

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Identity and Belonging in Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustment*

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Abstract

Seasonal Adjustments is the debut novel of the Bangladeshi-Australian writer Adib Khan. The novel introduces a migrant, Iqbal Chowdhury, who returns his homeland after eighteen years of living in Australia and encapsulates the journey from the moment of his returning home to final resolution to go back to Australia. However, while sketching the journey Khan concentrates on the multilayered conflicts that Iqbal faces following his absence for a long time and shows how belonging to two states simultaneously results in no belonging at all. He also points out how the protagonist fails to anchor his identity in both home and abroad. Being a diaspora writer himself, the author achieves a new perspective through which he plunges into the mental landscape of Iqbal and portrays the internal crisis that continuously battled within his mind. Through examining the dilemmas and confusion that Iqbal goes through in his homeland, this paper attempts to shed light on the identity crisis and lack of belonging that a migrant faces while visiting home.

Keywords: Migrant, diaspora, belonging, dilemma

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Introduction

Adib Khan, an Australian novelist of Bangladeshi Origin, is known for his novels that highlight the theme of a sense of displacement and yearning to belong. Khan's debut novel, *Seasonal Adjustments* portrays the story of the disquieted lives of the protagonist Iqbal Khan Chowdhury. In this novel Iqbal is captured at a point of his life when after living eighteen years in Australia, he finally decides to return "with the hope of home that he had carried within him" (Khan 10) for the last two decades. Returning home, he constantly tries to fit himself within the womb that he left but cannot fit there and as a result oscillates between the idea of home that lurks within his memory and the home that he has found in reality. But his aspiration to return home comes to its end with a realization that "this is no longer a matter of simple identification" (Khan 40). Khan in this novel tries to uphold the identity crisis of Iqbal who straddles on two states simultaneously but fails to reside comfortably in none and also the dilemmas that he faces in his attempt to negotiate two conflicting worlds. This article tries to delve into the mind of Iqbal and brings out the conflicts that make him uncomfortable in both spaces: his homeland and foreign land. It also analyses Iqbal through diasporic lens to assimilate his crisis with the crisis of diaspora.

Methodology

This article follows a qualitative research methodology. It is entirely purposive to investigate the dilemma that an expatriate faces due to living abroad for a long time. The primary source of the study is the text, Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments*. Different criticism on the text, literary theories, text related literary and research works, critical books, articles, published and

unpublished dissertation will be used as the secondary sources of data. Since this is analytical research, the text will be analyzed aiming to assess the diasporic tension on the expatriates.

Iqbal's Crisis

At the outset of the novel, Iqbal, a man at his 40s, muses the reason behind his returning home. He has decided to return after two long decades. The words of Claire reiterate within his mind, "Go home, Iqbal, go where you really belong" "Go back to your source and find the past. See yourself in its reflection and know who you are. Heal yourself in your spiritual womb" (Khan 1). Iqbal has returned to restore his scattered self. Uma Paramaswarn, the Indian born Canadian advises to her fellow expatriates living across the continent, "Home is where your feet are, and may your heart be there too" (Parameswaran 10). The concept of home is always subjective as it is always connected with one's feelings and emotion. Following his long absence, Iqbal finally returns but fails to bring back his heart. Maswood Akhter has pointed out "Khan is only too aware that for a diasporic being, home often resides in memory" (Akhter 231). Diasporic home is identified as an imaginary home that reflects scatter, fragmentary rather than real and concrete. For the last eighteen years, home exists as a series of mental images within his memory. While returning he faces the continuous struggle "to become an inconspicuous part of the mainstream life here" (Khan 16) and finds him in a second migration. His family considers his self-imposed migration as an "act of greed" (Khan 16) and offers him a cold welcome. At present for his family member, he is nothing but a misguided person, "corrupted by the hedonistic ways of the west" (Khan 16). He realizes his absence has become so normal for his own family that he is not even informed of the death of his sister, Sabnam and also the separation of his brother Hashim. "What upset me most is my inability to slip back into a tradition I assumed was an integral part me" (Khan 116), Iqbal speculates. Stepping into his home, Iqbal realizes he cannot return to his past anymore. Back in Bangladesh, he fails to

identify himself with his country. He says, “it is like looking at life with borrowed eyes”. (Khan 7). On the other hand, he is not even accepted in Australia as well. He explains,

What makes me unacceptable to Keith, even dangerous, is not my color or my background. It is my refusal to uphold what he considers to be immutable virtues of every decent Australian—a blind devotion to the monarchy, an active support for the policies of the RSL, a life-long membership of the Liberal Party and an undying belief that Australia should continue to draw all its spiritual and cultural sustenance from Europe, even in the distant future. (Khan 86)

Returning home Iqbal finds himself both insider and outsider. Keith, the father-in-law of Iqbal cannot accept him because he thinks Iqbal does not belong to the culture of Australia. The common tendency of human beings to identify an individual depending on their single affiliation plays an important role here. Both the people from Bangladesh as well as Australia focus on the divergence between Iqbal and them rather than the convergence and as a result, they deny accepting him. But instead of focusing on differences if they could focus on the similarities, probably there would be hundreds of reasons to accept Iqbal in both the places. Acceptance in a society is important to define one’s identity. In both the places Iqbal fights with the feeling of marginalization. Here a parallel relationship can be found between the society and Iqbal as on the one hand both the societies, Bangladesh and Australia due to their “fallacy of cultural superiority” (Khan 30) are reluctant to accept Iqbal and on the other hand Iqbal having hyphenated identity finds it difficult to belong to anyone of them. This kind of existence is often compared with Trishanku, a character from Hindu mythology who was stuck between heaven and hell. Iqbal also swings from new to old home and vice versa but fails to belong in anywhere. He portrays his situation by saying,

Do you know what it means to be migrant? A lost soul forever adrift in search of a tarnished dream? You live in a perpetual state of conflict, torn between

what was and what should have been. There is a consciousness of permanent loss. (Khan 143)

“Khan’s protagonists experience alienation first from their native land, then from their adopted home; and finally, from what the former has become during the years they have been away.” (Akther 240). At the early age Iqbal, a confused young man, left his home to get settled in Australia but fails to anchor his identity there and now after returning home he finds himself a stranger even in his own home. Rabindranath Tagore often compares human life with trees in his writings. The metaphor explains if a seedling is uprooted and planted in a new place there is a possibility that seedling will cope with the new environment and bloom and flourish but if an already grown-up tree is uprooted, possibly it cannot survive. This metaphor reflects the state of Iqbal. He left his home at his young age. While leaving Bangladesh, he was already a grown-up person with his own identity and belonging. However, stepping into his new home, Australia, he can neither blur his identity as Bangladeshi nor accept him as an Australian and after struggling there for a long time he finally returns but there remains a question that can a migrant return to his home? Khan reveals to Carol Middleton that though he has been back to Bangladesh several times, the familiar landmarks have been disappeared. Diasporic position is a unique one where a migrant live is neither inside nor outside completely but in no man’s land. He can never be the total insider but always both insider-outsider. The irony is he is titled as ‘Bideshi’ in both home and abroad.

Scattered Self

Characters in diasporic novels often face the overwhelming problems of self-definition. Their movement is not limited to only transcending the national boundary as they cross the cultural boundary too and as a result a diasporic identity involves clash of culture. They started to develop a split character. When someone asks Iqbal whether he is a Bangali he replies in

positive but says, “I was afflicted with a guilt-ridden impression that somehow I had betrayed my race” (Khan 216). He finds it difficult to identify himself as Bangladeshi. He also reflects his state by saying, “There was an acceptance of irreconcilable facets of my polarized self. Perhaps I was meant to live as a fragmented being. The idea did not disturb me anymore” (Khan 217). For Iqbal his hyphenated identity has become quite normal now. On the one hand Iqbal can hardly correspond to his own culture in his homeland; on the other hand, he cannot accept the culture of Australia either. On the occasion of Baptism for Nadine, the daughter of Iqbal, he interrogates Keith saying how can he determine she is Christian not Muslim. Again, back home when his mother insists on her granddaughter’s Aqeeqa-Islamic rites of naming he finds the ritual as a sheer wastage of money and shows resistance against it. In Eid-ul-Azha too, he does not let his daughter see the slaughter of animals. “Nadine will not go anywhere near those animals. She won’t see them or touch them”. (Khan 97). This ambiguity continues in multifaceted layers. In Australia, he cannot accept the racism and the fundamentalist Catholicism. Confronting his friend Iftiqar, he reveals,

There is a lingering foreignness about Australia that I find disturbing. I don’t have anything to hang on to with conviction, nothing I can really call my own. I don’t feel passionate for anything that happens there. (Khan 117)

Back in homeland he asserts,

From the air-conditioned comfort of the car, I view the third world with the critical eye of an intolerant alien...Everything appears to be dilapidated. Old. Dirty. I’m relieved I do not live here anymore. (Khan 40).

So, he finds himself as a fish out of the water in both the places. He also recounts, “There was a shocked silence of disbelief when I confessed, I had forgotten how to pray” (Khan 116). This line highlights how far he has lost the connection with his past. It is noticeable here that in spite of having the transnational identities, Bangladeshi-Australian, he resides in none. He reiterates

that there are occasions when he regrets his exposure to the diversity of cultural radiation which had bleached his individuality. However, Nadine, the second-generation diaspora, does not face the same crisis since “she simply does not belong here” (Khan 161). The perspective regarding home differs in terms of generation. The role of nostalgia has hardly any significance among the second generation, and this is probably the reason why they do not go through the crisis like a first-generation migrant. Iqbal being the first-generation migrant probably sacrifices the right to belong.

Absence of Home

In this novel Khan has invariably used flashback as one of the techniques to develop the plot. Throughout the novel Iqbal is torn between cobweded memories, permanent sense of loss and desire to belong somewhere. Throughout time of being in Australia, he lives like a fringe dweller. He was identified as “devious, unscrupulous, greedy and godless” (Khan 86). When he returns home, it coincides with the collapse of his marriage to his Australian wife Michelle. He returns home to bring his troubled soul back to its shore; to find a shelter but unfortunately, he no longer feels anchored here. “Eighteen years is a long time; long enough to realise that for a migrant the word home is fraught with ambiguities” (Khan 61). The paradox is real home has gone through a number of changes but the home within the mental cartography remains where it was earlier. So, the home that he tries to find does not exist in present time anymore. He finds nothing in present that can hold his feet and so he ceases to exist in present and slips away to past. On the occasion of Nadine’s aqeeqa ceremony Iqbal says,

In astonishment I listen to the details of the arrangements made without consulting me. I digest the information and mull over its implications.

My memory flits back to a July Sunday in Melbourne. (Khan 81)

The transition from present to past shows the internal crisis of Iqbal. Though he finds nothing to hold his feet strongly in present, Iqbal relentlessly searches for what he has come here that is to anchor his identity. The call for root is strong enough to take one back to one's home. In the context of Bangladesh, it is seen during Eid vacation because of the movement of a lot of people at a time roads become very risky. Public vehicles like buses, trains and launches are overcrowded and almost every year accidents take a toll of life. But people still seek to return their home facing all the havoc because its once a year when they can return to their home. For Iqbal his root resides in Shopnoganj where he was born and brought up and spent his childhood. This place plays the role of a bridge between present and past for him. When he comes to know that he is losing his root as the home in Shopnoganj will not be there anymore, probably he loses all the possible pull that he feels towards his homeland. He searches the answer of one question, where does he belong? Throughout the novel. He came to his old home to find out his belonging, his root that he failed to have in his new home. He says, "I crave for security I once knew" (Khan 279). Probably Iqbal is trying to chase the security that human beings seek from the beginning of their civilization. In classical period, Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* also searches the same security throughout the play. He leaves no stone unturned to find out his root. In *Waiting for Godot* Estragon also takes the fetus position to go back to the same security. But the protagonist Iqbal cannot fit to that position anymore, he says, the womb is there all right, except I cannot fit into it anymore.

Khan has poignantly highlighted in the novel that when a migrant leaves one's homeland and gets settled in abroad he possible loses the connection with his root. All through his life, he tries to restore the connection but cannot. Being a migrant too, Iqbal tries to harbor his loitered soul in his homeland but fails. During the end of the trip in Bangladesh Iqbal finally comes to the realization that he belongs to neither in Bangladesh nor in Australia. Since he cannot set himself in any of the places and finally, he declares the "most important identity is

that of a human being” (Khan 250). When he realizes belonging to any single place is impossible for him, he says,

I point out that I value the agony of free thinking and freedom of choice above the cosiness of belonging. I am a free floater. I take and adapt what suits me.
(Khan 296)

A diaspora exists in a unique position that enables him to see things in wider perspective. Possibly it is the diasporic position that has let Iqbal transcend the idea of belonging to a single country and given him the diasporic lens through which he can look at life from broader stance. He also clarifies,

Now I know the fabric of my life cannot be separated into their individual strands. They must remain interwoven in a complex texture. I shall never be able to close the sizable hole at the centre of my life and shut out the view of that other world. I am destined to fret and pine and endure the lonely burden of a dissatisfaction no one else will understand. I shall brood over what might have been. This is the way it must be. I have known too much to live contentedly.
(Khan 250)

He ultimately realizes that the home resides within his memory does not exist at all. So, he decides to resign from the continuous struggle to fit himself in his homeland and goes back to Australia with a realization that he has to lead the rest of his life with his fragmented identity. Through the dilemma and final resolution of Iqbal, this paper tries to show the crisis that every expatriate faces in their life. Home is not only a place to live rather home is related to one's identity. When an expatriate leaves home, he does not leave a place behind rather he is separated from his own identity. Iqbal mirrors the millions of people who are leaving their home every day in quest of a new home or a new identity. The way it is difficult for an uprooted tree to survive, it is difficult for the people to find a new identity in a new land. In most of the

cases the search for new identity results in complete fragmentation of a person. The paper highlights in such situation the crisis that an expatriate faces are far more intricate and internal rather than it looks outwardly. So, this paper reiterates the point that home signifies identity and belonging of a person and when a person leaves his home he lost his connection with his identity which is difficult to reestablish, the way Iqbal fails to do it.

Conclusion

This article encapsulates the internal crisis that a diaspora goes through and shows when a migrant leaves his home and gets settled in other countries, he probably leaves forever. He possibly will pass his rest of his life chasing the idea of home in both the places.

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