



CONTESTATION AND CONTRACTION OF SPACE AND IDENTITY IN “WHITE GIRL” AND “THE IMMIGRANT” IN AMEENA HUSSEIN’S *ZILLIJ*

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Abstract: *Ameena Hussein’s Zillij is a thought-provoking anthology of short stories addressing varied social issues in Sri Lanka. The book brings to light many thought-provoking questions through everyday situations in Sri Lankan life. The anthology is a complex assortment of day-to-day life in Sri Lanka, particularly of Muslims. Each story in the collection adds a different photograph of Sri Lankan life; and the collection, therefore, becomes an album of varied lives in the South Asian demographic space. Hussein tackles various communal, ethnic and spatial issues in Zillij which are primarily regarding space and identity. This paper tries to analyze the contradictory and contesting space and identity in her stories ‘White Girl’ and ‘The Immigrant’.*

Key Words: *Minority, Muslims, Space, Fundamentalism.*

Ameena Hussein’s collection of short stories, titled *Zillij* (2003) represents snippets of Sri Lankan life. *Zillij* is an Islamic traditional art of creating intricate mosaic design using hand-cut tiles. Likewise, Hussein’s *Zillij* is a single impression of art that contains multiple pieces of Sri Lankan lives arranged by her in the anthology. These lives showcase niche of space and identity within the space of Sri Lanka, particularly of Muslim minority. Most of her stories are nameless as she doesn’t provide proper name for any of her character.

Hussein story entitled ‘White Girl’ deals with the struggle with class, cultural, social and spatial identities of an American in Sri Lanka. Hussein looks at the clash of cultures, where there is a constant struggle in yearning for a lifestyle that one does not have. The story is narrated in allegoric way to highlight identities rather than personal tenets. In the story, the characters of the White Girl and the Muslim Girl jostle for attention in a chaos of love and confused identities. While White Girl’s dilemma is central to the story, one can also feel greater empathy for the hapless trishaw driver Anura. Ameena carves the identity of a minor and peripheral

character of a human-rickshaw driver who is a native of Sri Lanka. White girl falls in love with Anura and tries to make herself fit into the Sri Lankan society. Whereas for Anura, she is a ticket to his dream life in her homeland America.

Ameena Hussein shows how the character of White Girl finds herself misfit in the Sri Lankan society even after three months of stay in Sri Lanka. This also shows how the Sri Lankan space is an unaccustomed land for her. She tries everything to fit in and become acceptable in the society but all her attempts fail. People consider her as a representative of white race. White Girl feels vulnerable due to the complexion of her skin. She gets offended when someone racially abuses her. “When did it begin? She wondered. This difference. This feeling of being vulnerable because of the colour of her skin.” (Hussein 50) She wants to get identified as a native of Sri Lanka since she has adopted the island as her own nation. Ameena Hussein asserts about White Girl:

After three months of living in Sri Lanka she realised she had enough. She had tried to fit in. She had tried very hard, to hard a casual

observer might say, but there was no doubt that every effort was made by her to sleep into the machinery of society unnoticed. But it was too difficult she thought. Whatever she did, whatever she said, she was still the outsider. She was still part of that amorphous group called White People. (Hussein 47)

The author shows how White Girl attempts to be one with the host land as her homeland. Her being white in complexion distances her from the natives. She tries to project herself as the native of Sri Lanka but she is never allowed by the natives as Sri Lankan. They constantly remind her of being the 'other'. She takes part in various social activities for the cause of women and children. She drafts and lectures on various occasions, she protests and marches, remonstrates and demonstrates, rallies and organises, instructs and conducts a multitude of causes for Sri Lankan public. But all her efforts, services and dedications remain unnoticed and unacknowledged by most of the people around her. Though she is an outsider, she works hard for the natives which is lacking in Sri Lanka. She leads them but they retreat, denying her not only leadership but also her identity.

Her story is an example of losing identity in a nation where one is not born. Once a person leaves his or her birth place for any other country for reason whatsoever, the biggest risk associated with it is his/her losing of identity. It doesn't matter how hard one try to assimilate into the resident nation, but he/she will be looked after as an outsider. The same is the case with white girl in the story. "Those whom she identified with, did not identify with her and those whom she despised, she knew she had lots more in common with." (Hussein 52)

White Girl shows her cultural superiority in her attempt to establish identity through her social work. On the other hand, her friend Muslim Girl pushes herself to drugs distorting her identity. Hussein presents polarities in identities by placing two cultural metaphors who go in two different directions when being rejected. The journey of White Girl in identity is towards refinement, whereas the

journey of Muslim Girl proves violent and self-destructive. Both journey from certain point of identity towards achievement of identity. Muslim Girl begins to look in bad shape. She rejects any form of help extended by friends or family rather violently. Consequently, in a couple of month she starts to work out her own problems by herself. It seems that Muslim Girl realises her stance and starts working over it.

On the other hand, White Girl begins to enjoy her life and dreams about her future with Anura. She dreams of settling down with Anura in Sri Lanka, away from the artificial, shallow and meaningless American life. "Meanwhile, White Girl revelled in her newfound native domesticity ... She was beginning to enjoy this life, she thought on morning as she lay in bed with Anura by her side." (Hussein 61) But on the contrary Anura wishes to move to America in search of a better and modern life with the help of White Girl. Anura begins to enquire about California and his chance to have a life there. White Girl replies to change his mind from moving away as California offers nothing but a vacuum of artificiality. Ameena points out the ambitious approach of Anura to establish his identity by crossing the national borders and settling into America:

"Will you help me," he asked, "will you help me to go to Aamarika?"

"But I don't want you to go" pleaded White Girl. "I want you to stay here with me."

"But look at me," said Anura, "do you think that I want to be a trishaw driver for the rest of my life? I want to go to Aamarika because that is the only place it won't matter that my father is a labourer and my mother a domestic. That is the only place where I can make it and live in an apartment that has electricity and water from the taps. I can save and buy a car, a proper car and learn good English and send money back home for my brothers to be educated." (Hussein 62)

White Girl pursues Anura to stay back in Sri Lanka but he decides to move away. "Life was strange she thought, just when you thought it made sense, it no longer did." (Hussein 64) Both Anura and White Girl are dissatisfied with what they are born with. Each of them looks for something else through the other but finds it in different places. Their story represents postmodern and postcolonial life wherein one is happy in place of the other.

'The Immigrant' is the continuation of the story 'White Girl' where the writer shifts her space from the far east to the west. Anura, the boyfriend of White Girl, migrates to New York in America. Though the story is a continuation of the earlier story, it underlines up rootedness of a black protagonist in the country of the whites. It is totally a parallel plot to 'White Girl'. In this story Ameena Hussein narrates the plight of Anura's life in America, his dreamland, a promised land which, he believes, would fulfil his dreams and desires. Against his expectations of a new life in the promised land, it offers him nothing but a new form of loneliness. As Anura lands into the unaccustomed land, he realises his foreignness. The author notes, "Fifteen minutes to allow himself to think – on the meaning of life and the choices he had made." (Hussein 68)

Ameena Hussein portrays the minority existence of Diaspora subjects living in the dream land – America. These immigrants from Sri Lanka form and share a ghetto ideology and mentality as they suffer in the hostland. Anura meets many other immigrants like him who come to America in search of a better life but end up in disillusionment. Jayantha is one such immigrant from Sri Lanka with whom he shares room for his accommodation. This sharing of residence is sharing of not only space but also a sharing of identity and loneliness. The author narrates the uncertain life and prospects in Sri Lanka for the young generation who dream and struggle to make their life more comfortable. As a result, many young Sri Lankans aspire to migrate to America as America signals them as a promising land.

Hussein portrays the struggle for identity and space of in the hostland as well as in the homelands. The characters – Jayantha and Anura – struggle to establish their identity not only in their native land but also in the host nation. The story is about struggle of these young people regarding a sojourn of distracted identity to establish identity. In America, blacks are at odd with their identity since they are considered as immigrants. Also, it is a part of racial discrimination. Juxtaposingly, in Sri Lanka the natives are finding it difficult to establish their own identities.

Hussein upholds futility of migration as migrants fail to get better prospects in the hostnation. The young migrants from Sri Lanka reach America with a hope to get better jobs and subsequently better social and financial identities. Unfortunately, these young people get frustrated as they cannot achieve their dreams. Anura bewilders by meeting many non-Americans like Jayantha. He thinks, "Over and over again, year after year, thousands of us leave our homelands and go in search of better. But do we ever find it?" (Hussein 77). Jayantha reaches America after prolonged struggle. His dreams get ruined since he could not find a better job and prospect as he wished before illegally immigrating to America. Jayantha had no option but to enter into a job, as most Sri Lankans like him do in America -that is selling pornographic contents.

Ameena showcases the agonies of the young men like Anura who undergo an array of struggles to reach America. They utilise every possible means to reach the hostnation. In doing so, they follow illegal routes and illegal practices. Finally, they land into illegal selling of antisocial materials like pornographic movies. Jayantha expresses his sorry state to Anura, "So here I am brother,...Here I am in the great land of America, living with another desperate illegal human being, working with desperate young women who sell the image of their body to desperate men who want to forget. Hell! We all want to forget, for

there is nothing of worth to remember.” (Hussein 77)

Ameena shows the anguish of the migrants in America who express their dissatisfaction and frustration to each other. They have left their native land to achieve identity but in an attempt to achieve better identity, they realise that they have landed in subaltern existence. Their memories are so unpleasant – both at homeland and hostnation – that they find both spaces as wastelands. They prefer nothing to remember as memories torture them. Therefore, space, identity and memory are painful for immigrants as they are in an unidentified space that indicates inbetweenness. Jayantha stands for those immigrants who find their life in vacuum, bereft of all dreams and desires and compelled to live an implied life. For them, the condition of life does not change much though they migrate to developed nations in order to escape poverty and to find a space of will and wish. Anura thinks after his conversation with Jayantha, “Why do we do it? He wondered. Over and over again, year after year, thousands of us leave our homelands and go in search of better. But do we ever find it?” (Hussein 77) Unfulfilled dreams and desires are the final

destination of migrants like Anura and Jayantha. The author pinpoints hollowness of the life of migrants who never reach to the desired goal. Much of their energy is spent in establishing themselves in the hostnation. An escape from poverty results into landing into another pocket of poverty. A journey from marginalisation of poverty itinerarises double marginalisation in the hostnation.

Anura – like Jayantha – finds himself on the streets of New York peddling pornography following the providential separation from White Girl. Ameena narrates, “In fact he was beginning to rather like the space that he got when they knew whom he worked for or what he did...Anura knew for a lot of them it was more than a job, the porn industry was life and while he liked the idea of belonging to a clan that not many would mess about with, he was not sure if this was the life he wanted.” (Hussein 71) He, in order to escape poverty and unemployment, enters into the unwanted space of pornography. On his condition in America, Anura comments, “the dream is still there, it’s just not mine” (Hussein 79). Anura finds satisfaction neither in his native space nor in the foreign space. Hussein presents Jayantha and Anura as the victims of unfulfilled dreams and aspirations.

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