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CULTURAL CRISIS, ALIENATION AND RESISTANCE IN *DIGGING TO AMERICA*

Dr. Abdul Anees Abdul Rasheed

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English

Milliya Arts, Science and Management Science College, Beed

Maharashtra, India

Abstract:

Anne Tyler's renowned work, *Digging to America* talks about the family ties, multicultural attitude, cultural conflict and identity crisis. It focuses on the issues of the transnationality; American Dream and multiculturalism. It covers the different social and cultural issues faced by the people who go to America; settle there; gradually adopt the western cultural values and ultimately get assimilated in the American culture.

Keywords: Stereotype, Culture, Identity, Cultural Encounters, Assimilation, etc.

Anne Tyler, the Pulitzer Prize winner American novelist was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1941. Her literary works mainly deal with family relationships, alienation, failure of communication, quest for life and identity. Her seventeenth novel, *Digging to America* (2006) portrays family ties, multicultural attitude, cultural conflict and identity crisis. The novel also focuses on the issue of the transnational adoption of Asian children by the American Donaldsons and the Iranian-American, Yazdans which is greatly concerned with the American Dream and multiculturalism. Despite their differences in personality traits and customs, these two families are drawn together by their adopted Korean daughters.

America has always sheltered its immigrants irrespective of their nationality, religion, caste and creed. It has smoothly extended till the end of the 20th century. But the most devastating and horrible event, the attack of 9/11 has resulted into the major developments at socio-political level in America. It has created the post 9/11 era generating new stereotypes at social, cultural and political level in America. The 9/11 has been a turning point which has influenced America's foreign policies, its international affairs and its relations especially with Muslim countries. The Iranian Revolution, the Iranian hostage crisis and finally the September 9/11 attack overwrought the relations between Iran and America. After the 9/11 attacks, America discriminated Iran, an Islamic country. Owing to America's inclusion of Iran in the "axis of evil", America started treating Iranians with prejudice.

The novel reflects how the Iranians have faced difficulties in America after 9/11. Maryam states that she feels more foreign after 9/11 and that American public opposed them. The same is the feeling of her son, Sami.

Ever since September eleventh, every Middle Eastern-looking person is a suspect. They took [Mahmad] away; they searched him; they asked him a million questions. . . . Well, end of story: he missed his flight. 'Sorry, sir,'

they said. ‘You can catch the next flight, if we’ve finished by then (Tyler, 201).

The novel depicts Westernization, or more precisely Americanization. In this novel, Iranians are seen facing difficulties, negative attitude, hatred and hardships in their day to day lives in America. They are tormented by the feeling of estrangement and alienation in the American culture. Iranians have already left their own cultural identity and assimilated themselves in the American cultural scenario. The novel reflects the identity crisis caused by Western prejudice. Sami is an example as he falls a prey to the western prejudices and adopts western identity.

Sami Yazdan is an Iranian, son of Maryam. Maryam feels that her son must be an Iranian. When he talks on telephone he calls himself as Sami Yazdan. “This is Sami Yaz-dun” (Tyler, 110). Though Sami criticizes the American logic, he cannot give up his desire of being an American. Maryam feels partially happy and sorrowful for her Iranian roots in spite of acceptance of American life. It is because; in her mind there is always a cultural crisis. Sami’s remark clarifies his feelings about America and about the Donaldsons. Sami criticizes an American ideal that relies upon a “west is best” attitude. Tyler ends the second Arrival Day Party with the following words: “Two wild crazy Americans, two regular American guys” (Tyler, 123). Tyler is trying to equalize Sami and Brad by plainly stating that even though Sami’s heritage is Iranian, the bottom line is that they are both just American guys.

Ziba, who adopts the western identity, is also seen falling prey to the western prejudices. Ziba, has been in America as an interior decorator for a long time. Ziba, now knows well how difficult it is to live in America as an Iranian. She accepts the truth of the image created for her by the West and chooses the supposedly “right” path. It reflects how the West calls the Eastern culture inferior and backward and their own culture, superior. This western behavior makes Ziba to give-up her own cultural identity and pretend to be an American.

Always she spoke English to Susan; she said she didn’t want to confuse her. Maryam had expected her to lapse into Farsi from time to time, but Ziba plowed heroically through the most difficult words—“think,” with its sticky th sound, and “stay,” which came out “es-tay (Tyler, 23).

Susan’s who belongs to Korea also faces the same crisis. Her Grandmother is an Iranian-American and her mother Ziba was born and brought up in America. Maryam wants her to know Farsi but Ziba is against it. Ziba speaks English well.

Ziba and Sami try to be fit in the American culture. They have indirectly left their own identity behind to Americanize themselves. But as a Yazdan, Maryam’s attitude to Americanization is completely different from that of Ziba and Sami. In fact, Maryam does not want to be a complete American; she wants to hold on to her own identity. For her, America is not a perfect country. Maryam is, to the much extent, an educated, social, capable and independent.

As she is an Iranian-American, Maryam faces problems of adaptation. She is always seen disturbed by the feelings of displacement and mal-adjustment in a rapidly changing global scenario. She seems to be detached from the fast-paced American lifestyle. Thus, she is half-integrated but lacks social relations. “Even during the school year this was an undemanding job carried out as a measured pace among people long familiar to her” (Tyler, 167).

Maryam does not like to get mingled with the unfamiliar people. It is the impact of the Iranian culture, whereas Americans are totally opposite as they are always eager to meet new people. Maryam’s aloofness causes trouble in her life. Maryam always keeps herself busy in some work. Gulerai and Neelakantan observe: “Maryam’s migration to America let down her preference for being an outsider rather than live a life of unfreedom in Iran” (Transnationalism, 1).

Maryam can neither completely attach to her native culture nor she feels completely American.

Maryam, after her marriage is compelled to adopt the Western identity by acquiring a driving license. For her, that license is a kind of permit for her mobility and freedom. Her husband, Kiyam, was such a workaholic that he could not have an active social life in America. After his death and after her son's marriage, she could get herself free from the domestic restrictions and live her own life. But she is fed up and depressed by her own monotonous, isolated and empty life. Maryam is completely disconnected from her Iranian culture because her relatives live in other states. She becomes the victim of western supremacy. Moreover, the 9/11 attacks created the difficult circumstances which have made the Iranian-Americans feel as outsiders in America. Both Gulera and Neelakantan believe that Maryam's immigration to America helped her to leave behind a rigid theocratic society and displace to a predominantly secular culture that values individual freedom (Transnationalism 2009:1). Being a young, well educated and 'rendered a misfit in Iran', she seeks a getaway in her marriage with Kiyam, an Iranian pathologist, who has a good-paying job in America.

In Iran, Maryam's identity would not have changed after marriage; she could have retained her birth name even after marrying into the Yazdani. On one hand she is confused by her status as an Iranian-American, on the other hand she is also confused as that her identity has been changed due to the change of her name.

Perhaps if she lived in Iran, she would have been more casual. Oh not that she would have let herself go, nothing so extreme as all that, but she would have let herself go, nothing so extreme as all that, but she might have worn a housecoat at home the way her mother the way her mother and aunts used to do. Or would she? She couldn't even imagine now what her life would be like if she had not moved to Baltimore (Tyler, 18).

The Iranian people, especially women do not like to be as free as the Americans do. Generally women like Maryam always try to imagine and compare their past lives with their present lives. She is a native Iranian, but she has been in the United States for over thirty years. She often feels herself 'uprooted' and unfit in the western culture.

The novel also covers the resistance of the major characters against the American imperial agenda. The novelist has presented the certain elements as the symbols of resistance. The protagonist, Maryam, is an Iranian-American, prefers her cultural intimacy over American superiority. It reflects a rebellious resistance of Maryam against American psyche. Maryam is seen to be outwardly assimilated in American culture but inwardly clinging to her Iranian identity.

Maryam has established "favourable" relations with the Donaldsons. But she cannot help criticizing their American lifestyle. To Maryam, Americans believe that American values are superior in the world. She disagrees: "They seemed to feel that their occasions—their anniversaries, birthdays, even their leaf-rakings—had such cataclysmic importance that naturally the entire world was longing to celebrate with them. Yes, that was what she objected to: their assumption that they had the right to an unfair share of the universe" (Tyler, 272).

The character of Maryam appears different to Ziba and Sami in terms of being adapted to American culture. Ziba and Sami consider their culture inferior, precisely America wants them to, and desire to get rid of it, rather than to claim it. Maryam knows that she can never belong to American culture. She respects her original identity. But her son and daughter-in-law fail to grasp their original identity. For Maryam, the gathering of Brad, Bitsy, Sami and Ziba's is just pointless. She is of the opinion that the American couple can never be like the Iranian couple.

Obviously the desire to be American seems prevailing over. Sami, though strictly criticizes American logic, does not bother to vilify his own culture. It irritates Maryam. Maryam rejects Dave Donaldson's proposal of marriage. She is described in the aftermath:

“She seemed much smaller than usual. In her black blazer and slim black pants, she was a single, narrow figure, straight-backed and slight and entirely alone” (Tyler, 255).

Maryam, alienated from the Western civilization, tries to move away from others, especially Dave. Her feeling of being an outsider obsesses her again. She realizes that “She had never felt at home in her own country or anywhere else” (Tyler, 321). She just wants to be alone; she behaves as if she does not need anybody, not even her son and his family. She can’t assimilate herself in western culture. It has resulted in that Maryam seems to be losing self-trust and self-confidence. The psychoanalyst Erik Erickson says:

The first component of a healthy personality I nominate is a sense of basic trust, which I think is an attitude toward oneself and the world....By ‘trust’ I mean what is commonly implied in reasonable trustfulness as far as others are concerned (Erick, 57).

Maryam’s refuses the marriage proposal of Dave because she is a Muslim Iranian while Dave is a Christian American. However, she could not explain what happens to her especially after September eleventh. She seems to lack her cultural identity i.e. a Muslim Iranians. She is not a religious person. She always drinks wine and never prays. In the framework of globalization, being an Oriental Muslim equals being an inferior. After catastrophe of 9/11 Islamic culture has labelled as “Other’s culture” and thus of simply the “Other” (Burgat, “Veils”, 31-32).

Maryam and Ziba try to hide their Muslims identity from Bitsy Donaldson for fear of receiving inferior treatment. However, their appearance does not reflect the image of the Muslim women who wear veils or ‘hijab’ which is perceived by the West as an incarnation of “the mystery of Islamic culture and its backwardness” (Majid, 111).

Accordingly, acculturation can be considered to be the process of cultural learning imposed upon minorities to avoid cultural conflict because the minority culture is banished by the dominant group culture in a process of adaptation. In *Digging to America* this feature is obvious in Ziba’s family which has adopted the dominant American culture. Ziba and her family are Iranian-Americans who are totally influenced by western culture. Ziba’s clothes were “chosen carefully for their Westernness, stylish sheaths in electric prints of hot pink and lime green and purple; her hair lacquered into a towering beehive; her feet encased in needle-toed, stiletto-heeled pumps” (Tyler, 21). Ziba had enthusiastically adapted American culture to fit into the American society. She listens nonstop to 98 Rock, hangs out at the mall, and drapes her small, bony, un-American frame in blue jeans and baggy T-shirts with writing printed across them. Hence “she seemed native-born” (Tyler, 16).

Ziba does not sustain her Iranian identity. She always insists her mother to speak in English and not in Farsi. Ziba and Sami are totally Americanized. Sami is a second-generation immigrant who belongs to the white society. He neither has an accent of Farsi nor does he understand it. Their union demonstrates a going away from the world of their first generation parents in many ways. Unlike his mother, Maryam, Sami shares a happy married life that is free from gender stereotyping. Both Sami and Ziba are employed. Sami willingly and happily supports Ziba in household responsibilities including child care.

This may mean that whoever comes to America and settles there, gradually adopts the western cultural values and ultimately gets himself/herself assimilated in the American culture. Ziba and Sami ultimately get assimilated into the American culture. Unfortunately, due to the negative stereotype caused by 9/11, it seems that many more Muslim families like the Yazdans experience identity crises.

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To Cite the Article: *Anees, Abdul*, “*Cultural Crisis, Alienation and resistance in Digging to America*”. *Literary Cognizance*, II-3 (December, 2021): 24-28. Web.

