



Identities as Palimpsests of the Boundaries and Constructs in Tabish Khair's *Filming*

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Abstract:

The issue of identity has been a major force to reckon with since the beginning of human civilization. With its already problematic stance, any kind of an upheaval in terms of geo-political shift further complicates the problems associated with it. Considering the event of Partition after the independence of India which not only cordoned physical locations but also created a cultural and psychological chasm, brings us to the cusp of identity crises in the people affected by it. The physical borders and geographical lines of demarcation limited human movement on one hand and led to displacement, rootlessness on the other, making the issue of identity all the more palpable. Even though issue of identity is not limited to and by the physical lines on land, yet, this geo-political marker precipitates the problematics of identity. The current paper shall examine the predicament of such a displacement and its concomitant events upon the people through the characters presented in Tabish Khair's novel *Filming*.

Keywords: Identity, Partition, alienation, displacement, belonging

Introduction:

The age-old issue of identity is known to have been directly or indirectly informed by various discursive constructs. The concept of identity has been endlessly conceptualized and fleshed out in all the disciplines. Even though there are many signposts and signifiers that inform and create an identity of a person, still this domain remains highly in flux. Quite aptly, Zygmunt Bauman has attributed the complement 'liquid' to identity as the elements that go into the rubric of identity formation are never fixed, are ever changing and contingent, especially in the current

globalized world. Yet, there are certain aspects of identity formation that are intrinsic to it and which press on the issue of identity even when the man has become more or less a world citizen.

To tackle with the conundrum of identity, we may first pin it down to certain identifiable tokens. As it goes, “An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (Burke & Stets, 3). Taking this definition further, Amin Maalouf’s simple understanding of a person’s identity also provides an astute stating point. He states: “What’s known as an identity card carries the holder’s family name, given name, date and place of birth, photograph, a list of certain physical features, the holder’s signature and sometimes also his fingerprints...” and then he continues to add to these, “...allegiance to a religious tradition; to a nationality—sometimes two; to a profession, an institution, or a particular social milieu” (Maalouf, 10). This simplified yet highly cogent explanation of identity saves us from the complex theoretical approaches to this concept and at the same time it leads us to the key words that are associated with the framework of this baffling concept. The most immediate facets that ascribe to an identity are ancestry/lineage, tradition/culture, and the social milieu. Then, there are the bigger categories like religion and nation. But within these small and big cohorts that offer humans a sense of belonging, there are many smaller and sublime ways in which a human creates different ways to belong. The boundaries of this concept in some cases can be as expandable as the horizons and in some cases as limited as to the walls of a house. This brings us to the point where identity becomes more of a character than a phenomenon. This also opens the floodgates of vast number of constructs that are attached with this concept.

Some of these constructs are espoused by Homi K. Bhabha through concepts like ‘stereotypes’ that are manifested upon the identity of others, for instance, the colonizer’s attribution of certain characteristics upon the colonized native through ‘fixity’ of notion. In another instance, the stereotypes associated with religious groups, castes, classes and communities can prove to be other sets of definitive brackets. When these discursive constructs are appended with physical borders and geographical lines of demarcation, they accentuate the identity problem even further. It then calls for an enquiry into aspects like displacement, rootlessness, and a quest for belonging which transcend the historiography of a nation, flaky tenets of religion, or veneers of societal norms and gives a peak into the lives of people as such.

This paper shall take the concerns of estrangement born out of conceptual and physical limitations imposed on human beings and try to understand how various displacements and subsequent boundary settings shape and determine identities. The displacement caused by the Partition of India in 1947 in two regions—one in the East and the other in the West—through Tabish Khair’s more recent novel *Filming* (2007) will provide a canvas to the issue at hand. Khair’s novel throws light on the upheavals brought around the birth of Pakistan. Keeping the major historical event of the Partition as the background, the paper shall move ahead and away from the physical border and the grand narratives towards the petit narratives of the people whose identities become the palimpsests on which boundaries of belonging were etched and re-etched across the time and space.

Tabish Khair's *Filming* (2007) presents simulation of a scenario wherein characters are rendered homeless within a homeland, and led onto a journey in the search of an identity. These movements are thrust upon the characters in the wake of social, political and religious insurgency during the event of Partition of 1947 and enforce upon them a pursuit for a new place of belonging. The novel showcases a world of fiction that is dexterously situated in real historical events rendering the characters amidst actual and imaginary states of exile. The characters seem to negotiate their existence between various cordoning wires, at times tangible and at times conceptual. Within the bigger scaffold of nation and Partition events, the novel traces the lives of three major characters—Chote Thakur (later Rajkunwar), Harihar (later Hari Babu), and Durga (later Bhubaneshwari) besides many other related characters. They all are situated in the Indian terrain which is witnessing the turbulence caused by the shifting of domains in the Northern plains of Punjab. Though they are initially untouched by its immediate effects, yet they are brought together by the shared search for a place of belonging. The aforementioned criteria of nation being a signifier of identity, does not bequeath this token of belongingness on them. All three of them are lost within their homes and the terrains of their homeland by virtue of being out of the social bracket of normativity. This brings us to another signpost that people derive their identity from and which also becomes an extension of their being—home.

Home is an abstract concept which in its essence reverberates with a person's identity. It is a symbiotic place where a person feels belonged and which in turn becomes a home because of this feeling. Oxford dictionary defines a home as “the place where one lives; a dwelling house; the members of a family collectively; native land of a person or a person's ancestors; an institution for person's needing care, rest or refuge; the place where a thing originates or is most common”. In another place, As Madigan et al. (1990), quoting Dupius and Thorns, 1996, indicates that “the literature on the significance of home ownership variously argues that it is a source of personal identity and status and/or a source of personal and familial security (Mallett, 66). And she quickly adds to say that “It can also provide a sense of place and belonging in an increasingly alienating world” (Mallett, 66). This exactly is the caveat in the concept of home. That is, the very home that is the ultimate desire of a human can often become that place which confronts the human with an inescapable alienation. Home, then becomes a site where the fixity of stereotypes becomes extremely condensed. Durga has no power over her body in her mother's home, Harihar is someone else when he is in the confines of his society, and Chote Thakur is denied, alienated and marginalized in his palatial *haveli*. The Partition of India and its woes are not able to reach them as the bigger homeland is yet to be experienced in a distorted home space of these characters.

The physical construct of nation does not impact them directly as their bodies are already displaced from their homes, and their safe space of belonging. Chote Thakur is a pariah in his Thakur clan for being effeminate and for having an inclination towards expressing himself through the body of a woman. He has been beaten and abused by his father endlessly for not being the successor of Thakur patriarchy in the village of Anjangerh. Harihar, on the other hand, is a middle aged widower who has taken a much younger prostitute, Durga, for a companion. He is driven by his dream for making it big in the field of cinematography and performs bioscope from village to village

while travelling on a rickety bullock cart. Durga, his partner, is another dreamer and misfit in the given social set up. Her little insignificant life is restricted to being a means of earning money for her mother. Along with the overturn of British from India, and subsequent turmoil within the nation's boundaries, Durga's life also takes a turn when she gets pregnant with Harihar's child and elopes with him. This event in her private life coincides with a major historical event on the Platoon bridge in Calcutta where the Non-Cooperation Movement is on full swing. The juxtaposition of these two events brings out the relevance of everyday things in defining who we are, what our identity is, even within a bigger frame of nation and world. The three characters meet each other in their search for the home, and an identity. Their characters are inscribed by the experiences of their displaced selves within the boundaries of society and nation. What they become and what becomes of them is a journey of their identity formation which mirrors the various constructs present around them.

The identities of individuals within the smaller circle of their lives derive from the bigger concentric containers of class, caste, community, religion and nation. However, these individual identities are not limited to and by the bigger categories. The point being, the identity is at once derived from a unique sense of belonging. This is definitely facilitated by the bigger groups that we are a part of or which subsume our smaller communes. However, the biggest sense of belonging is derived uniquely by each and every person, as does the characters in this novel by Khair.

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