



Failure and Construction of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: A Bhabhaian Approach

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the construction of identity from the perspective of postcolonialism. It applies Homi Bhabha's theory of hybrid identities to the study "Failure and Construction of Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: A Bhabhaian Approach". It testifies that identity is fluid rather than fixed, even within one single context of colonialism, migration, or war. It probes how personal and national identities are formed and reshaped in the face of present external pressures. In the novel *The Lowland*, Lahiri portrays characters who are experiencing identity crises because of their migrations from India to the United States, researchers finding themselves at odds and conflicts in their inner selves as they turn to accommodate cultures and environments that were alien to them. It is on the other hand, Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which has shown an Iraqi identity fragmented under war and foreign occupation, where individuals and a whole society suffer by dint of existence of violence and trauma to create new collective identity for survival. It also underlines how each novel differentiates between the issues of the depiction of identity, whereby Lahiri situates her exploration within the subjective formation of an individual's identity while Saadawi

extends this to a collective social identity within a war-torn society. The conclusion underlines Bhabha's third space, whereby hybrid identities emerge as a result of cultural and power dynamics.

Keywords: Identity, Hybridity, The Lowland, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Colonialism, Bhabha's theory

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1. Introduction

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the story of some characters in Bengali city in India and their migration to the United States. The novel relates the story of two brothers, Udayan and Subhash that live different lives. Udayan joins a communist group, starts to fight against the government whereas Subhash moves to the United States to study, and builds a new life for himself. Udayan's wife, Gauri, also moves to the United States after Udayan's death to start a new life. However, she is unable to adapt a new identity and she is forced to deal with new challenges such as migration, motherhood, and spouse life. Saadawi's novel is about a journalist who stitches the body parts of different people killed in Iraq war in order to give them proper burial. However, this creature turns into a monster and starts to kill people in order to survive rather than revenging those who had been killed in war.

The Lowland and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* depict the realities of colonialism and war on individuals and on society as a whole. Although both novels depict the presence of a western imperialism in an Asian nation, their focus and the reality that they illustrate are completely different. Lahiri's novel depicts India after the independence from The Great Britain and the empowerment of communist groups in India that fought with government for the rights of peasants. On the contrary, Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* narrates the reality of war in Iraq and the consequences of US-led occupation of Iraq. Furthermore, whereas Lahiri's novel puts emphasis on the individuals and their internal evolution during the novel, Saadawi's concentrates on the suffering of his nation and the presence of violence in Iraqi society because of war and trauma. Said differently, Lahiri's novel depicts the immigration of the main characters to the US and their personal evolution and the challenges they experience. Saadawi aims to depict the reality of war and violence. One common ground in both novels is that historical events act as internal motifs for the characters to justify or explain their intentions.

One of the main elements analyzed in this novel is the notion of identity and identity crisis. Individuals' identity is made in society and family. In fact, it is a combination of social and some small group elements. Race, gender, nationality, and religion are some of the examples of social elements. Family, workplace, and community are the examples of influential groups of forming the identity. These elements and groups form the way each individual see the world. In addition to these elements, the roles that people get in their lifetime such as being a teacher or a parent help them to construct new identities and consequently, their behavior would be made based on these identities. One important point about identities is that they are not static but they are fluid. It means that they can change and the relations of power and hierarchies can change them. Korostelina (2007) defines social identity as a feeling of belonging to a social group, as a strong connection with social category, and as an important part of our mind that affects our social perceptions and behavior. Bhabha states that identity cannot be static and fixed. Rather, it is dynamic and fluid. He states that when individuals are in the colonized situation, they develop a third space.

According to Bhabha, As stated above, hybrid identities leads to alienation because individuals are in a constant struggle for reconciling between their own cultural heritage and the dominant culture of the country they are in. This situation leads to loneliness and isolation. Besides, this situation may lead to several mental and personal anxieties such as the stress of assimilation. The sense of self is also damaged here because the individuals lose their identity and has identity confusion. Another important issue is the differences between different generations of migrants. This happens because the new generations of migrants absorb the western culture more than the previous generations. Therefore, here there is intergenerational conflicts between the old and new migrants. New migrants are not interested in keeping the old culture and traditions of their own nationality. Even though hybrid identities refer to

cultural alienation, it can be beneficial for the individuals in some ways. Hybrid identities would be fruitful for personal growth.

Furthermore, it starts resilience and adaptation. Considering these theories, the present study aims to argue that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *The Lowland* represent two different representations of identity construction. Whereas *Frankenstein in Baghdad* indicates the representation of the construction of a social identity by individuals in order to keep their unity and their nationality, Lahiri tries to show the fragmentation of individuals' identities because of colonialism. Said differently, in Saadawi's novel although individuals create new identities to protect and adapt themselves with common war and violence, they try to keep their social and national identity in a war-torn society. However, Lahiri's novel shows the problem of construction of identity for individuals in both their own nation and in the United States.

2. Review of Literature

Alhashmi analyzes the grotesque nature of the Saadawi's novel and aims to apply Bakhtin theories to the novel. Although Alhashmi considers the monster as the symbol of unity in Iraq, it does not refer to the role of identity here. He states, "The metaphor of Frankenstein's monster has been used by Saadawi not only to mirror the dystopian atmosphere in post-2003 Baghdad but also, and very critically, to grapple with grim realities and outcomes of war, not to mention greater impacts of colonialism" (Alhashmi, 2020: 1). Elayyan argues that Saadawi's novel focuses on terror and fear. He states, "Saadawi is tracing the sources of terrorism that since the American invasion has plagued Iraq—saying, in essence, that terrorism comes from fear. This becomes a fear described as a monster, rearing itself after some breakdown in central authority, ushering in what the irrepressible Judith Butler has succinctly described as 'a precarious life,' one always aware that death may come suddenly and through violence. The monster symbolized violence and fear while the monster was representative of fractured identities. Webster argues that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* presents a story of biomedical salvation. She asserts that Saadawi's novel undermines the logic of biomedical narratives—most significantly, mirroring and inversion—and does so in a way that calls for reevaluation of the ways in which the international community has framed the human toll of the Iraq War" (2018: 440). Thus this study focuses on war and identity in Saadawi's novel.

Dhingra considers Lahiri as an American native writer. He claims, "In the same way, Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* resists any reduction to its status as an 'immigrant writer.' Lahiri also never invokes her immigrant identity for the sake of assuming authority in a text or out of obligation to work as a 'native informant.'" (2012: 11). He also states, "She never writes in an exotic manner, eschewing even the limited framing that the heteronormative capitalistic view of America would impose on an individual to mold into a preconceived narrative" (2012: 15). Pourya Asl argues the gender roles of the Indian communist party. He holds that "the genealogy of this particular oversight is rooted in the heteronormative capitalist ideology of the States that exercises discursive power over individuals to fabricate a desired truth"

3. Discussion

Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* have some common themes and motifs. Nevertheless, they are different widely. Lahiri's novel is about India and the United States and how identity is dynamic and can be changed. Saadawi's novel is about the occupation of Iraq by the US. Whereas India celebrates its independence from Britain and seeks development and growth, Iraq's situation does not become better after the invasion. In both novels, the environment plays a crucial role in forming the personality of the characters but in Saadawi's novel, it is more highlighted because he describes a society at war. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, all characters are involved in the war and occupation and they have to develop a new identity to adapt themselves to the new situation. Moreover, the reason that Hadi, the protagonist of the story, creates a monster to take revenge is the inability of the people to improve the situation of their country. In fact, the monster is the symbol of a national trauma materialized by the war. This traumatic situation of individuals leads to identity crisis. The situation in

India is different because India is involved in a domestic violence between the left group who seeks reformation and the government.

Bhabha states the identity is not fixed and it is dynamic. He states that cultural interaction creates new and hybrid identities for the individuals. He argues that the colonizer and the colonized do not have fixed and pure identities, rather, they have a hybrid and mix of different cultural identities. "Bhabha suggests that there is an area 'in-between the designations of identity' where, through the passage between fixed identities, cultural hybridity can emerge. This space permits the differences to exist without imposing a type of hierarchy" (4). In Lahiri's novel Subhash can be the witness of this theory because he develops a new identity and he can adapt himself with the new culture and milieu. However, Gauri cannot develop this identity even though she lives for years in the United States. It can be said that Subhash and Gauri are two different characters and they are opposite. Whereas Subhash can form a new identity, Gauri is unable to do that.

The writer tries to juxtapose different characters with different identities in order to delineate the variety of identities created in the colonizer's nation. Whereas Subhash can create the new and adapted identity, Gauri has crisis in developing this identity. Bela, who is Gauri's daughter and is born in the United States, develops the identity without any problem and effort. Gauri's movement to the United States is a futile effort by her in order to overcome the suffering and consciousness that she experiences after Udayan's death. In fact, she has the identity of a traditional woman in India even though she studied philosophy and seems to be different from other women. When Udayan dies, she is supposed to behave like other women. Nevertheless, she decides to move and removes the pressure that she tolerates in her native land. This effort is futile from two different aspects. At first, she is unable to develop a third space and tries to make a harmony between her native identity and the new identity she is making in the US. Second, she realizes that in India she has to obey the social norms whereas in the US, these norms are different and she is no longer have to obey them. Said differently, her priorities change and she tries to release herself from all customs and traditions. This is the reason that she leaves Subhash and her girl in the US and moves to another city. However, her past never leaves her. Therefore, it can be said that although she experiences identity transformation, it is a partial effort and she cannot adapt a new one and lives with it.

Another important aspect of identity in this novel is the narrative structure of the novel. Lahiri switches between India and United States to highlight the duality of identity in characters. The point here is that Subhash and Bela can move between two countries whereas Gauri is unable to move to her native land again. As Ahmad states, "Lahiri has given more depth to her characters and situations than ever by writing about the conflict of cultures and comparing various customs" (2018: 1). However, the change in Gauri's character can be seen as something positive too. When she moves to the United States, she gives herself time to have personal grief and cultural dislocation. This opportunity gives her time to confront herself and makes a new identity for herself. It seems that she is successful to some extent even though she leaves her husband and her daughter behind.

The paradoxical character that Gauri represents in the novel lies in the fact that the identities are not activated at the same time. As Kolpakovienė contends, "People have many identities, but not all of them are equally salient at all times. Some more consistently are dominant in most contexts, while others might be more salient in some contexts." (2020: 119). Korostelina notes that a "dominant identity replaces all other core social identities and becomes the most salient and actual identity prevailing in the system of social identities" (2020: 76). Kolpakovienė argues, "There are a lot of identities; not all of them operate during every interaction. While usually the most salient identity is more likely to surface across different contexts, less prominent identities may be only invoked under specifiable conditions and replaced by more dominant ones" (2020: 119).

Gauri here has the identity of Udayan's wife, Subhash's wife, Bela's mother, and herself, free from all these people. Gauri's first identity is with her until the end of the novel even when she leaves Subhash and Bela behind. She leaves them behind because she tries to forget this identity. Said differently, Subhash reminds her of Udayan and India's life, something she tries to forget. Therefore, her identity as Udayan's wife is

still active until the end of the novel but her identities as Subhash's mother and Bela's mother change during the time and finally, she leaves them.

Another important issue here is that Gauri does not like her identity as a mother. As we read in the novel, Lahiri shows such complexity in the nature of her character dynamics. For instance, the character took good care of Bela, her daughter: clean and combed, well fed. What Subhash most rarely saw was a smile when she looked at Bela [...] From the beginning, it seemed that she had already reversed their roles, taking Bela as any other relative's child rather than as her daughter (2018: 188)

The reason behind this behavior is that she loses her parents when she is sixteen. They are killed in an accident. Kolpakovienė holds, "Gauri, given this backdrop, is projected as a character who has little idea about the idealistic behavior of a mother because of her poor recollection of her mother's behavior while alive. Their bonding was so disappointingly poor" (2020: 119). As we read in Lahiri, "She remembers that most of the time she felt deprived and could never spend time alone with either parent, even in their somewhat secluded house" (Lahiri, 2015: 72). This is the reason she becomes sadder for her grandparents' death not for her own parents.

Although Bela is the future for Gauri when she leaves India, when she arrives, she realizes that giving birth to Bela and raising her do not give her life any meaning. Kolpakovienė argues that "Gauri does not wear any other strong, visible identity during this time, but one thing is crystal clear: motherhood is never going to be the core of her self-definition. As a matter of fact, years would pass before this particular aspect of her self-definition assumes any relevance at all" (2020: 121). Finally, it must be said, "Instead, the identity of being an academic becomes the future path that Gauri decides and the most overpowering part of her persona. Usually, validation for key identities is sought from other people. This is amazingly not the case in *The Lowland*" (Kolpakovienė, 2020: 121).

Frankenstein in Baghdad focuses on fragmentation of identity in Iraqi society. As stated before, the monster is the representative of the fragmented society in Iraq. Alhashmi argues, "In another story, the monster undertakes to take revenge on those who were responsible for the murder of individuals whose body parts were joined together to make up his body. However, the more the body parts he loses and deteriorates, is the more he is seen to shift into killing every innocent person for survival purposes rather than focusing on targeting the bad ones. By then, the monster has fully and completely altered from being an emblem of hope into being an emblem of terror" (2020: 15). The monster is the symbol and the corruption of his actions represents a sharp critique of the Iraqi government, and the decaying of his body signifies the deformity of ongoing realities in Iraq (Alhashmi, 2020).

The transformation of the monster is the symbol of the transformation of Iraqi identity. Therefore, Saadawi here tries to analyze the destruction and the fragmentation of Iraqi identity and Iraqi society. Saadawi represents people from different background to show the complexity of Iraqi society and Iraqi identity. Alhashmi states that "Saadawi deliberately created 'The Whatsitsname' from parts of the body that represent the immigrant, poor, ethnic, and other identifiers that create a multi-dimensional Iraq. He used the merging to become a metaphor to describe the layered and fragmented quality of identity in Iraq through a posture that leaned into complexity, specifically Iraqi identity in a context of war, violence, terrorism, and occupation" (2020: 17). Therefore, Saadawi tries to focus on national identity Iraqi society. The monster in the novel represents the unity of these identities. Alhashmi argues, "In this light, Whatsitsname's body becomes that significant symbol for modern Iraqi identity; it introduces one archetype of the average Iraqi citizen that the government never could" (2020: 17).

Here there is a paradox in the monster's character and body. Although the monster is made from different parts of dead bodies, which represent different backgrounds, its unified body represents the unified identity of Iraqi society. Alhashmi states, "*Frankenstein in Baghdad* therefore reduces the richness of Iraqi identity into a unified and fragmented human form" (2020: 18). Saadawi writes, "As it were, the Whatsitsname admits this when it says, 'Because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was

achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen" (2015: 146). Therefore, Whatsitsname or the monster is the symbol of all Iraqi people and Iraqi community. Alhashmi argues, "Saadawi significantly stresses the importance of human attributes, social fabric, cultural unity, and historical continuity through the Bataween neighborhood. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that "He places his narrative in the real setting of 'Al-Bataween,' a section within Baghdad" (2020: 18). Hence, it must be mentioned that in Saadawi's novel we are dealing with a social and national identity rather than an individual one. Saadawi tries to show how this unified identity of people are damaged by war and violence.

The location that Saadawi chooses for his novel is also significant because it shows the cultural diversity and variety in social identities of Iraqi people. "This is not an accident, with the Bataween neighborhood always portraying Iraq's incredibly rich cultural and religious diversity, with Jews, Christians, and Muslims living next to one another. Giving that setting a name shows that Saadawi is demonstrating coexistence and cultural tapestry that have been part of the basic tenets of Iraqi society" (Alhashmi, 2020: 19). Therefore, it seems that Saadawi tries to convey this message that Iraqi society is a unified identity even though it is damaged by the occupation and violence.

4. Conclusion

Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* focus on the notion of identity and its relation to a foreign entity but they seek different issues. The first important difference is that Lahiri focuses on individual identity in the context of violence and migration whereas Saadawi focuses on the social and national identity of Iraqi people in the context of war. Both novels highlight the importance of identity change for adaptation. Iraqi people form new identities in the time of war while characters in Lahiri's novel form identities for adaption to the new situation. Both novels represent the presence of a foreign power in a developing country. In Saadawi's novel, Iraq is attacked by the US as a western power while India has become freed from the colonization of a western power but the main characters move to live in a western nation. The last aspect is violence in the novel. As stated before, Lahiri puts some historical events such as Naxalbari movement in her novel to magnify the factors behind characters' motives and identities. Except Naxalbari's conflict with police, there is no description of violence in the novel.

On the other hand, Saadawi's novel is entangled with violence because he aims to show the daily violence that Iraqi people have to tolerate every day damaging their identity. The most important point in both novels that proves Bhabha's attitude toward identity is that identity is not fixed and static. Rather, it is fluid and it is the construction of society and the relations of power. Bhabha states that an individual creates new identities and a third space when they deal with the colonization. In Saadawi's novel, characters have to form a new identity confronting the violence led from occupation of a western power. In Lahiri's novel characters have to develop a new identity to deal with the new situation and environment that have to live in it.

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