



ICEPTLELL-2024



ETHNICITY, LINGUISTIC IDENTITY AND POLITICS *IN FUNNY BOY AND KARTOGRAPHY*

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ABSTRACT



The main objective of my research is to focus on the idea of ethnicity and politics of linguistic identity in the novels *Kartography* by Kamila Shamsie and *The Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai. In the novel, *The Funny Boy*, the Tamil-Sinhalese conflicts force the protagonist Arjie's family to immigrate to Canada. The novel also focuses on how the linguistic identity also paved way for ethnic violence. All of Arjie's experiences make him question his own identity and the sense of alienation only deepened further throughout the novel. It is essential to note how these social constructs shape the ideology of the people, leading to all the vices affecting specific individuals both on a personal level and also as a community. In the novel *Kartography*, Shamsie focuses more on the experiences of the migrants during the partition of Pakistan and the discrimination faced by Bengalis especially women. The partition though doesn't seem to affect the social status of the characters in the novel it had a severe impact on the personal lives whose baggage has been passed on to the next generation as well. In this research, an attempt will be made to understand the origins of ethnic conflict and the repercussion of the same especially in the setting of diaspora and post-colonialism. Besides this emphasis has been laid on how one's linguistic identity defines their life as a whole and how other's perceptions about one's identity makes one think about one's own identity. It is essential to understand the socio-historical factors and how politics play out in the social and personal domain.

Keywords: *Ethnicity, Language, Identity, Politics, Bias, Diaspora, Conflict**Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

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Proceeding of Two-Day International Conference on "Emerging Practices in Teaching - Learning of English Language and Literature: A Journey from Theory to Praxis." (ICEPTLELL-2024) on 1st & 2nd February 2024, Govt. City College, Hyderabad.

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One of the significant mediums to establish a sense of solidarity among people is language and the phenomenon where this cohesiveness is established amongst a group of people who speak the same language or dialect is what strongly characterizes Linguistic Ethnicity. The deliberate exclusion of people on the basis of one's linguistic identity is a key aspect to understand a certain dimension of racial discrimination as well. Though ethnicity is ascertained on the basis of multiple factors, it is essential to note that each one of them are interlinked. Language as a means of bias could possibly be directed to the idea of how language, culture, identity and meaning are inseparable. It is through language that one's culture is understood and passed on to the future generations. Likewise, one's understanding of the world around is strongly associated with the language one uses. Aspects of identity and belongingness are interlinked inevitably to the choice and use of language and also one's geographical locale.

Owing to several racial origins and complex social realities in South-Asia, linguistic diversity is apparent on a variety of levels. In the context of Indian sub-continent, the variety of languages reflects the intricate social hierarchy and caste. Imposition of the native language of the dominant community or the ones in power onto the minority and weaker section of the society had emerged on the ground level too, let alone the mainstream independent nations. The rise of several movements to protect the regional languages from extinction was also witnessed especially in the Indian context, the reason for which was to reclaim the cultural identity.

Literature has played a major role in bringing to light these issues through both fictional and non-fictional stories. This paper attempts to look at how linguistic identity is a factor that can lead to 'othering' of a particular section of people in the society and the politics playing around it. The same shall be achieved through careful understanding of certain literary works specifically pertaining to South-Asian Literature. Literature initiates a discourse on the issues of the marginalized if not for offering a solution to them and the aim of this paper is to understand the same.

In the novel, *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, the author majorly emphasised on the aspects of race and linguistic identity has paved a way for ethnic violence. The experiences of each character in the novel are severely affected by the country's violent historical background and the repercussions of it. A careful understanding of the same shall bring in the root cause of the marginalization of Tamils by the Sinhalese settlers. Kamila Shamsie's *Katography* talks about the ethnic conflicts between the Bengalis and Pakistanis in 1970s'. On the basis of their linguistic identity, Bengalis were subjected to cultural suppression and their loyalty towards the unified nation culture in Pakistan was questioned. Shamsie tries to map the lives of the ethnic minorities in this novel. Through a detailed analysis of these texts, this paper shall try to analyse the post-colonial scenario and the displaced identities of the colonized in South-Asia.

THEORY OF ETHNIC CONFLICT

Donald Horowitz's theory majorly contributed in explaining the root causes of ethnic conflict and secessionist movements. Ethnic affiliations and their



relevance cannot be limited to some spheres and contexts specially in deeply divided societies. They impact family and social life besides the formal organizational structure where each individual on the marginalised side experiences the brunt of ethnic conflicts. Specially in the post-colonial context, the inter-cultural contact of different groups leads to cultural suppression, identity crisis and marginalization of one group by the other. He also introduced the concept of ranked vs. unranked groups on the basis of hierarchy.

In societies divided on the basis of ethnicity power is an end unto itself. Each group claims its own legitimacy while some don't. The dynamic of ethnic politics is yielded from the competing claims of legitimacy of each group. Though these factors explain the significance of symbolic politics, language is the ultimate symbol of it. Language can be used to exclude other groups; "the status of the language denotes the status of the group that speaks it." (Horowitz 195). Language affects mobility, in the sense that the using the language of the advanced group helps it preserve its position while the usage of language by the backward group makes it mobile. "The incidence of ethnic violence also reflects the motivating factors of the fears of domination." (Horowitz 189) In a nation-state which constitutes an ethnically based party system, especially when majority group is intra-ethnically divided, it can lead to the exclusion of minority groups. The migration of ethnic strangers into the potentially separatist region augments the chances of secessionist demands.

FUNNY BOY

Sri Lanka consists of two large indigenous groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The novel

depicts how culture and collective memories shape and the characters perception of how you should treat someone that is not Tamil or Sinhalese. Radha's mother and Anil's father were not happy have their children's romance. Radha doesn't understand Ammachi cannot put behind the incident of her grandfather's murder and that lead to her hatred towards Sinhalese. Language as culture is the collective memory repository of people's experiences in history (Ngũgĩ 15). Radha lacks the collective memory that has shaped her mother that way and calls her a racist not being able to relate to her mother due to the same. "Would you allow your child to marry a Sinhalese? ... Would you marry a Sinhalese?" (Selvadurai 89) Radha is aware of the truth that it is not as simple as it can be imagined. At the core of the novel, the division of the stereotypically considered unholy alliances could be witnessed as the characters hail from different ethnic groups and languages can be found too. Such examples show how Sinhalese are put to light as a major who hold all the power and the Tamil as a minority.

In a society that is dominated by the Sinhalese, speaking Tamil will narrow the possibilities. In such a society, some even wish they were Sinhalese so that they could have all the freedom and opportunities. Arjie's father was completely aware that it is about the survival and they have to act accordingly. "Sinhalese is the real language of the future" (Selvadurai 61). Arjie was bullied by his fellow students for being a Tamil, even though he has been learning Tamil since grade one. "This is a Sinhalese class, not a Tamil class." (Selvadurai 215) As mentioned by Ngũgĩ in one of his works, Chinua Achebe questioned in one of his



speeches if it's right on the part of anyone to abandon their mother tongue for the sake of someone else's. He considers it to be a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. (Ngũgĩ 150)

The discrimination just on the basis of the language one speaks was so intrinsic in that society that it has been inculcated into school going kids and the politics also ran through the teachers working in the school. "Tamils like us will suffer. Our loyalties must therefore be with him." (Selvadurai 246) Ngũgĩ considered language as the most important vehicle through which power fascinated and held the soul as a prisoner. Language according to him was a means of spiritual subjugation. (Ngũgĩ 9)

Neil DeVotta in one of his works *Blow back* points us how the language politics that has enforced linguistic nationalism was one major force that led to the breakdown of peaceful co-existence of Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. (DeVotta 3) The Sinhala only language act was passed in 1950's by the leaders of the Sinhalese majority to facilitate the socio-economic mobility that favours the interests of the ethnic majority at the expense of the Tamil minority. The imposition of Sinhala as an official language in both the functioning of the government and education system led to the Tamil nationalist movement and which further led to the devastating civil war. The Anti-Tamil riots began soon after and the security forces were partial on the part of Sinhalese rioters (DeVotta 84). This further led to loss of confidence in the government by the Tamils. "The Sinhalese wanted to make Sinhala the only national language and the Tamils did not like this. So, there was a riot and many Tamils were killed." (Selvadurai 61)

In one of the instances in the text, Mr. Rasiah had to make people assaulting Radha Auntie believe that they are Sinhalese in order to save her. The fact that he was fluent enough in Sinhalese was just enough for people to identify his ethnicity (Selvadurai 90). The power of language and its significance in defining one's identity is explicitly stated here by the author. The author also tries to show the other side of the Tigris who also resorted to violent means in achieving their goals. "If you become a Tiger, you cannot question anything they do." (Selvadurai 176) The author tried to paint a picture of how constant suppression of Tamils led to violent secession in Sri Lanka. According to Horowitz, the loss of members in a group through assimilation and migration of ethnic strangers into the region that is potentially separatist heightens the urge for secessionist demands (Horowitz 262-263).

KARTOGRAPHY

The partition of the Indian sub-continent led to migration and settlement of people from across the borders. The people who migrated from India to Pakistan in the wake of nationalistic ideologies were called the Muhajirs. Bengalis situated in West Pakistan were not given equal social position due to their linguistic identity which resulted in severe cultural suppression, loss of sense of identity and marginalization on their part. As Bengalis didn't speak Urdu their loyalty towards their nation was suspected and how their lives were made miserable was pictured vividly in Shamsie's *Kartography*. The novel talks about how these ethnic minorities though belonging to the privileged class suffered through it.

According to Hall, the identity of any individual determines the social position of an



individual in a culture or community and if one's identity doesn't match with that of dominant group, one is subjected to discursive practices (Hall 26). This led to the rise of regional identities instead of a unified national identity. Aunty Maheen in Kartography who is a Bengali had to succumb to societal pressure and break ties with her beloved Zafar on the grounds of linguistic and cultural differences. The suffering of Aunty Maheen shows how the Bengalis in West Pakistan were treated as the "other" and Shamsie tries to throw light on the same at the very beginning of the novel. "Since last year when that girl was killed by a speeding bus...but instead of being a family tragedy it all ignited a terrible ethnic fight. The girl Muhajir and the bus driver Pathan." (Shamsie 11)

Berry points out how people who migrate try to maintain their identity in other culture or geographical location and are always subjected to ethnic stereotypical gaze. Muhajirs couldn't embrace the Pakistani culture as they have always been treated as outsiders and they couldn't leave behind the previous identity. (Berry 709) Raheen and Karim's visit to Uncle Asif's farm Raheem Yar Khan was not to spend their holidays but because their parents thought it was a safer in Karachi. The reason behind such an insecurity is the factor of ethnic prejudices against the minorities. Karim who is a child of Bengali-woman Maheen was a companion of Raheen. "Does not it bother you that we're here because our parents don't feel we're safe at home?" (Shamsie 19)

The suspicion of Muhajirs loyalty made them feel unimportant and powerless which also results in their failure to become a part of the local cultural sphere. Shamsie highlights the misconceptions

regarding the community in the novel. "I mean Muhajirs will never understand the way we feel about land. They all left their homes at partition. No understanding of ties to a place" (Shamsie 39). When Karim and Raheen get to know about the trouble in the relationship amongst their parents they were realise that there existed a wide social gap between them just on the grounds of being a Bengali migrant. This leads to Karim's self-introspection of his own identity. "I am a Muhajir with a trace of Pathan, and he was Bengali and ...Punjabi? Sindhi? What? I considered. Probably Punjabi, I decided" (Shamsie 43).

Shamsie's idea was to challenge the basis of ethnic identities that affect the relationship between Karim and Raheen. This disparity is the social picture of the position of Muhajirs in Pakistan. Different ethnicities and the issues that come along in their relationship is also symbolic of the weakening stance of Pakistan as a mono-cultural and religious state. The character of Aunty Runty is an example of how people dear that the minority shall over take the power in the state and hence talks about the 'sameness' when discussed about the issue of marriage. "The background, class, sect, ethnic group: that's what a family looks at when considering who they are willing to be related through marriage" (Shamsie 74).

Talking about the Bengali language movement, Dr. Rahman states that it was the first time ever that domination of those in power was successfully challenge through ethnic appeals and a pattern was set for similar developments in the future. The rise of Bengali ethno-nationalism was a threat to the ruling elite and the conclusion they drew



from it was to suppress the expression of ethnicity (Rahman 101-102). When Karim was addressed as a “macho Sindhiass”, he corrected it by saying that he is half Sindhi and the other half is Punjabi (Shamsie 178). His sense of identity remains in the zone of suspension and can't identify himself as a complete Punjabi or Bengali. Maheen who is a representation of Bengali community resented her stay in Pakistan as a stranger. Towards the end of the novel, she migrated to a different country to cope up with the sense of strangeness. Having borne the consequence of her love affair and witnessing the atrocities of Pakistani army against Bengalis in the 1971 war wishes that her son never settled in Pakistan. As Safran points out people who belong to the same ethnic group share a sense of distinctiveness, common history and fate. During the 1971 war, Bengalis were always perceived negatively and this always made them feel ashamed of it. They were called by a defamed name Bingo. Zafar despised his emotional attachment with a Bengali as he was considered a traitor on ground for having the same.

The portrayal of inner conflicts of Maheen as a Bengali living in Pakistan is a very bold move on the part of Shamsie. Maheen expresses her dissatisfaction in leaving a that she always wanted to call 'home'. Shamsie highlights the political marginalization and sense of exclusion in the following line. “We left India in 1947, we left our homes, Raheen, think of what that means – saying we can live amid this injustice, this political marginalization, this exclusion. And then we came to our new homeland and became a willing part of a system that perpetuated marginalization and intolerance of the Bengalis (Shamsie 319). On the other hand, Shamsie quotes in her novel “we are the

same’ (Shamsie 44) alongside the numerous differences be it ethnic, racial, linguistic, spatial. The author is trying to establish a sense of unity through the process of restructuring the social space with the elements of basic humanity, togetherness and fraternity.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF *FUNNY BOY* AND *KARTOGRAPHY*

The novel *Funny Boy* explicitly states the issues of linguistic identity and there were instances where mere the power of language decided the fate of the individual. While on the other hand, in *Kartography* the major divide was more culturally inclined rather than linguistic identity. *Funny Boy* emphasises more on the idea of linguistic nationalism while *Kartography* focuses more on the religious nationalism. One parallel that can be drawn between both novels is that the assimilation of minorities and their culture into the main stream was not possible as they were always excluded from the dominant culture. Despite trying to own the new space they moved into, the discrimination persisted throughout. Both the novels portray how the characters are put through psychological distress about trying to establish their identity in space with multiculturalism and diversity. The insecurities of protagonists in both the novels made them move to the west as an escape mechanism while led to the phenomenon of double migration. The shifting identities always left them unsettled. While *Funny Boy* talks about the rise of an opposition amongst the Tamils in Sri Lanka as a society while also the personal live of the characters, Shamsie only focuses on the effects of the socio-political factors on the individual lives of people. The



exclusion policy only led to suffering from which the ideas of vengeance arise.

CONCLUSION

One's identity is not solely dependent on one specific factor however the factors like race and language do contribute a significant share in it. As Ngũgĩ quotes, Language is not a mere string of words (Ngũgĩ 110). It gave us a view of the world and it is through language that we try to make a perception of the things around. Mother tongue has a special place in each one's life and in the process of migration or colonization the minority group is forced to leave behind the identity they have been carrying throughout their life which Marx once called the language of life as quoted by Ngũgĩ. (Ngũgĩ 13) There are several theories that surround the idea of language and ethnicity being the significant part of one's self. The idea of living in a society together brings up the issues of harmony of co-existence of people with different identities and culture. People who share a similar identity often try to assert their superiority over the others in a certain geographical space. This leads to radical change in dynamics of the relationship between them. The two novels in question discuss how these dynamics change due to socio- historical factors. *Funny boy* focuses majorly on the Sinhala-Tamil conflict where the Tamil minority was marginalized by the Sinhalese in power resulting in the outbreak of violence. Similarly, *Kartography* talks about how Bengalis never felt at home in Pakistan despite having shared the same space for decades. The theories of ethnic conflict helped me understand and analyse why and how ethnicity, linguistic identity and the politics

surrounding affected both the social and personal domains especially in diaspora and colonized spaces.

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