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Identity in Trouble: Reconstruction of Identities in Post-9/11 Narratives

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Abstract: *The attacks on the American Twin Towers have disturbed the harmony and peace of the world. People who are well assimilated in America, become the victim of racial profiling and public annoyance, and suddenly they become the threat for America's national security. Their identities and loyalties have been questioned. To assimilate in America, it has become necessary for them to forget their culture, their language, and their heritage. Gayle Brandies *Self Storage* and Neesha Meminger's *Shine, Coconut Moon* do not settle for streamlined harmony. Both the novel show what it means to be a non-American in post-9/11 America.*

Keyword: *identities and loyalties, racial profiling, assimilation, harmony.*

In the time of globalization, identities have been reconstructed and restructured and national identity has faded in the dynamics of globalization but since September 11, 2001, the dynamics of identity formation have changed. With race/ethnicity, gender/sex, nationality, religion has become an important aspect in identity formation. People have forget that identities are structured through the relation to the 'Other', instead they have begun to see the 'Other' as a threat, and since September 11, 2001, it has become very common in America. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, the dynamics of American multiculturalism have changed. The discourse of nationalism and exceptionalism has caused a major backlash against cultural and religious pluralism. The hate crimes and racial profiling has increased since September 11 as Nadine Naber points out that there is a "1,600 percent increase in hate-based incidents against persons perceived to be Arab, Muslim, or South Asian in the United States between 2000 and 2001" (Naber 289). The death of many low wage worker and illegal immigrants has not been counted and their death remained completely silenced and unnoticed. The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers have dismantle the exceptionalism of American innocence and contributes to a global positioning of the memory of 9/11. Inés Hernández reminds us as: "Can this country see these oher faces? Can they hear these other names? Will they ever

understand that history is not just September 11, 2001, in any way” (as quoted in Däwes 203). People who are Muslims and those whose are perceived as a Muslim has been killed and attacked. Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner was brutally beaten and killed in Arizona on September 15, 2001 by a man determined to take revenge for September 11. It was the first reported case of hate crime against the Muslims and South Asians.

Gayle Brandies’s “Self Storage, Neesha Meminger’s Shine, Coconut Moon are endowed with their own voices. All of the protagonists fall victim to the physical and mental harassment either by the fellow American or by the security officials that leaves them wounded and some of them decides to leave their dream land but some of them fight back and retain their existence. All these novel offer the different vision of American multiculturalism which significantly enriches the cultural memory of 9/11 and its aftermath.

Gayle Brandies’s *Self Storage* is an account of Flan Parker who lives on the UC Riverside “wonderfully international community” with her husband and their children. People live like a family there until 9/11 happen. Since 9/11 everything has been changed especially for a couple from Afghanistan who lives in their neighbourhood. Their house has been attacked and they become the victim of racial profiling: “Their duplex had been egged twice since September 11” (19) and the slogans like “Terrorists live here” (92) are inscribed on their walls. But situation gets worst when Sodaba causes a car accident which injures Flan’s two year old daughter Nori. The media coverage of the accident makes the situation worst for Sodaba and her husband Raminullah, a “scientist studying plant pathogens” (169): “Most of the letters demanded that Sodaba be sent back to Afghanistan, demanded that all “towel heads” be sent back to Afghanistan, demanded, essentially, that anyone with Arab blood be sent back to the Middle East, or at least rounded up and detained” (133). People who call themselves liberal begin to show their true nature, they begin to voice their opinions: “those b***ds don’t belong on American soil” or “they should send her back to the Taliban, let them cut off her hands” (139). But Flan refuses to generalize the things and decides to confront Sodaba personally. During their conversation, Flan finds out that her husband Raminullah has been detained since September 11, 2001 on the name of registration at the immigration office and also comes to know that Sodaba is pregnant and at the time of accident she was trying to save her child and she already had three miscarriages and one still-birth. By their general conversation, Flan realizes that inspite of cultural and linguistic differences they have so much similarities: “That hadn’t mentioned in any article. I felt my own belly twist inside. So both of us had been scared of losing our babies on that day” (170).

When Flan finds out that Sodaba is facing deportation and her husband is also detained, she decides to help her out; firstly she hides her in a friend's storage unit and later at a Zen Center for refuge (240): "Sodaba had been my secret. My shadow. My unopened box (197). She arranges halal food for Sodaba and she also learns to respect Sodaba's faith and develops a solidarity with her: "She wears burqa because her sisters in Afghanistan have to wear them. She doesn't think she should be free if her sisters are not free" (235).

Like Sodaba, Flan also ultimately feels refugee experience when a fire forces her family to evacuate their house and take refuge in a shelter house. Because of her help to Sodaba, Flan Parker becomes a suspect. The FBI follows her everywhere so she decides to leave her residential area and on the road she begins to write in order to find herself "to store my story, my self" (251).

Neither Flan nor Sodaba settle down in their life, and it is the lack of fixity that reassures their happiness as Flan thinks: "We would find our way, whatever direction we might choose" (251). Both Sodaba and Flan, the immigrant and the American respectively, find their "self" on the move. The title of the novel is ambiguous: literally it refers to the yard sales that Flan organizes from self-storage auctions, as well as to the strange shelter for Sodaba but symbolically it refers to the contemporary American identity. In search for the place to store the "Self", Flan and her husband, Shae represent diverse schools of philosophy: Flan's passion for Whitman's poetry guides them into the future while Shae's dissertation on Baudrillard "and the Postnarrative Origins of Virtual Selfhood" (20) seems to create differences between a research scholar and his family. In the beginning of the novel, Flan thinks *Leaves of Grass* as a "campy old tract about marijuana" (12) but at the end it turns out to be her favorite book. The novel is intermixed with quotes from *Leaves of Grass*. In the contemporary multicultural debate, Gayle Brandies unambiguously has used Whitman's poetry as a sustainable source: "Whitman was a master at imagining himself in other skin. *I am large, he said. I contain multitudes*" (73). In the end of the novel, Shae also rejects Baudrillard and decides to write his own creative Opera scripts. Thus *Self Storage* celebrates mobility, democracy and pluralism and also confronts the reality of hate crimes.

Shine, Coconut Moon is a coming of age tale of a teenage girl Samar Ahluwalia aka Sam/ Sammy, an Indian American, who is unaware of her roots. Her mother intentionally cuts ties with her family so that Samar can assimilate in American society. Samar was well assimilated in American society until her uncle Sandeep turns up at her door after the September 11, 2001 attacks. He wishes to reunite the family and teach Samar about her roots. Uncle Sandeep's arrival makes Samar to think about her cultural heritage, her roots, and her identity. Uncle

Sandeep's arrival leaves Samar shocked as it is the first time in her life she has seen a turbaned and bearded man at her door step. The opening lines of the novel show the fear of 'turban' and 'beard' in post-9/11 America:

There is a man wearing a turban ringing our doorbell. I walk slowly up the driveway and stop a safe, short distance from him as he rings again. "Yes?" I ask, cautiously. Is this guy a salesman? Lost, asking for directions? Strange, weirdo lunatic? ... "You don't recognize me," he says... *Recognize* him? What is he talking about? Why would I recognize him? I *know* that I don't know any turban-wearing, dark-bearded, and mustached men... May be this guy *is* lost. (Meminger 1-2)

Uncle Sandeep's sudden appearance creates a storm in Samar's life. Samar who was well assimilated in American society suddenly feels the need to "know thyself". Though before September 11 attacks, Samar faces racial harassment in school but after September 11 and uncle Sandeep's appearance it becomes a day-to-day affair for her. One such incident occurs at her friend Molly's place where uncle Sandeep turns up to pick her and Molly up for study. She feels that after seeing a bearded and turbaned man most of the people at the party are shocked and reacted differently because "all those lost lives was linked to another bearded, turbaned man halfway around the world" (10). Samar who was perfectly blended with the MacFaddens, suddenly feels out of place in Molly's house and she becomes self-conscious. She feels like she is being "re-evaluated based on the latest evidence" (25). After seeing their awkward behavior, Samar, who was enthralled with anxiety at the sight of the turbaned man in the beginning of the novel, now wants to scream that her uncle is not a "terrorist, okay"? (25). Critics like Jsabir K. Puar, Sara Ahmed, Judith Butler, among others, have argued that the September 11 attacks have created a profound terror of Orientalized "Others" in the West. Chandrima Chokraborty writes that "the experiences of the fictional Sandeep in *Shine, Coconut Moon* reveal how the War on Terror effectively attached the word terrorist to those bodies who might, in the words of Ahmed, 'look Muslim' (Cultural 67-68) to an uninformed American public" (280). Thus, the post-9/11 political discourse has produced as well as controlled marginal individualities. Sara Ahmed discusses that "by projecting the threat of violence from home-grown terrorist into the public consciousness, the War on Terror incited ordinary citizens to look out for suspicious others into their midst (particularly, turbaned and bearded brown men), which in effect transmuted democratic citizenship into policing" (78). That is why Sandeep's turbaned and bearded body is seen as a threat to their nation by the Mac Faddens.

Even before September 11, Samar has been called by different names in her grade school like “paki; dsoo-doo skin, Ahluwahli-ali-alia, or All-you-wallies” (45), but after her friendship with Molly, a daughter of Irish-American parents, bullying and the name-calling has stopped, and she sticks to her “like glue after that” (30). Molly’s friendship gives her a shelter from racial assaults and supports her to assimilate in American way of life. Samar accepts that before September 11, she never spends time with Indian American teens neither at college nor anywhere else. Samar feels ashamed when despite of her Indian name, one of her classmate asks her “Are you from Trinidad or Guyana ...” (44)? And calls her “a coconut ... brown on the outside, white on the inside” (45). She also questions Samar: “Do you even know who you are? You need to learn about more than just your Sikhness; you need to learn about your American-ness, too! (103) Samar feels that she neither belong to America nor to India: “This is the first time someone’s telling me I’m not brown *enough*. It’s true I’ve always been like the center of a daisy, if daisies had dark centers. Surrounded by all these white petals: Molly, my best friend, and her family; Mike, my boyfriend, and his buddies; and just about everyone else except Mom” (45).

Due to her recent self-awareness about her culture and identity, her mind has been distracted from the studies. For the first time ever in her class, she feels like “a mixture of doo-doo skin, coconut, and bonehead” (50), as she tells uncle Sandeep, “if you ask me anything about who I am and where I come from, I might as well tattoo the word ‘clueless’ on my forehead’ (74). Because of her self-assertion, Molly calls her a “reverse racist” (15), and thinks that she exaggerates things but when uncle Sandeep’s car is attacked by the three school boys and they hurl abuses on him like “Go back home, Osama! No bombs on civilians here ... this is America” (55), Molly realizes that Samar is right. To Molly’s surprise all this is not new for him since September 11, 2001. People like him who are perceived as terrorists are facing harassment and racial profiling. Samar’s mother wants to save her from all these harsh realities and after knowing about the incident she fights with uncle Sandeep for bringing all this to her daughter, and only then Uncle Sandeep brings the reality before Sharan, Samar’s mother:

This is what you ran away from. And here I am, bringing it all back to your doorstep... And all these years everything’s been fine because you could pretend you don’t belong to us... “You could run away, fit in, and cloak your differences— become an upstanding assimilated American”. He further argues with her, “Why doesn’t Samar speak a stitch of Punjabi? Why has she no clue about her family? What does she know about her history, the struggles of her people?” (58)

Uncle Sandeep's words makes Samar realize her unawareness about Sikhism and its history. She begins to learn about Sikhism on the internet and becomes more curious. In the process to know about her culture and religion, she visits the *gurdwara* with uncle Sandeep but in the *gurdwara*, she feels more out of place than in church with Molly: "At least there I *knew* I didn't belong... Here, I feel like I should know all this stuff" (77). After spending some time in the *gurdwara*, Samar begins to feels that she belongs to this place and when she closes her eyes for the prayer, for the first time in her life, she feels the inner peace: "Little by little, a kind of quiet seeps into me, like a stain spreading on a paper towel. Uncle Sandeep, the old woman, Molly, Mom, Rick Taylor, Chuck Banfield, Simon Monroe, Mike, Bobbi Lewis, Balvir, tests, school... they all fall away" (79-80). Samar realizes that she is one of these people who are right here. They are 'my people'. She thinks that it is very exciting and amazing to dress up like your forefathers, speak their language and celebrate the same holidays like them. In order to know more about her roots, Samar decides to meet her grandparents with whom her mother has cut all ties.

Samar's process of realization of the "self" changes her beyond personal self to move to others like her—Balvir, Uncle Sandeep, and Shazia, who also suffer racial injustice in liberal America. The novel talks about valorization of civil rights in the United States, it also allows its teenage central character to not only "depersonalize" but also discuss cultural injustice. After September 11, 2001, most of the ethnic communities assert their identities, Samar hankers to ascertain her Indian roots, and she reaffirms her identity. Samar initially takes it an insult when a class mate calls her a "coconut" ("brown on the outside, white on the inside") but Uncle Sandeep tells her the positive aspect of being a "coconut": "the coconut is a symbol of resilience" (197) because "even in conditions where there's very little nourishment and even less nurturance, it flourishes, growing taller than most of the plants around it" (197). Uncle Sandeep's redefinition of the moniker in a positive way makes Samar to adopt it as a proud nickname for an online forum. After her "self" discovery, crevices advance between her and her best friend Molly, and she comes closure to Balvir and Shazia— "my "peeps" (242). She becomes a regular poster on South Asian forums and has "an entire cyber-community of former and recovering coconuts" where she openly talks about the positive side of being a "coconut". She tells all of them that "coconuts are very resilient and often grow taller than many of the plants around them, usually in less than optimal conditions (242).

Her mother, earlier, who insisted that she is not 'different' from others, realizes her mistake and tells her that it is very important to know about "thysself", and without our cultural heritage and identity we are nothing but "light feather, torn from the body of a free bird and drifting alone in the wind" (240).

Samar who struggles throughout the novel to write a paper on “the impact of the World Trade Center attacks on our lives”, after discovering her “self”, she finally starts writing, and titled it “American Heartbreak: A Personal Account of a National Tragedy”: “Is it possible to feel completely American as well as completely un-American? After September eleventh, I never felt more un-American in my whole life, yet at the same time, I felt the most American I’ve ever felt too” (150).

Uncle Sandeep makes her understand that it is very important to ‘know thyself’ (239) but we humans are interconnected with each other: “The more I know myself, *really* know myself, he says. The more I’ll see that there’s actually no difference between me and everyone else. “We’re not humans on a spiritual journey, Samar,” he always says, wagging a finger at me. “We are spirits on a human journey. Remember that” (239-40). Sandeep’s universal vision is the “beacon for intercultural understanding, but it does not erase cultural difference” (Däwes 216) as Samar thinks: “It dawns on me, clear as a summer sky, how wrapping a turban, speaking the language of your parents’ parents’ parents, and celebrating the same holidays that everyone before you celebrated are all like little thank-yous to those who survived”(81).

Thus both the protagonists discover themselves into contemporary America and both the novel criticize the meaningless violence and rupture after September 11, 2001, as well as develop a more general evaluation of hybrid American identity. Both the novel also show how different identities are unmade and remade in the time of global crisis.

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