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The Craving for an Identity in *Meatless Days*

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature is an increasingly rich area of study in the new world scenario when the East and the West are trying more than ever to get closer across apparently insurmountable rifts. The trans-national muddled voices of the colonized states are to be heard distinctly now in English literature, more than ever, pointing at the widening gap between the margin and the centre. The English language, which is the largest legacy of colonization, is made to voice the predicament of the postcolonial experience. The severe feeling of inadequacy and estrangement, resulting in a loss of identity, is one of the prominent issues being addressed in the postcolonial literature. Sara Suleri in her *Meatless Days* boldly delineates the discomforts and inadequacies of belonging to and living in two cultures at the same time. Though Suleri's father was a renowned Pakistani journalist and her mother was Welsh, still she could not help the feeling of being lost somewhere between the margin and the imperial centre.

Keywords: *Meatless Days*; loss of identity; immigrant; postcolonial; memories.

Introduction

Identity issue is foremost in the postcolonial discourse. It is investigated and examined with greater insight and force in the canonical texts of Frantz Fanon (1952), Edward Said (1978), Spivak(1988), Homi K. Bhaba (1994) and Ashis Nandy (1983) while the postcolonial novels and memoirs explore this question from many other interesting and meaningful dimensions. The loss seems to become more profound and complex in the im(migrant)'s writings as most of the narrative paradigms weave into; 'a story of exile and displacement — rich in detail and human experience'.¹ Migrations have dire effects and a continual feeling of loss appears to be the predicament of the immigrants. V.S. Pritchett writes about Conrad, to whom it is nothing else but to experience exile itself; 'he was one of the great moralists of exile. And exile is not emigration, expatriation, etc. etc., but an imposing Destiny'.² However, Sara Suleri as an expatriate tries to reconstruct her identity in the relationship between memory, culture, family, food and the negotiation of physical and metaphorical borders, central to the immigrant experience. According to Sangeeta Ray; '[*Meatless Days*] engage in the poignantly arduous task of representing the reconstruction of identities denied, displaced, disabled, and disavowed by the forces of personal and historical migrations and cultural relocations.'³ In this context the paper argues that her memoir symbolizes a search for identity as she reinvents her representation of family, cultural bonds and her very self while facing headlong the 'cravings' of 'body' and soul. The metaphor of 'meatless' is particularly traced to capture the emptiness of immigrated lives and the struggle for reconstruction of identity and self-representation against a backdrop of loss and displacement. It will be an attempt to see through the 'meatless days' in Suleri's narrative strategies and to understand the traumas of 'body' in reaching out the cocoon of identity after being 'stripped to the bone' as an immigrant.

Craving for Identity

My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose.

Philip Larkin⁴

In *Meatless Days* Sara Suleri shows that identity for a postcolonial immigrant is not just the sense of belonging to a place, but reliving the past with a body that decomposes in the cravings for the close-knit family life. In Suleri's narration 'body' seems to be identical with all that is related with her sense of identity. Her past life in

Pakistan has framed her whole sense of identity and she could never peel off the Pakistani aura from herself to see who she is. One can see that she is enfolded in the 'meaty skin' of her loved ones and her family life and feels inadequate without this fine film of identity around her. My research paper will be an attempt to see through the 'meatless days' of Suleri in her rich postcolonial narration and try to understand what emotional adjustments and psychological alignments she had to make to reach out the cocoon of her identity after being a settler in a 'meatless' world.

Identity is a complex, paradoxical entity, and is probably always anchored in one's past. So Suleri's abstract retrieval of her past family life at her homeland is her attempt to fix her identity which she may have found falling apart after her immigration to a Western country, at a young age. What Suleri says about her Dadi (grandmother); "She fell between two stools of grief, —"⁵ actually happens to her own identity; it falls between the two stools of the East and the West. Her father was a committed Pakistani journalist and her mother a pure Welsh and she may be thought to have had more adaptability to stretch between both the worlds, but soon after she and her brother move to the Western countries, they start to feel:

"We are lost, Sara," Shahid said to me on the phone from England.

"Yes, Shahid," I firmly said, "We're lost" (19).

The West is synonymous for the Indo-Pak immigrants with forbidden meat and drink. They can never enjoy meat without scruples in West as they can do in their own country. It is therefore there are repetitive allusions to meat cuisine and the Eid rituals in Pakistan when butchering goats and lambs become a sacred duty. In the chapter about 'Excellent Things In Women', with reference to Dadi and Eid festivities, she records that, "— shortly thereafter rush out of the kitchen steaming plates of grilled lung and liver of a freshness quite superlative"⁽⁴⁾. Then in the dream about her Mamma she sees pieces of meat around her and in the 'Meatless Days' she gives details about the dishes of different organs of animals. This reveals her unconscious craving for the liberty with which she could enjoy meat in Pakistan. Meat becomes her metaphor for the intimacy of blood relations and after her Mamma's death, she wakes up to a world of 'meatless days' or in other words of 'flavourless days' or 'loveless days':

And then, I was trying to move away from the raw irritability of grief, I dreamed a dream that left me reeling. It put me in London, on the pavement of some unlovely street, an attempted crescent of vagrant

houses. A blue van drove up: I noticed it was a refrigerated car and my father was inside. He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin and he opened the blue hatch of the van to make me reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like mamma, in some odd way. It was my task to carry those flanks across the street and to fit them into the coffin at the other side of the road, like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Although my dream will not let me recall how many trips I made, I know my hands felt cold. Then, when my father's back was turned, I found my self-engaged in rapid theft – for the sake of Ifat and Shahid and Tilat and all of us, I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like a knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue. Then I and the dream dissolved, into an extremity of tenderness (44).

This is a subtle metaphor for a postcolonial writer like Suleri. She is trying to collect the portions of meat from her past enshrouded in a postcolonial time. Unconsciously, these feel like portions of meat to her when she counts on the memories of her mother, Ifat, Pip, Dadi and of her siblings, all tied down in a blood relationship but now have to be picked up from the hazy, refrigerated past. Though all were there at a time, but now Sara has to pick up these flanks and fit them into the coffin of her past family life in her country, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. She feels greater cravings for her past family ties and therefore laments; “I had eaten, that was all, and woken to a world of meatless days” (44). Here Suleri may sound as a person getting haunted and may have felt like exorcising her postcolonial immigrant monster through her autobiography.

She is born and raised in Pakistan and feels herself whole only by connecting herself to her family and country. She may be living in New Haven but what her mother has felt about her age long stay in Pakistan proves to be true for Suleri too; she may have got accustomed to her life in the West but could never cut her umbilical cord with the place of her birth. Her mother told her:

There in Wales one afternoon, walking childless among the brambles and the furze, Mamma realized that her childhood was distinctly lost. “It was not that I wanted to feel more familiar”, she later told me, “or that I was more used to feeling unfamiliar in Lahore. It's just that familiarity isn't

important really”, she murmured absently, “it really doesn’t matter at all” (12).

Suleri’s Dadi lived through the colonial as well as the postcolonial age but her identity appears to remain intact: “But non such pocket did she ever need to hide since something of Dadi always remained intact, however much we sought to open her”(6). Dadi did not remember the number of her children neither that of her sisters. Despite her weak and agile memory, she was deeply rooted within her own culture and cherished her own unshaken identity like the meat of the freshly butchered goat on Eid ceremonies. Suleri also feels an irritation when she is recalling Dadi with her solid identity as she is a direct counterfoil to all the children with their dual identities and therefore, there is a marked difference in the aura of her chapter about Dadi and the rest of her family members. She stands as a strong post in Suleri’s past family life. It is at the end of the autobiography that the readers may realize that all these strong women “— there’s imperial Ifat, there’s Mamma in the garden, and Halima the cleaning woman is there too, there’s uncanny Dadi with her goat” (20) carry their individual identities and tend to contradict Suleri’s emphatic statement about women in Pakistan in the first chapter; “Because, I’ll answer slowly, there are no women in the third world.” Dadi, contrary to her zealous son, was totally untouched by the movement for Pakistan’s independence and later on, even the postcolonial remnants could not affect her and all the while she remained comfortable and self-contained within her culture and traditions:

but there was something else that she was eating with that meat. I saw it in her concentration; I know that she was making God talk to her as to Abraham and was showing him what she could do --- for him --- to sons. God didn’t dare and she ate on alone (5).

It is quite understandable that for her “the world takes on a single face” (6). But this single faced world gets shattered into different pockets for her grandchildren and soon Shahid has to lament; “we are lost, Sara” (19). Not only the grandchildren but even her son, Pip (Suleri’s father) could never keep that composure like his mother. It is interesting that Dadi’s confidence and ease with herself becomes the yardstick against which the swinging identities of all other members of the household can be judged.

When the postcolonial writers write down their account, they unconsciously reflect the unease which they always face in balancing their dual identities:

One morning I awoke to find that, during the course of the night, my mind had completely ejected the names of all the streets in Pakistan, as though to assure that I could not return, or that if I did, it would be returning to a loss. Overnight the country has grown absentminded, and patches of amnesia hung over the hollows of the land like fog (18).

The “hollows of the land” may be related to Suleri’s own sense of displacement and loss of identity. Her identity sounds to be tied down both to her family as well as to the place, but she can only return ‘to a loss’ after the recurring deaths of her mother, and Dadi and then of Ifat. She reproaches this recurrent tearing away from her identity by saying “worn by repetition” (18) and “then we swiftly returned to a more geographic reality” (19). Her loss of identity was not merely on the geographic level due to her immigration but on a deeper, personal level and on a repetitive mode because of the multiple losses of her Mamma and then of Ifat who was “the golden apples of my soul” (131). It is why Tillat says, “Sara, you must learn how to settle now” (83). Suleri could never pack away her secure life with her family and therefore, through her narration shows us all that is lying in the pockets of her mind one by one but in an abstract, intellectual manner; in the tradition of her learned but reserved Welsh mother and intellectual but vociferous father. She could never stop to yearn for her blood bonds, and that makes her mind move like a merry-go-round through the fragments of a ‘fleshy’ past and the ‘meatless days’ of the present. Her whole narration seems to follow a merry-go-round’s movement as psychologically she keeps going round and round the strong post of her past secure life. This makes her postcolonial dilemma even sharper which she has to face anyway like all other immigrants.

Suleri’s Welsh mother’s presence and posture in the household can be seen as the colonial age at its low ebb. Her mother still like her ancestors carries the intentions to educate the children but in her own remote way. She carries an English aura as the English had withdrawn from their colonizing positions but still carry more knowledge about the temperament of their past colonies. It is therefore the chapter about her mother is titled as “what Mamma Knew”. Her father was a renowned journalist but Suleri seems to be more impressed with her mother’s intellectual caliber. Her father seems to be an emotional person and thus, stands as a good representative of the Eastern temperament while the mother punctiliously, carry

the Western aura in her reticence and tendency to philosophize different situations. In the whole autobiographical account of the *Meatless Days* her mother is always there, whether it is a chapter about Dadi, Pip or Ifat. It may be because her mother seems to have an intellectual sway over others. This again makes it a typical postcolonial writing as postcolonial writers unconsciously, give an edge to the people from the colonizing nations. Suleri gets an allowance here as the representative of the English after all, is her mother, and a learned lady in her own right. The intellectual congruence she had with Mamma may be seen when she remarks; "I could be her need to think in sentences" (167).

The dilemma with the postcolonial migrants is that they are produced by one culture but groomed in another one. They can relate back to their homes and identify with their intimate relations but ironically, feel an aversion for the East too, when it starts to exhibit its intensity in rituals and henceforth, they prefer their respite in the intellectual, secular atmosphere of the West:

Then the city dissonance seems in collusion with some shrill Quranic cry, as though destiny has again placed me, as it always will, in a Muslim country. In those moments I am glad go out wandering again, breathing in the intellection of the West, feeling in the air a heavy peace of books unwritten and books written, never to be read (183).

As a postcolonial immigrant, Suleri, too finds identity as unreal; "Trying to find it is like pretending that history or home is real and not located precisely where you're sitting, . . ." (20). The postcolonial migrants or immigrants are the residents of two worlds; two cultures and holders of two identities. They skid around in half circles as the feeling of being settled escapes them. Nonetheless, the geographic reality always challenges their sense of identity and forces them on a rejection of their intimate, 'meaty' self in order to be able to say: "Now context becomes a more abstracting thought, admitting finally: you never lived in Ifat anyway; you live in New Haven (183).

Interestingly, the West too, cannot evade her for long as the in the last chapter she describes all the famous Muslim anecdotes about the Prophet Muhammad's (peace) prayers and Shab-e-Miraj (a night of great Islamic relevance). Nonetheless in her attempt to fix herself in a comfortable zone, she has to deal with a psychological abstraction and a geographical trick. Suleri's memories belong to a time when people in Pakistan were passing through trying times. Psychologically, they were

still colonized and the independence that was gained was only physical. Suleri was comfortably housed as a spectator within the changing political scenario to see her father theatrically reporting over the epoch making events of 1970s and 1980s in Pakistan. With the hindsight only she comes to know that even the political events have become a part of her:

Till then we had associated such violence with all that was outside us, as though some how the more history fractured the more whole we would be. But we began to lose that sense of the differentiated identities of history and ourselves and became guiltily aware that we had known it all along, our part in the construction of unreality (13).

The changes that were seen in Dadi after her recovery from burning were the same that occurred in Pakistan. She recounts with an unease that the Dadi and the country both forgot their “great romance” and Pip took on to the restoration of the old faith:

The men would take it to the streets and make it vociferate but the great romance between religion and the populace, the embrace that engendered Pakistan, was done. So Papa prayed, with the disparate ardor of a lover trying to converse life into a finished love (15).

After a ‘finished love’ a point comes when one feels withdrawn and resigned but after the loss of identity there is a greater unease as that of the Princess and the pea. Suleri’s identity is kneaded into the love for her loved ones and gets shattered on more than one level. Her own shifting to a foreign country and then of her siblings, and last of all Ifat’s death pushed her into an anonymity with herself. Probably, without identity one’s mirror image gets blurred, reflecting only meaninglessness in one’s life. Sara seems to end up facing increasing horror after the recurrent losses but her love for her dead sister only turns into a fetish activity for her (175). The grief of Ifat’s death hit her very hard and strangely enough, on her visit to Pakistan she finds her body frozen; “Consider the month I went back to spend the first post-Ifat June at home in Lahore, frozen, on my bed, unable even to sweat” (72); as if her identity has frozen away like her body’s flesh and not just ‘post-Ifat’ but rather ‘post-Suleri’s flesh and bone’ era has started for her. The love between sisters is again symbolic of the oriental family structure, and lingers in Suleri’s heart as a postcolonial physical craving. In fact, her narration is a desperate attempt to grapple onto some

pieces of the flesh of her identity and to put them back where they belong to; and thus, not to exist just as a fleshless skeleton.

Identity is related to one's contextual placement and Suleri may not be able to detach herself from the residential zones of her loved ones. In her narration she is unconsciously trying to place her identity within the context of her family after it has scattered over a number of places:

But now I must admit that my faces do not remain distinguishable from their contexts, that their habitation must lend feature to the structure of significance. It is hard for me to picture Nuz without seeing simultaneously Karachi's maniacal sprawl, its sandy palms and crazy traffic. Shahid looks like London now, in the curious pull with which London can remind, "I, also, was your home." Tillat in desert-land is busy, surrounding herself with oases, pools of infancy, converting in my mind a grain of sand onto signs of impressive fertility. And it is still difficult to think of Ifat without remembering her peculiar congruence with Lahore, a place that gave her pleasure (181).

It may be due to her own displacement that she says; "In simple headed fealty, I worked at making Ifat my geography, my terrain of significance, on which I thought, and slept, and breathed" (182). In reference to her friend Richard she narrates; "he did not wish to see me framed by family just then but to picture me alone instead and isolated in his gaze" (138). This is not possible as Suleri's identity is the passionate zeal of Pip; the 'lucidity' (169) and 'reticence' (156) of her Mamma; the leopard skull of Ifat; and the whole 'protective aura' (13) of her siblings and home. All these are the 'hunks of meat' of her identity which have to be collected from the past if she has to make her identity reflect back upon her as her mirror-image. This is how she wants to see herself; a self of flesh and flavour and not just mere a skeleton.

End Notes

- ¹ Edward Said's review of Ghada Karmi's *The Search of Fatima; A Palestinian Story*, (London & New York: Verso, 2002).
- ² Chandra B. Joshi, 'The Voice of Exile', *V.S. Naipaul: The Voice of Exile*, (Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd. 1994) p. 5.
- ³ Sangeeta Ray, 'Memory, Identity, Patriarchy: Projecting a Past in the Memoirs of Sara Suleri and Michael Ondaatje', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 39, No.1, Spring 1993, p. 38.
- ⁴ A famous line from Philip Larkin's poem, already quoted by the famous Pakistani poet Daud Kamal in his poem 'Skylight': JELC, 1988, p.114.
- ⁵ Sara Suleri, *Meatless Days* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 19. All excerpts are from this text and page numbers follow in parenthesis.

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