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Fractured Identities: Domestic Alienation, Political Violence and the complex Ethical Encounter with the Other in Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field*

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Abstract:

This paper intends to investigate the gradual erosion of individual identities which is made translucent by external pressures, domestic frameworks and political violence. This study examines Madhuri Vijay 's *The Far Field* to present how Shalini's journey from Bangalore to Kashmir reveals two factors that result in the erosion of the selves: the first one being the domestic sphere marked by discomfort, repression and emotional hollowness in Bangalore and the conflict driven paradigm of Kashmir, defined by brutality and collective suffering. Drawing on the psychoanalytic, postcolonial and ethical frameworks, this study further emphasises upon how personal grief and discomfort intersect with the broader histories of violence and collective suffering, producing a fragile and unsettled sense of self. The novel follows Shalini's journey to uncover the realities behind her mother's identity, which pushes her to encounter the vindictive realms of the political scenario in Kashmir. Moreover, Shalini's inability to judge the deplorable conditions of Kashmiri natives further aggravates the contours of identity, showcasing the dichotomy between the self and the other. For Shalini, the violence experienced by the Kashmiris remains largely alien to her own experiences, highlighting the distinction between the ways in which domestic complexities and political violence contribute to the erosion of identity. By converging Shalini's personal grief within the domestic sphere with political turmoil in Kashmir, the study will investigate how the crippling process of the self begins at home and extends outward into collective degradation of identities.

Keywords: Domestic sphere, Identity destabilization, Selfhood, Emotional repression, Middle-class subjectivity, Sociopolitical conflict, Trauma, Displacement.

Introduction

The crisis of identity and the process of identity formation have found vivid literary representations in the history of Indian writing in English novels. The post-independence novels have dealt with the prospect of crisis in individual identity by demonstrating how partition related violence, fractured histories and disintegrated process of nation building result in the destabilisation of identity. However, it is crucial to examine that those narratives

have simultaneously paved the way for identity formation through storytelling and restructuring of history. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is one such novel that highlights the themes of fractured identity and reclamation of the idea of self and nation through storytelling. Moreover, the diasporic novels have also dealt with the contour of fragmented identity and how such crippled sense of self needs to be reconstructed. For instance, in the diasporic novel, *The Namesake*, Gogol struggles with name, identity and belonging, however, he gradually accepts his identity and the novel ends on a reconciling note. One of the important outcomes of these novels is that they show the convergence between the crisis of identity and the process of identity formation. However, the post-2010 novels have shown shifting trends in their methods of dealing with the prospect of identity. The recent trends have traced that contemporary post-2010 novels don't treat loss of identity as something recoverable, but as emotionally precarious and perpetually unsettled. In particular, our discussion of *The Far Field* (2019) displays the contour of identity as something unstable and unsettled. In *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler has opined that "we are undone by each other" (Butler 23). Butler's idea explicitly deals with the aspects of grief, identity and human relationships, where she shows that our identity is never autonomous, but it is shaped and crippled by external forces. She adds that human beings are emotionally dependent on others and sometimes such dependency can result in the disorientation and destabilisation of identity (23). However, it is important to note that Butler's views often seem to represent emotional dependency or vulnerability as something necessary for structuring meaningful relationships. But our discussion seeks to examine that Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field* presents this vulnerable self in a more dark and destabilised way, where individual identity is crippled by external forces and the efforts of forming meaningful relationships result in the gradual erosion of self.

In *The Far Field*, Madhuri Vijay represents the crippling identity of the self by demonstrating individuals' failure to come to terms with the discomforts of domestic sphere and external violence. The novel narrates the story of Shalini, who initially experiences emotional disorientation due to the fractured relationship between her father and mother, whose lives are shaped by emotional distance, silence and perpetual misunderstanding. Therefore, this idea advocates how home, which traditionally serves as space for emotional security, becomes a sphere of emotional fragmentation. Moreover, when Shalini's mother dies her emotional emptiness becomes more vivid . This emptiness instigates her to explore more of her mother's identity which ultimately takes her to Kashmir: a place with which she believes her mother is connected to. However, this search for emotional reconnection in Kashmir results in her gradual erosion of the self, pushing her to the politically violent sphere of Kashmir. Recent studies on this novel have primarily focused on the themes of trauma, the violent sphere of Kashmir and the oppression of minorities, memory and displacements. However, although these studies have explicitly dealt with these ideals, the specific theme of unsettled identities have not been directly taken into account. Moreover, there has not been a separate study on the idea of the domestic sphere in this novel and how it shapes gradual fragmentation of the self. Furthermore, the novel has not been studied through the

three interlinked frameworks of postcolonial, psychoanalytic and ethical dynamics. Therefore, drawing on postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Emmanuel Levinas's ideas regarding ethical encounter with the 'other', this study seeks to examine the idea of the erasure of self or unsettled identities through the characters, particularly Shalini's character. Furthermore, this study utilises domestic sphere and external violence as sites of demonstrating the hollowing out of the self; it seeks to examine how these sites shape the emotionally disoriented journey of the protagonist and the collective identities of Kashmiri people. Moreover, an effort has been made to examine how this gradual erosion of the self results in an ethical crisis, where the self is no longer able to comprehend the pain of others. Shalini's failure to judge the sufferings of the Kashmiri people in the novel displays the limitations of the erased self to be empathetic to the sufferings of the others. In the end, this study seeks to examine how *The Far Field* differs from earlier Indian English novels by presenting self-erasure without reconciliation or recovery.

Analysis

Domestic Alienation and the Fragmentation of Self in *The Far Field*

The Far Field represents the domestic sphere as a site of the gradual erasure of the self. In Bangalore, Shalini's relationship with her parents, particularly her mother, is marked by silence and emotional disorientation. Vijay shows that Shalini's emotional fragmentation is a result of the destabilised domestic sphere. Shalini is raised in a deeply unstable family structure marked by her father's emotional rigidity and narcissistic personality and her mother's emotional emptiness and psychic withdrawal. The perpetual conflicts between her father and mother create a sense of discomfort. In one of the scenes , Shalini recounts how her parents started a fight when she returned home due to chicken pox, "But thus began one of their many wars of silences and recriminations. She spoke to him in an exaggerated mumble, an idiot's thick accent, which drove him crazy, and eventually caused him to ignore her for an entire week" (Vijay 98) . Shalini's intense longing for love and affection gets hijacked by the conflicted atmosphere of the domestic sphere. Moreover, the mother-daughter relationship again serves as a way for demonstrating the unsettled identities in the novel. Shalini's relationship with her mother is consumed by grief and emotional emptiness. In their domestic sphere, Shalini notices her mother and observes "sometimes it seemed as if she noticed nothing at all…at other times , however, I could sense her watching me, a perplexed look on her face" (Vijay 174-175). This suggests how her mother also suffers from an unsettled emotional stage, mirroring Shalini's gradual erosion of the self. Shalini's constant observation about her mother's emotional state foregrounds her own collapsing sense of self. Shalini looks for emotional connection with her mother, but her mother remains emotionally indifferent to her. In his famous book *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud argues that the aspect of melancholia represents an ambivalence or conflict because the subject is both emotionally attached and detached from the object (256). In the context of *The Far Field*, Shalini's relationship with her mother is deeply ambivalent. She loves her mother, yet their relationship is shaped by emotional distance, silence and fragmentation. These conflicted relationships within the domestic sphere serves as an example of unsettled

identities, where the subject always remains disconnected from the object. Moreover, this domestic tension is again exemplified through patriarchal structure in the household. Shalini's mother represents the submissive Indian woman whose life is deeply ambivalent. Although highly intelligent, she is denied the opportunity to pursue higher education. It could be argued that her lack of freedom also serves to her fragmented identity within the household. Domestic sphere in Bangalore also highlights the performative nature of middle-class households utilised to conceal the scars of painful realities. In the novel, Shalini's journey to Italy along with her family is filled with happiness and thrill. However, this thrill only serves as a mask to conceal their domestic complexities. After the trip to Italy, Shalini reflects, "Cracks began to appear…my mother became more prone to spells of abstraction"(Vijay 192). This reflects the collapsing sense of identities within the domestic space.

In Bangalore, the domestic sphere mainly highlights the fragmented identities of Shalini and her parents. Shalini's mother remains aloof and psychologically disconnected from everyone except Bashir Ahmed, a Kashmiri salesman. The relationship between Shalini's mother and Bashir Ahmed is ambivalent in the novel. Bashir's presence in the domestic sphere of Bangalore makes Shalini's mother emotionally alive. These instances push Shalini to find the answers regarding Bashir Ahmed's relation with her mother. After her mother's death, Shalini's mind becomes more conflicted, which leads to her emotional fragmentation. She seeks to know the mysterious identity of her mother and her relationship with Bashir, which ultimately pushes her to the violent landscape of Kashmir. Shalini feels she can liberate herself from the domestic complications by exploring her mother's identity in relation to Bashir Ahmed.

Violence and the Erosion of Subjectivity

In *The Far Field*, violence serves as another way through which human subjectivity is crippled at both the individual and collective levels. Violence, in the novel doesn't only indicate socio-political realities, but it serves as a force that erodes identity, stability and the possibility of a stable selfhood. Vijay recounts crippling experiences of Shalini and Bashir Ahmed to present the destructive impact of violence. It is important to note that from the beginning of the novel, Shalini's identity is already eroded by the domestic sphere. In fact, Shalini's voyage to Kashmir is initially meant to find her mother's relation with Bashir Ahmed through which she feels she can reconstruct her identity. Shalini observes that by finding her mother's identity she can reflect upon her mother's emotionally detached nature. However, when Shalini reaches Kashmir her identity becomes more fragmented. Vijay presents Kashmir as a valley shattered by military power, which ultimately results in the gradual erosion of individual identities. The character of Bashir Ahmed represents the collective erosion of selves. He represents the first generation explicitly exposed to militancy in Kashmir. Bashir Ahmed is falsely accused of involvement in militant attacks and brutally tortured by the army. Moreover, it is important to note that Bashir Ahmed is exploited mainly because of his identity as a Muslim. In one of the scenes, it is revealed by Shalini's father that "they are not friendly…they supported the militants"(Vijay 80-81). Here, the word

'they' indicates the Muslim people. These pervasive exploitations on Bashir result in his fractured sense of self as he becomes psychologically shattered. Bashir becomes emotionally fragmented and resorts to silence. Whenever Shalini tries to interact with Bashir regarding the exploitative situations in Kashmir back in Bangalore, Bashir often reacts in a frustrated manner saying "Beti, please. No more questions right now" (Vijay 106). This suggests that the violent atmosphere in Kashmir isn't confined to exploitative socio-political dynamics, but it destabilises individual identities. In fact, Bashir's condition mirrors Fanon's views on the psychological impact of violence to some extent. Fanon argues that individuals struggle to find their human agency when the oppressor instigates extreme forms of violence and in that case the oppressed often uses psychological resistance (Fanon xxxvi). However, in the context of the violent situation in Kashmir as represented in the novel, Bashir Ahmed remains totally distorted; he fails to revolt against the oppressive structure which shapes his psychological hollowness. Shalini's journey in Kashmir further aggravates her psychological dislocation. Shalini's mind, which is already hijacked by the domestic complexities, becomes more fragmented when she witnesses the destructive violence in Kashmir. Shalini's interactions with other Kashmiri people such as Aaqib and Riyaz reflect how the violent atmosphere crippled their lives. Riyaz and Aaqib represent later generations who suffer from this violence after Bashir Ahmed. Shalini's search for Bashir Ahmed doesn't give her emotional fulfillment. Instead, it worsens her mental state and makes her emotionally indifferent.

Apart from the crippling identity, Shalini's life in Kashmir represents her emotional emptiness towards the Kashmiri people. Shalini shows an intense curiosity to comprehend the pain and sufferings of people like Amina, Riyaz and Aaqib in Kashmir, but she somewhat remains emotionally detached to their sufferings. In the concluding sections of the novel, Shalini reflects on her life in Kashmir, saying "for six years, I have given myself one reason or another for not speaking, for not acting" (Vijay 429). This line suggests how Shalini chooses to stay silent on the violent experiences she had in Kashmir. We can argue that her emotional self is already emptied by the domestic complexities in Bangalore, therefore, she fails to connect with the sufferings of Kashmiri people. Shalini remembers everyone she met in Kashmir, but she fails to take any action or show emotional connection. Shalini's emotional disconnectedness with the Kashmiri people mirrors Levinas's view of the other. Levinas argues that the 'I' cannot comprehend the identity of the 'other'. The 'other' cannot be studied in relation to the self as it is not the simple reverse of 'I'; the definition of the 'other' cannot be perceived as it has its own identity which needs to be respected (Levinas 39). In the context of *The Far Field,* it could be argued Shalini's stable familial background in Bangalore makes it difficult for her to comprehend the complexities and sufferings of the people in Kashmir. Initially, Shalini approaches Kashmir through her own aspirations: her loneliness, her mother's memories and her personal search for identity. However, as she encounters sufferings of Kashmiri people, she realises that their sufferings cannot be totally understood, possessed. Therefore, we can say that Kashmir remains 'other' to Shalini.

Alternatively, we can say Shalini's emotional hollowness or numbness makes it difficult for her to comprehend the complexities of the Kashmiri people.

Findings and Conclusion

The Far Field demonstrates identity as fragile, emotionally hollow and unsettled through the characters. It places emphasis upon the character of Shalini to examine the idea of the erosion of self. Initially, the domestic sphere in Bangalore represents the themes of emotional alienation and psychic withdrawal. Shalini's fractured relationship with her parents destabilises her sense of self. Moreover, the theme of violence also demonstrates psychological emptiness. Kashmir is presented as a destructive space that erodes both individual and collective identities. The character of Bashir Ahmed represents the psychological destruction caused by military and state violence. The novel also displays how the erased self fails to comprehend the sufferings of the other, which is explained through Shalini's emotional emptiness to connect with the sufferings of Kashmiri people. In the end, it could be argued that the novel differs from earlier Indian English novels that often reconcile fragmented identities, as it demonstrates the total collapse of both individual and collective identities.

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