

Cultural Memories In The Writings Of South Asian Diaspora Writers: A Study Based On The Writings Of Sara Suleri.

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Sara Suleri, a representative of South Asian Diaspora writers, chose the autobiographical style of narration in her works *Meatless Days*. The work is a memoir of her life in Pakistan. She has used memoir as a technique to describe the cultural memories of her home land in the Post colonial scenario. *Meatless Days* portrays the history of Pakistan's independence and her memories of her mother Surraya Suleri, her grandmother (Dadi), her siblings, her childhood friend Mustakori and her journalist father Zia Ahmed Suleri. Sara Suleri has her base both in Pakistan and in the U.S. Once she was a part and parcel of the Pakistani culture, her life in the west has made her analyze her life there in a different colour. The question of cultural identity as to where her culture belongs, can be read in her writings.

Key words

- South Asian Diaspora.
- Cultural Identity.
- The Technique "Memoir."

Introduction

According to the United Nations Classification of geographical regions, says Wikipedia, Southern Asia comprises the countries of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Iran, Maldives and Sri Lanka. The writers who migrate to other countries from South Asian countries are the South Asian Diaspora writers.

Diaspora is a minority living in exile. Diaspora literature always has the idea of homeland, since the authors would be settled in different countries like the U.S.A or the U.K. Literature that has the back drop of Diaspora has two distinctive types of writings. First is autobiographical style, with reference to the narration of self and second, a scholarly approach to the studies on Diaspora. Even though there is such a distinction, most Diasporic writings have certain similar features. First and foremost, the writers are entwined with the memories and the attachment of the homeland. It reflects in their writings. Major problem they find is with the culture. They cannot find themselves fully in the culture of their present settled land and the homeland. They try to take the best from both¹.

The South Asian Diaspora writers are very large in number. So the focus is given to the writer Sara Suleri, who is born and brought up in Pakistan and now settled in the U.S.A. Sara Suleri, a representation of South Asian Diaspora writer, chose the autobiographical style of narration in her work *Meatless Days*. The work is memoirs of her life in Pakistan. She has used memoir as a technique to describe the cultural memories of her home land in the Post colonial scenario. *Meatless Days* portrays the history of Pakistan's independence and her memories of her mother Surraya Suleri, her grandmother (Dadi), her siblings, her childhood friend Mustakori and her journalist father Zia Ahmed Suleri.

Cultural Identity.

The term cultural identity is an inevitable part when the cultural memory studies are explored. It is an identity of an individual based on the cultural, historical, religious, social and political backgrounds he/she has been brought up. Diasporic writers generally face the problem of identity. They are de-rooted from their homeland and replanted to a new culture. They find it difficult to identify themselves in either of the cultures. There are different terms associated with cultural identity like cultural pluralism, multiculturalism, identity of ethnic group and the like. Cultural pluralism refers to a smaller group of people who maintains their identity of their ancestry and accepts the traits of their present land culture. America, being, the land of immigrants, witnesses the crisis of cultural identity faced by the immigrants and it has a dominant culture, Nationalism, Sporting culture and artistic culture. South Asian Diaspora Writers form a major immigrant group in the United States.

Sara Suleri, being a Diaspora writer, who was born and brought up in Pakistan, has migrated to America as soon as she got a job in Yale University. Initially she found it difficult to cope with the cultural standards of the country; even though she stayed in England along with her maternal grandfather. The Islamic religion and its culture were so conservative and they made her mother follow the religion and its culture; also her mother has changed her name to Surraya Suleri and so all the children were strictly following the rules and regulations set by the father Zia Ahmed Suleri. The gender identity is the major problem that Sara Suleri indirectly hints all through her novels. In the first chapter of *Meatless Days* "Excellent Things in Women", she begins, "Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount of giving up the company of women."⁽¹⁾¹. In this chapter she speaks about the women in her family. In New Haven, where she currently lives, she thinks about the childhood and girlhood of herself, but could not identify the identity of her "self". A student once asked her as Sara Suleri was taking the class on third world literature, why she had not included women writers from Pakistan. Even though she could see the images of so many women – Dadi, Mamma, Halima (the maid) – she replied "There are no women in the third World."⁽²⁾². In the third chapter Suleri³ says that in Pakistan women were not received college education. She speaks about Kinnaird College, which is exclusively for women can be a symbolic representation of the cultural shift. She called it as a "historic terror" even though she got some intellectual enrichment from there. It was a prison for her. Some others

¹ *Meatless Days*

² *Meatless Days*

³ *Sara Suleri*

gained some sort of selfish motives from that institution. The character moulding of a woman could not happen in a “zenana khana”, the unenterable women’s rooms like that. Suleri has cultivated her identity since she was focussed. Being an expatriate she can authentically talk about Pakistan as well as the Western World. She convincingly explains the role of women members of her family in moulding her identity. In Pakistan, the word woman was not a part of the vocabulary⁴. Men enjoyed the freedom of themselves in the society.

Sara Suleri gives a clear picture of her brother Shahid, in the fifth chapter ‘The Right Path or They took the wrong Road’, who is three years older than her, who was brought up amidst girls. He always complained that Sara had engulfed his youth. They both had a very good relationship. Once she went to meet him, she got to know that Shahid had learned cooking. It was an astonishing experience to her. Knowing her brother very well, it took time to Sara to digest. According to her Shahid could be brought up differently and even he did not even take a decision of his own without the consent of any of the sisters. A similar type of situation is described, regarding the identity of a boy who grew amidst sisters in a Muslim family, in the Malayalam movie ‘Ustad Hotel’ directed by Anvar Rasheed. The character of the boy can be related to Shahid.

On observation it is found that Sara Suleri has not exposed her identity as such in the memoir *Meatless Days* instead she tried to portray the women members of her family and her friend Mustakori and her interactions with them. It could be her difficulty in identifying her identity as a girl or an adolescent in the Pakistani society or could be her urge to show the world that there were women in the third world. She tries to portray the situation of women, through the family members; in the Pakistani society including her. As a professor of Yale University she has created her own identity. But the tradition and culture what she has assimilated could not change. She normally wears “Shalwar Kameez” and sometimes she was called as “American Pakistani” by the natives of the U.S.⁵

Conclusion.

To conclude, Sara Suleri, through her work *Meatless Days*, was trying to give us her memories of her native land and childhood and her father respectively. The question what I raised in the introduction as to where her culture belies is answered here through the findings that even though she presently belongs to the United States, her true identity of culture is still in the land of Pakistan. She is a true Pakistani at heart and she exposes herself as a Pakistani and not “American Pakistani.”

⁴ See *women and identity in Pakistan*

⁵ *The Express Tribune, Interview by Saba Imtiaz, Feb 7, 2011.*

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ⁱ Shodhganga.inflibet/diaspora

