

Role of Cultures in Creating Identities as Portrayed in *A Delhi Obsession*: A Literary Analysis to Deconstruct Cultural Influences on Personality and Destiny

Jenifer Immaculate

Sixth Sense Academy, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

M. Amutha

St. Joseph's College- Department of English, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu India

[Abstract] This research shows how various cultural influences modify one's personality and way of thinking, thereby modifying even one's destiny. The researchers investigated the connection between culture and identity to unveil how culture plays a significant role in creating different identities in an individual. Culture and identity are interconnected, and they enhance each other. To validate the strong relationship between an individual and their cultural influences, a key source is Moyez G. Vassanji's novel *A Delhi Obsession*. The characters in his novels live through the past and the present hoping for a better future and the novel reveals how their identities go through an array of changes throughout their life resulting in their redefined identities.

[Keywords] culture, identity, globalization, cultural product, cultural influence

Introduction

This research is a literary analysis of the novel *A Delhi Obsession* by M. G. Vassanji. It highlights the interconnection between an individual and one's culture and thereby validates the influence of one's culture in creating identities which can even restructure the personality and destiny of the individual. Many a time, people do not realise that culture is something strongly connected to one's life and reflects identity. Individuals see culture only as a set of practices, rituals, rules, and regulations. On the other hand, they fail to understand that their own identity has been framed and moulded by their own culture and every *individual* is the reflection of their culture. Therefore, this research is an attempt to unveil that unseen connection between an individual's identity and culture and show how they enhance each other through an individual.

Vassanji's *A Delhi Obsession*

M. G. Vassanji is a contemporary writer, a Kenyan-born Canadian novelist, and an editor. He himself had various cultural influences. His parents were Indians who migrated to Africa. He was born in Kenya but settled in Canada. The impact of his cultural influences from different cultures can be sensed in his novels. He has authored ten novels, three short-story collections, and three non-fiction collections. He went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania. He specialized in Nuclear Physics. He then moved to Canada as a postdoctoral fellow and he now lives in Toronto. His works highlight the issues and consequences of diaspora, colonial encounters, ethnicity and the postcolonial period. His works are being translated into

different languages, and he has also received awards like the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Prize, the Commonwealth First Book Prize, the Harbourfront Festival Prize and the Bressani Prize. His novel, *A Delhi Obsession* (2019), reflects the political and cultural atmosphere in the present-day Delhi.

The main characters of the novel, Munir Khan and Mohini Singh, represent contemporary life. Munir Khan, a middle-aged Muslim with his ancestry in India, visits Delhi after having settled in Toronto. During his visit to Delhi, he happens to meet Mohini Singh, a column writer for a newspaper. They visit places together and they develop a liking for each other. Mohini, a Hindu married Indian woman, is being watched by the gang of Jetha Lal. The gang is infuriated by the relationship between Munir Khan and Mohini Singh. Towards the end, their murder is planned and executed by Jetha Lal and his gang. Their relationship and the impact of a terror attack by Jetha Lal in Delhi constitute the mainstream of the novel. The identities of the main characters add to their destiny. Many instances in the novel highlight the consequences of cultural differences and how cultural influences transform individuals. The varied cultural influences of the individuals redefine their identities and that leads to the transformation of their life.

Defining Culture and Identity

Culture, as suggested by Raymond Williams in the book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* by John Storey (2014), is "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (p.1-2). It is an embodiment of various practices, beliefs and ways of life pertaining to people and time. It varies according to different sects of people from different places. Their culture carries values connected to their lifestyle and environment. The individuals take in these cultural values and the impact of their cultural influences is reflected in their ways of life. The impact of cultural influences plays a prominent role in designing the identity of an individual.

Simon During, in his essay *Debating Identity* says identities "define *who somebody is* in terms of a trait, which might be anything from, for instance, a physical feature of a body, a belief, a genealogy or a cultural preference" (p.145). One's identity pertains to physical appearance, the portrayal of their behavior, intelligence, character and the way one projects oneself which helps others to recognize the individual. It helps to find out who a person is and what kind of role they play in their life and society.

Perception and Identity

In *A Delhi Obsession*, the nationality of a person is obvious from the very look of a person. It is evident through the line, "A wiry young man, barely in his thirties, already bald and very obviously of Indian origin" (p. 2). Even simple physical features can contribute to identifying an individual. Therefore, one's appearance holds a prominent role in identifying oneself. Identity, on the other hand, is also concerned about the perceptions one would receive. To manage the perceptions of others, the expressions of identities vary depending upon the onlookers.

The difference in expressions of identities is because every individual thinks that they are being noticed. When Munir met Mohini for the first time at the bar in the Delhi Recreational Club, Mohini Singh sat at the table where Munir Khan was seated as all the other tables were almost full. She was not very comfortable being seated with a stranger as she felt she would be noticed and it would cause her trouble. Mohini "looked edgy, perhaps didn't want to be seen seated with

a male stranger...” (p.7). She feels a sense of being noticed and it makes her conscious of it. Though Mohini personally did not mind being seated near a stranger, she was concerned about the way she would be looked at and talked about by others as she was “a married *Indian* woman” (p.9). So, she had to behave in a way her society wanted her to behave. This shows that people keep changing their identities according to the demands of the situation.

Culture Building Identities

In addition to that, religion is also a very important factor in identifying an individual. In India, being a Muslim has also become noticeable. When Munir was visiting places with Mohini, he was warned by her about his Muslim appearance. He wondered “What did a Muslim look like to Indians” (p.144) and even Mohini commented, “Just be careful, don’t walk into crowded area. Even without a beard you look a Muslim from mile off!” (p.144) as she felt it might drag him into problems. She was concerned about him as he had seemed to be unaware of the circumstances in India.

These differences between Munir and Mohini reflect their lifestyle. Munir, though his ancestors were Indians, was brought up with different cultural influences. He was born in Kenya and he later settled in Canada as a renowned writer. When he was leaving for India from Canada, he noticed some Indians who were heading back to India. “He found himself observing the returning Indians closely, with fascination. Am I like them? One of them? ...but he had thought of himself as a Kenyan, and he was now also a Canadian” (p. 5). This random thought of Munir shows that he had been experiencing different cultural influences. Whereas Mohini being born and brought up in India was way more concerned about being noticed by society than Munir. These differences in personalities depend on the cultural influences one experiences in their life and this modifies their identity.

Therefore, culture keeps on building identities with time. It occupies a major part in framing identities. The culture and identity of an individual are woven together, and they are interdependent. In his collection of essays *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz (2012) says, “There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture...would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts, fewer recognizable sentiments, and no intellect” (p.49). Every culture is intertwined with individuals who belong to it and the individuals grow along with their culture. For example, for Munir, “her Indian-ness [is] reminding him of his Punjabi home in Nairobi’s Eastleigh” (p21). Mohini, being an Indian, is brought up with Indian cultural values. Munir can identify her Indianness from her appearance and behavior. Moreover, while Mohini was worried about her relationship with Munir, “she was her Indian, Hindu self” (p.151).

Influence of Culture on an Individual

Culture influences people to a very great extent. Exposure to the ethnic values and customs of their culture directs the way they think and behave. Through culture, they gain knowledge about life, and they carry forward their values which helped them grow as individuals. Clifford Geertz in his essay *Culture, Thick Description and Local Knowledge* (2012) points out that “every individual is the product of his or her particular culture” (p.48). Henceforth, every individual is a cultural product as they grow up with the nuances of their cultural values imbibed within them. For

instance, when Mohini and Munir visited a temple, “Mohini covered her head with her dupatta, joined her hands and knelt before the idol...The priest gave them some water, which, following Mohini, Munir sipped from his hand, dabbing his head with what remained” (p.15). Mohini, as a Hindu woman, followed what she had to do in a temple according to her culture. It shows that the thoughts and behavior of individuals reflect their cultural influences. Individuals sustain the passage of cultural values through generations.

In the present scenario, globalization has facilitated travelling to and settling in foreign countries to a greater extent. It has become very common to travel abroad for education, job opportunities and various other purposes. Many people even settle in foreign countries and stay there for generations. They rarely visit their native country. Even if they visit, they do not wish to get settled again in their native. They get used to their life in the country they have settled in. This kind of lifestyle brings changes and differences in their attitude and personality.

Impact of Cultural Differences

Having settled in foreign countries, the individuals get used to a variety of people from different cultural backgrounds. They tend to shed and acquire values from cultures throughout the world. For instance, Munir was not interested in being identified by his religion. He wanted to shed his religious identity. When Mohini commented, “But you are a Muslim” (p.15), Munir retorted saying,

“...But I don’t describe myself by my faith.”

“How do people know you, then?”

“As just another person. A friend. A neighbor. An author.”

(p.15)

Mohini was not convinced, yet she accepted his opinion. She was able to understand their cultural differences. When Mohini was with Munir, she was contented and felt a sense of solace. On the contrary, she was worried about the society they were in. Being a married woman, she was unconsciously always aware of her surroundings. Their relationship was noticed, and she felt like being under surveillance all the time, though Munir was not very much aware of them. While Munir and Mohini met, Mohini often reminded him of their cultural differences. When they had to take an auto to visit places, Munir questioned the situation, and the discussion was as follows:

“What, no car and driver today?”

“No. The car was needed today.’ She paused, then murmured, ‘And these drivers talk sometimes.”

“What is there to talk about?”

“You don’t understand. You are from there.”

(p.28)

These words of Mohini imply that being a married Indian woman, she was not supposed to hang out with a stranger. Since Munir had come from Canada, it was not a matter of trouble according to him. Mohini’s Indian brought up and Munir’s mixed-up cultural influences are distinct in their discussion.

Connecting to and Realizing the Roots

Though modifications occur in one's cultural understanding, individuals keep hold of their native identity throughout their lives. But their native cultural values are overshadowed by the newly acquired values and those native values come out when they tend to get back to their roots. After a period of time in Delhi, Munir felt a sense of connection with the land. He felt happy and contented when he was in Delhi. It was palpable from the following words of the narrator: "He felt a strange sense of fulfilment in India, of just-so, of familiarity and ease" (p.144).

Munir was not very fond of his religious identity, but after his stay in Delhi and his relationship with Mohini, his forgotten identity started sprouting again. The religious identity which he had shed before seemed to get back to him. He remembered the days he celebrated Eid. The memories of those days seemed to ease his mind and soul. The narrator questions, "Eid Mubarak! Why this memory now, arriving after all these years, why Eid and the namaz prayer, when he had put it all behind him, to start his life anew?" (p. 229). Munir seemed to regain his religious faith, and he wondered at the changes he was going through.

When people return to visit their native country after being settled in a foreign land, they happen to learn more about their ancestry and feel connected to the land. Even when Munir was visiting places in Delhi, his memories of the past rolled back and kindled his connection with his roots. He felt that "he had never lived in any place where centuries spoke loudly from every direction" (p.22). This connection gives them a freshness which they cherish once they get back to the place they have settled. Throughout their life, they keep holding on to those memories of their roots while they live away from their real identity.

They come to know about their real identity and realize the changes that have happened in them in all these years. They carry a mixture of cultural influences, but their real identity gets refreshed when they try to get back to their roots. When Munir was busy visiting places in India, Mohini said, "You're becoming a real Indian" (p. 211). His hidden Indian identity seemed to express itself. Such circumstances encourage those who return to their native to get to know who they really are. Their real identity rejuvenates, and they feel a sense of fulfilment.

Culture and Identity: Shaping Individual's Personality and Destiny

Being a Canadian or an Indian or any nationality means that the individual carries the cultural values of that place. Once they move to a different place away from their native, they strive to adapt to the new place and the only possibility to adapt is to take up the new cultural values. Adapting to those cultural values modifies their identity. So, an individual belongs to a place by imbibing its cultural values and carrying them throughout their life.

Individuals learn every aspect of the new cultural influence and it modifies their behavior. No individual is void of identity, which means no individual has grown up without cultural values. On various occasions, the relationship between identity and culture is made obvious in the novel. Once Munir's daughter was "sitting across from him, legs crossed. The open cashmere sweater, the hair short, with a streak of red. The very stylish creased white pants. Very modern" (p.46). On seeing her he thought, "Had she become an American in her identity?" (p. 46). Munir was afraid that his daughter would bring up his grandchild as an American. Munir "didn't mind, if she was happy, needed an identity, a base to hold on to, to bring up her child or children in" (p.131). Henceforth, identity is strongly connected to one's culture. When Munir's daughter Razia gave

birth to a child, he said, “We are Canadians, and that’s all the identity I need” (p.131). He wanted his grandchild to be brought up with the cultural values of a Canadian. He wanted his grandchild to grow with the Canadian identity.

Culture Creating Identities and Identities Contributing to Culture

Culture provides ample values, and these values design one’s identity. One comes to know what to do and what not to do according to their cultural exposure. Their behavior and way of life highly depend upon the values taught by their culture. The process is reflected through various ways of expressing their identity. Every expression of identity is an implication of the cultural aspect of the individual. Their ways of thinking, speaking and behaving on different occasions are all voices of their cultural backup.

Identity is therefore a cauldron of cultural values. Culture adds and removes values in an individual, thus shaping their identity. Identity keeps transforming, depending upon the cultural inputs one receives through everyday life. It defines and redefines itself according to circumstances and experiences. It is expressed according to the values taught by cultural influences. Thus, cultures create identities through individuals and the individuals contribute to sustaining cultures through their identities.

References

- Chambers, I. (1988). *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*. Routledge.
- Connor, S. (1992). *Theory and Cultural Value*. Blackwell.
- During, S. (2005). *Debating Identity. Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge. (145-152).
- Dollimore, J. (2003). *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*. (3rd ed.). Duke University Press.
- Dollimore, J., et al. (1985). Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism. *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*. (2nd ed.). Manchester University Press. (2-17).
- Dollimore, J., et al. (1990). Culture and Textuality: Debating Cultural Materialism. *Textual Practice*. 4(1), 91-100.
- Erikson, P. (1987). Rewriting the Renaissance, Rewriting Ourselves. *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 38(3), 327-337.
- Felperin, H. (1990). *The Uses of the Canon: Elizabethan Literature and Contemporary Theory*. India: Clarendon Press.
- Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Penguin Books.
- French, A.L. (1972). *Shakespeare and the Critics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gallagher, C. (1989). Marxism and the New Historicism. IN H. Aram Veesser (ed.). *The New Historicism*. New York and London: Routledge. (37-48).
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Neema, P. (ed.). (2012). Culture, Thick Description and Local Knowledge. *Shakespeare and Contemporary Theory*. Bloomsbury Academic. (47-55).