

The Creative Launcher

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Divided Home, Divided Identity: A Postcolonial Study of *Alam's Own House*

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Abstract

One of the outcomes in Postcolonial era is the inherited multiple identities of individuals and their respective communities. Torn apart in the Partition, the domestic and social spaces of millions of people across the border got blurred and diluted. It is exemplified more evidently when it comes to religious identity, both Hindu and Muslim. Seen from this perspective, the looming tension and growing vulnerability of members of both religions in Post-Partition Dacca and Kolkata have always been trapped in divided home and divided identities. *Alam's Own House* by Debyendu Palit is one such short story that quintessentially addresses the crisis of home and identity across two cities, Dacca and Kolkata that have been the worst affected in the Partition. Telling from third-person point-of-view, this short story vividly narrates the mental tensions of the lead characters through portrayal of interfaith love, communal tensions, residential crisis, and more evidently the gradual realization of cultural differences. Nationhood and belongingness in Postcolonial Indian subcontinent are entangled with the divided home and divided identity. *Alam's Own House* faithfully reflects all these issues.

Keywords- Postcolonial, Partition, Nationalism, Hindu and Muslim, Divided home, Divided identity, Inter faith

Alam's own house by Debyendu Palit focuses on major themes of Post Colonial literature Viz. Partitions, Migration, Identity, Nationalism, Clashes between majority versus minority,

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Socio-cultural locations, differences, Suppression and resistance, representation, homelessness, human relationship and emotions so and so forth. This short story has the potential to counter the narrative of the euro-centric discourse which prevailed during colonial era. This story well portrays the effect of Colonial rule in India and how it has affected the Indian Society at large after the colonizers left India. Neither the author nor its characters in the story clearly tells whether partition was good. But the pains and suffering of the characters can be understood throughout the story.

Foucauldian discourse is “Discourse is regulated by set rules which lead to the distribution and circulation of certain utterances and statements” (54). In other words, the discursive analysis “is a form of discourse analysis, focusing on power relations in society as expressed through language and practices based on the theories of Michel Foucault.”¹ Kendall and Wickham outline five steps in using ‘Foucauldian discourse analysis.’ “The first step is a simple recognition that discourse is a body of statements that are organized in a regular and systematic way. The subsequent four steps are based on the identification of rules on:

- How those statements are created;
- What can be said (written) and what cannot;
- How spaces in which new statements can be made are created.
- Making practices material and discursive at the same time.” (42)

In colonial era the colonizers justified the oppression against the Indians by setting the Foucauldian discourse. There were some people among the Indians who could not understand the motive of the colonizers and supported the policy of divide and rule or rather antagonising the people of two religions in such an extent that the Indians thought it are better to quarrel among themselves. In post colonial period after partition the ruling class of both the countries heavily relied on the power of Foucauldian discourse analysis.

In 1978 Edward W. Said published a book known as Orientalism in which the author establishes the eponymous term "Orientalism" as a critical concept describe the west's commonly contemptuous depiction and Portrayal of "The East", i. e. the Orient. Said writes, “Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of

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discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (2). It explains the process of representation of the non-European subjects in the following way: “Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that makes the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourse about it” (22). But after partition the ruling class of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh started each other’s contemptuous depiction and portrayal. The very blame-game seems quite intentional, when Partition history records the fury and peril of riots, rape, genocide, and homelessness of millions of people. In this horrific dance of destruction, not the colonizers, but the colonized leaders were the determiners of the fate and future of millions of Indians and Pakistanis, of Hindus and Muslims. Gyanendra Pandey writes. “Overwhelmingly, ‘violence’ and ‘Partition’ (‘riots’ and ‘politics’, the ‘primitive’ and the ‘modern’?) have been seen as being two quite separate things in this historical enterprise. Scholars have spoken commonly of the bloodbath, the violence or simply (and frequently) the ‘riots’ that accompanied Partition in 1947” (52).

The historical trajectory opened up the fangs and ribcages of the horror. This horror of Partition and the riots between Hindus and Muslims across the border in the honour of religious communalism, like photographic representation of the Holocaust victims in the Auschwitz concentration camp, germinates an alternative representation through literary portrayal of life and events in the life of common people to alleviate the pain and suffering. On the dimensions of violence and suffering in Partition literature in Bangla, Suranjana Choudhury observes, “Partition represented a phrase of unnatural human conduct and horrifying acts. Imagination in this context becomes very sensitive territory, encompassing the problem of evil” (23). To focus on the collective representation of the people and their real life through literature, Choudhury writes, “The collective imagination continues to nurture idea about Partition, to shape the discourses of caste and religious identities, and ideas about majority-minority relation and issues related to refugees and cross-border migration” (30). The Partition literature as a distinct literary arena provides us the faithfully done artistic representation of common people who were the victims of the Partition. *Alam’s Own House* is one such story that speaks on behalf of the divided home and divided identity as it will be

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explained later on. It is true the author speaks about the common people. The characters of this story are common people. Not only the postcolonial period but also the beginning of the colonial period is to be blamed for the present complicated conditions of the characters of *Alam's Own House*.

Alam's Own House is a story of a Muslim boy and Hindu girl. Alam who is travelling by plane from Dhaka, Bangladesh to Kolkata, India along with his friend Feroze to participate in a seminar on friendship organised by Maitri Singha. While on plane Alam reminisces his love for Raka: how within this short distance up forty-five to sixty minutes journey has an International border and also these letters sent by Raka. Raka in her last letter wrote that like everything else, there is also a time frame for returning. And once that point is past there is a feeling that it is not going to happen again. While staying in India quite conscious about religion therefore she says certain lands are meant for certain root only: Alam could not decipher its meaning. He thinks of which root Raka is talking about. Because where Raka is staying now that is in Kolkata it used to be Alam's house before the creation of Bangladesh. In 1970 when communal violence took place between Hindus and Muslims Alam's father decided to leave India and purchase a house in Dhaka. On the other hand Raka's father left Dhaka and came to Kolkata never to return to Dhaka again. Therefore Alam's father purchased the house of Raka's father in Dhaka and Raka's father did the vice versa. Before entering the house of Raka all these meanings were flashes in Alam's mind. When Alam enters Raka's house he thinks Raka might open the door but that did not happen. Raka's mother opens the door. In conversation with Raka's father Alam is astonished because he tells that oil and water can never get together. He is very much conscious about two religions Hindu and Muslim (Islam) before going to sleep Sneha masima, Rakesh mother enters the room and Rakesh mother enters the room and tells Alam to forget Raka, because there is a kind of hesitation and resistance that Raka can not marry Alam. In this way Alam love comes to an end. Finally Masima tells Alam about her homelessness in Kolkata. Alam wept in the darkness of the night.

Themes of *Alam's Own House* are pertinent in the post colonial literature. Themes of the postcolonial literature are 1) Partition; 2) Migration; 3) Identity; 4) Nationalism; 5)

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Clashes between majority versus minority; 6) Socio-cultural locations/religion; 7) Difference; 8) Suppression; 9) Resistance; 10) Representation; 11) Homelessness; 12) Human relationship and emotions; 13) Reinterpret western canonical texts; 14) Contemporary realities, and so forth.

Partition is a broad and encompassing theme in this story. Regarding partition Alam's father said partition had taken place in two forms one political and the other mental. The second one had not been sealed and signed by Mountbatten. Migration is inseparable part of the journey across the border. Then there was the war. The slogan was Bangladesh, "Our Bangladesh!" One day Dr Gupta brought the proposal. Anantashkher had left Dhaka with his family. He had no intentions of going back. His house and property were lying waste. (Frazer 453-72)

On the issue of identity, Alam's father said, "Earlier I used the same stethoscope for Ram and Jamal. Those days are gone. There are no Rams among my patients anymore; Jadu and Kanai have all gone to Dr. Gupta." Nationalism: Alam said, "This sky space belongs to India," Firoje said, "we have no, what you say, fundamental rights over it." Clashes between majorities versus minority: In Kolkata communal violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims. And at that time Alam was staying at Raka's house. Therefore being Alam being Muslim, Raka's brother thought Alam might face problem therefore Raka said, "There is great trouble outside. Houses are burning. Dada called to say that you should not step outside the house..." (ibid).

Socio-cultural locations are very important. In this story Alam's father thought that it would be better to leave India and settle in Dhaka, Bangladesh whereas Raka's father before selling his house in Dhaka he came to Kolkata never to return again in Bangladesh. Both the parents thought that the two countries have different cultures and different societies also therefore they left their place of birth whatsoever difficulties they encounter while moving from one place to the other. Raka in one of her letters wrote, "certain lands are meant for certain roots only." In return Alam said, "If I understand it the way you mean it, then don't forget that I was born in Kolkata- the very house to which this letter is being addressed. Doesn't that give e roots in Kolkata" (453-72).

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Differences: Firoz believed in the cultural differences of the two countries. His ideas were directed towards the concept of 'yours' and 'mine'. Alam also said, “the difference lies only in politics.” Then firoze said, “the difference does not lie even in politics. It lies in religion can you avoid this point however much you try?” Not only Feroze but also Antatasekhar Raka’s father believed in differences. It can be understood from the following conversations. “Cultural exchanges you could call it,” Alam said. “An exchange of ideas, so that the people from one of the two countries can get to know each other better...” “That is fine,” replied Anantasekhar in his own very manner. “But can oil and water ever get together? If they had, then your dad wouldn’t have left Kolkata and I wouldn’t have left Dhaka either.” He waited to see if Ananta wanted to say anything more and then he said, “Meshomoshai, we talk about oil and water because that’s what’s been installed in us. But none of us really knows which one is oil and which one is water. Maybe one day we will realise it’s all oil or all water...” (453-72).

Suppression: Raka loved Alam but their love didn’t end in marriage. This is only because of religious identities. She says, “But, Alam, I lack the mental strength required of me. There’s a kind of resistance, a kind of hesitation something, somewhere. I cannot explain what it is. And I don’t have the strength to break that wall. So there’s need to make the wall higher. It is because of this hesitation that our addresses had changed yours and mine. And many people’s before us. But if that hesitation wouldn’t have been there, we would probably never ever have had the opportunity to meet. And there would have been no need for this love- the stringing of letters one after another. I wouldn’t have the strength to say these things, standing before a person as honest as you. I am running away because your love is stronger. Your pain will be much more than mine. If you can, forgive me. If you can, keep in touch. If you write, I will surely respond. Besides, there are things in life that we know are illusions, yet we love to keep them alive. Don’t we?” (453-72).

Alam’s resistance can be observed in there quoted line “Feroze believe in the cultural differences of the two countries. He had said, “... friendship was a good thing. But it was dangerous to use it as bait. People wore clothes because that wanted to cover their bare bodies. But that didn’t mean they had to wear clothes that were identical in cut and colour as

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well. Where was the scope of individuality then?" The problem was, Alam wasn't able to identify with Feroze's thoughts. Was individuality limited to cut and colour only? Maybe, Feroze was trying to express something deeper that was not quite clear even to his own self. His ideas were directed towards the concept of 'yours' and 'mine'. So Alam said, "Does it mean anything? If we had the time and patience we could actually have covered this distance by foot. Things would have been very simple then. Here there was no distance, there was no need to organise a seminar especially on friendship" (453-72).

The characters in this short story often feel the alienation of homelessness. Alam says that it is the land (that is Kolkata) of his birth. He again asks that it was the land of one's birth also one's native land. This question often made him feel homeless. It did now again'. Sneha masima tells Alam, that for them the road is completely shut. They spent their lives there, were born and grew up, and often there's the call of the umbilical cord. It's more so for his Meshomoshai. It's been ten years now everything that they have their own house and property is here. Yet he doesn't know why we have this constant feeling of being homeless. Alam says that they concentrate more on the differences of religion than on the differences between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed. And that is because it absorbs off from responsibility and makes it easy for us to escape from reality. But then, he thought, there was no point in saying these things. Not all questions had answers. (453-72).

Alam's Own House represents the trauma and dilemma of the lead characters. Since searching for home and identity remain at the centre of the entire story, through the lens of Postcolonial political and social disorder and vulnerability brooding over East Pakistan/Bangladesh and West Bengal, and Dhaka and Kolkata, the interfaith love affair and later on the realization of cultural differences add a new dimension in the human understanding of religious differences. Despite the common linguistic heritage, religion and political boundary increase the gap that reflects on the central theme of divided home and divided identity in this short story.

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- ¹ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foucauldian_discourse_analysis
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