into the traditional world wanting to find a home and security that had so far eluded to her because of her broken parental home, Sameer is desperate to flee the confines of the old city and show her the hybridized world of contemporary India, where people have moved out of their traditional crunches. He makes her wear jeans underneath her purdah when they go out so that she can fling it off after crossing the traditional confines. When Sameer disappears for days on end and fails to reciprocate Layla's sexual attraction, she suspects some truth behind it, until she finds his friend Naved who reveals the secret of their gay love. Layla

decided to leave Sameer, but rather than being accepted back into her parental home her own family asked Layla to accept Sameer's tendencies as a type of recreational sex which would change with her presence.

The novel also portrays the constraints placed on both women and men by misguided societal expectations. Layla isn't the only one to have lost her "virtue." While every character believes him- or herself to be a model Muslim, not one is adhering to the true intention of the faith ... and the women are the ones who end up paying the heaviest price. "Caught between cultural ruins," Layla is left to separate out superstition from culture and patriarchal traditions from the egalitarian message of Islam, even if it means she must then leave behind her husband and her mother, everything she has ever grown to know. Thus almost all, the characters and particularly Layla undergoes the conflicting Loyalties in her quest of identity.

The novel further unveils an illuminating portrayal of a young Muslim woman's cultural crisis. Layla finds herself a prisoner. Tensions between Muslims and Hindus turns into riots and her favorite cousin is raped and murdered further underlines the vulnerability of women. At last Layla decides to escape. The novel is a subtle conglomeration of the tremendous pull of the traditional world of Islam with its moral confinements and the attractive and powerful potentials and pitfalls of contemporary globalized world in the self-journey of Layla. Henna is Layla's best friend, confidante, and cousin. Layla says that they were both girls who grew up to be women who knew they would be sold to men in marriage and were looking forward to it. Her sudden death is a surprise at the end, shows Layla the path of freedom and symbolically she is walking around the city of Hyderabad in her burqa after finally leaving her husband, enjoying her freedom behind the veil within its little space of anonymity.

At the very end of the novel, Layla finally finds her freedom and says, "My body hidden and safe under the chador, belonging only to me." Even if the Muslim veil is as an oppressive device yet, the chador provides Layla the freedom she has long awaited. With or without the veil, women everywhere struggle for the quest of identity and freedom. The veil makes her be in public space yet remain absent from public eye by its covers; it is an alternate moment of liberation for Layla. She prefers to remain in the traditional space of the Indian society within the confines of real/ imaginary zenana as a single woman rather than moving out to the liberal diasporic space of America with her gay husband bound in the terms of a Companionate marriage. The religiously constructed body space of the purdah evoked in the novel stands as a sign of 'heteronormative' enclosure which is stabilized through the spatial boundaries between interior and exterior, domestic and public, the body and the house in an embodied experience.

Thus the novel thoroughly investigates the issue of identity in Madras On Rainy Days through a couple trapped into an arranged marriage to demonstrate the plasticity of identity which is necessarily more than a simple combination of self and social perception rather complex as conflicting loyalties. The process of identity construction of the two main characters is highly influenced and further complicated by Layla's childhood upbringing in American culture with Indian identity i.e. conflicting two identities and loyalties and her husband's homosexuality.

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