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Othering Identities and the Conflicts of Migration in Jameela Siddiqi's *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*

Jendele Hungbo

The question of identity has always been a major issue in cultural and literary discourse. For literature, the question of identity is a crucial one as it puts in perspective those issues that determine the categorisation of works and their producers as well as the communities for which such works are intended. As people take on different identities, depending on their history and cultural orientation, there is often the likelihood for them to be invested with new characteristics, both real and imaginary, based on certain observations and constructions made by others about them. The aim of this article, therefore, is to examine the fluidity of identities of both migrants and host communities as a result of migration and in spite of attempts at a conservative preservation of the culture of the 'homeland' by each of the two communities. While imagining the question of identity beyond the mere categorisation of colour and race, the paper seeks to expose the conflicts resulting from stereotyping, misgivings and the clash of cultures, which often lead to unceasing conflicts between 'host' communities and migrant populations, with reference to the Ugandan novelist Jameela Siddiqi's first novel, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* (2001).

Migration generally refers to the movement of people from one particular place which can be regarded as their 'home' to another place that becomes a 'new' home. The concept has, over the years, acquired different kinds of connotations which make it a very complex idea to deal with in any field of study. The difficulty of the term stems, in the main, from the different varieties of migration which can be identified in today's globalised world. From mere movements or dislocations to finding new homes in strange lands or settlements originally inhabited by other people, different forms of migration now define the location of different categories of individuals or groups. Such migrations have equally affected relationships among different races all over the world. As Angelika Bammer observes:

> The separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, exiles, or expatriates) or

> the colonising imposition of a foreign culture … is one of the most formative experiences of our century.[1]

The kind of separation that Bammer refers to is brought about by varying factors, which in most cases are beyond the control of the migrant population. In the course of such movements entirely new communities emerge while the likelihood of a kind of hybridised society is also a possibility. Where migrants decide to settle permanently and create a new home for themselves, we often find conflicts which arise as a result of the demarcation of identities between the original occupants of a particular location – those who claim to be natives – and the immigrant population who are seen as 'strangers'. This demarcation also comes in addition to certain characteristics, implicit and explicit, which give away the difference in identities. While original settlers seek to lay claim to the land and the opportunities it offers, migrants also find the need to assert themselves through a form of citizenship which then results in the othering of identities in a separatist fashion. The tendencies to take such acquired citizenship for granted and assume privileges, which may draw the envy of those who are considered natives, usually prepares the stage for different kinds of conflict that characterise communities with migrant populations.

In some other instances, the major source of conflict and mutual distrust stems from the imagining of Diaspora populations as 'possible political actors – as minorities'.[2] Strongly implicated in this process of identity creation, as Arturo Escobar observes, is 'the continued vitality of place and place-making for culture, nature, and economy' as a result of the dynamics of globalisation which alter the social ecology of various communities across the globe.[3] Place therefore becomes a major determining factor in the attainment of many goals, including the determination of privilege and the quest for its sustenance. In some cases, there is a resultant hegemony which also constitutes a potential source of friction in mixed societies as multifarious interest groups maneuver their ways towards cultural, political and economic domination of space. Concomitant with this is the obvious emergence of a subaltern group or identity which often materialises as a result of the contestation for space

[1] Angelika Bammer (ed.), *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (Bloomington, 1994), xi.

[2] Nauja Kleist, 'In the Name of Diaspora: Between Struggles for Recognition and Political Aspirations', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34 (2008), 1127.

[3] Arturo Escobar, 'Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization', *Political Geography*, 20 (2001), 141.

which characterises communities inhabited by different categories of people. The situation also becomes somewhat more precarious when the group which deems itself the host slides to the position of the subaltern with the attendant deprivations and loss of place which often becomes the norm in such circumstances.

The question of migration and the othering of identities are major thematic concerns in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*. The novel, which is the first to be written by Ugandan writer Jameela Siddiqi, chronicles the author's experience with migration and its effects on identity in a multicultural society represented by a fictional country called Pearl. Taken as a metaphor for Uganda in the 1970s, Pearl provides space for different groups or races who incidentally find the maintenance of social cohesion difficult as a result of prejudices which keep defining their relationships in an otherwise beautiful land. The narrative contains multiple plots. The first, and perhaps the most crucial to the appreciation of the multi-layered conflicts in the text, is told from the innocent perspective of an eight-year-old child, simply identified as The Brat. This aspect of the narrative carefully illustrates the politics of race, class, religion and gender which dominates existing relationships among the different groups resident in Pearl. The relationship of The Brat with the entire (Indian) Mohanji family helps to bring to the fore the dynamics of race relations and how different forms of stereotypes develop in the shared community. The narrative ends with the expulsion of Indians or Asians from Pearl which also signals the beginning of another round of migration.

Jameela Siddiqi provides a hint in the opening to the novel of the inevitability of migration. This she does through the idea of *qismat* or destiny which brings to mind the limitation of choice that an individual or even an entire community is able to exercise in relation to the issue of migration. The notion of rootedness also becomes problematic:

> Born in Bombay, raised in Mombasa, married in Kampala, educated in London, worked in Tehran, lived in New York, then Stuttgart, then Hong Kong, and died in Vancouver. Where was this person actually from? Where does anyone live these days?[4]

The inability of people to have total control over their destiny in terms of movement presupposes a fluidity of home or the idea of the homeland. It is

[4] Jameela Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* (London, 2001), 1.

usually convenient for people who are born in a particular place to so-called indigenous parents to see their homeland and therefore themselves as being spatially privileged over others who, for instance, are also born in the same location but to immigrant parents. It is quite clear that neither of these two categories of individuals have any role in determining either their place of birth or their ancestry. What this reminds the reader of, therefore, is the fact that 'everyone lives in a space inside their head' and 'when destinies become intertwined, the world becomes a very small place'.[5]

The notion of 'home' becomes problematic through the global concepts of travel, exile, migration and dislocation in addition to narratives of domestic life or inter-family relationships. The emergence of transnational kinships in the modern world has, indeed, further problematised the idea of home, rendering it fluid and complicated. As Habib Chaudhury and Graham Rowles contend, home is 'where we belong. It is our experience, recollections, imagination, and aspirations. Home provides the physical and social context of life experience, burrows itself into the material reality of memories, and provides an axial core for our imagination'.[6] In a way therefore the reminiscence of home never departs from the migrant individual as he journeys through life even when he is deemed to have physically settled in a new space, either welcoming or hostile. The major point to note here is the move away from a fundamental interpretation of home as a concrete or physical space to a more psychologically inclusive historical experience in the life of every individual, including the migrant. So in a sense, immigrants bring different national histories with them to their new places of settlement thereby affecting the socio-cultural dynamics of the new 'home'. The significance that underlies the memory of home for migrant populations is firmly established by Siddiqi as she draws attention to the way the Asians in Pearl hold on to their cultural practices and values which they have brought with them to the new space they now inhabit. The most obvious illustration of this is seen in the representation of the Mohanji family as one holding tenaciously to Indian ways of doing things while abhorring African and European ways of life. Another instance of this conservative attitude towards home is evident in the second plot of the novel where the mysterious moneybag who commissions an Urdu-speaking filmmaker to make a film insists on the film starring a famous Bollywood actress. Such practices

[5] Ibid., 1.

[6] Habib Chaudhury and Graham Rowles, 'Between the Shores of Recollection and Imagination: Self, Aging and Home' in Habib Chaudhury and Graham Rowles (eds), *Home and Identity in Late Life: International Perspectives* (New York, 2005), 3.

tend to bring to the fore 'the sustaining memory of home' through some form of 'imaginative and emotional homecoming'.[7] The construction of home, whether at the physical or imaginary level, is important for the individual as it is for many of Siddiqi's characters because this process 'provides the tools for both enduring and evolving possibilities of the self'.[8] In other words, the idea of home becomes a crucial element not just in the formation of identities but in the determination of the progress of the individual at different points in time. This way, home becomes a great influence on the past, the present and the future of the individual.

The concept of migration can then be approached from both metaphorical and literal perspectives. While at the metaphorical level we can find a shift in attitude or orientation which does not necessitate physical movement of the individual, migration in the literal sense presents us with a situation in which the individual is physically separated from a particular location. In *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, migration at the domestic level occurs as Mohanji's children keep shifting their roles in order to meet the aspirations of their father. Clear evidence of this can be seen in the manner that the children rotate their visits to the cinema and re-enact the actions seen at the movie for the rest of the family. The point here is that through a kind of migration the child who goes to the cinema acquires knowledge which he is made to transfer to the other members of the family on return. In the case of the six-year-old Brat, we encounter migration in varying dimensions. The invitation the Brat often gets to attend feasts in the homes of those who offer thanksgiving to God for accomplished wishes gives her an insight into the convolutions that characterise human existence and also a chance to learn about the world outside her immediate home, as made available via her mother. In a sense, therefore, migration holds its own value in the exposure and knowledge that it confers on the individual who embarks on a journey beyond his or her immediate habitat. Pearl, initially for the Brat, is no more than the coziness she sees in her immediate environment until she begins to explore the world outside her mother's cocoon:

> Gradually, the truth began to dawn on me. Yes, we too lived in the same world. It's funny how once I came to terms with the fact that our little paradise was not situated anywhere else but was also part of the

[7] Lesley Marx and Robin Cohen, 'Cinematic Representations of Diaspora: Italians and Jews', *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture*, 1 (2010), 13.

[8] Rowles and Chaudhury, 'Between the Shores of Recollection and Imagination', 13.

> world, I began to become aware of everyone's problems. It is then that I realised there was pain, and suffering and injustice.[9]

The Brat's relationship with the Mohanji family, on the other hand, serves to invest the narrative with a class dimension as she is able to see the kind of life lived by the not-too-educated Indian middle class who exist in different conditions from their upper middle-class compatriots in spite of the similarity of race. It is also important to point out here that the Brat is not static in age as she grows from a six year old to an eight year old over the course of the narrative.

The concept of home keeps redefining itself as it becomes more convenient for the individual to regard wherever s/he finds peace or comfort as home. In the course of doing this, however, various other intervening factors combine to create a new set of problems between the immigrant and the host population, and thereby turn the new home into a site of conflict where both the immigrant and the host communities are affected. The historical event on which Siddiqi's novel is based clearly illustrates this. The expulsion of Indians from Uganda by Idi Amin in 1972 fractured relationships and created social dilemmas for both the immigrant Asians and native Africans whose interest the regime pretended to represent. In addition to this was the economic downturn resulting from the collapse of businesses, job losses and the mismanagement of expropriated property after the expulsion. The cost of Amin's action can then be said to be enormous, pointing to the inadequacy of blaming 'aliens' for the socio-economic malaise of communities with considerable migrant populations. In terms of migration, a new wave of dislocation was kick-started as it became imperative for the Asians in Uganda to look for a new 'home'. The fluidity of home is further reinforced in the way the narrative ends in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*. The different kinds of dislocation that the characters in the novel suffer often leads them to look for new 'homes' instead of remaining rooted in a particular place or returning to a space previously occupied by them. The implication of this is that people continue to seek new zones of comfort as new challenges confront them in places they inhabit either as migrants or even as part of an indigenous population. The Widow, who survives the tragedy of deaths in the wake of the expulsion, does not return to India, which can be said to be her ancestral home, but rather relocates to Britain where she hopes to renegotiate space by capitalising on the obsession of the native Briton with

[9] Siddiq, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 4.

material wealth and unbridled desires through her mastery of dreams. This relocation, however, makes her more nostalgic as it becomes more difficult for her to find virgins to invite to the feast she had promised God for twenty years. For Jameela Sidiqqi, anywhere could be home but people, migrants especially, may not appreciate what the space they occupy at a particular moment means to them until they lose possession of it. As she notes in an essay on the 1972 expulsion of Indians by the Idi Amin regime in Uganda:

> the vast majority of Indians never thought of Uganda as home. But when ousted heartlessly – and inhumanly – many cried bitter tears for the 'homeland' from which they were being forcibly evicted. It took an expulsion to make Uganda feel like home.[10]

The pain of the fragmentation of life which the expulsion represents is given a more vivid description in Siddiqi's novel: 'Two weeks to park up an entire lifetime – a humanly impossible deadline – and then a massive, desperate, panic-ridden rush to the airport: a throng of brides all hurrying to get away, under a sentence of death'.[11] Home then becomes a significant space that is imbued with emotions that transcend mere geographical borders. The nostalgia which Zarine experiences in the novel notwithstanding, the point seems to have been made as to the import of home in the modern world. Home then becomes that place where, at a particular moment, the individual is able to live a comfortable life with little or no hardships. The fact that some of the killings witnessed during the expulsion were carried out by 'opportunist Muhindis' also gives the impression that the dangerous tendencies of the Diaspora are not the exclusive preserve of the host population.

The racial dimension to these issues also makes them crucial to the understanding of the dynamics of pre-expulsion Ugandan society which the author attempts to recreate. In representing the experience of the Indian community in Uganda during this period, Siddiqi supplies the reader with a template on which to examine the idea of migration closely, to consider its effects, and to appraise the question of the ownership of space as represented by various nation-states whose borders are now clearly marked and whose citizenship have also become fluid because of the need to be in tune with the

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[10] Jameela Siddiqi, 'Uganda: A Personal Viewpoint on the Expulsion 30 Years On', *Information for Social Change Journal* (Summer 2002), http://libr.org/isc/articles/15-Sidiqqi-1.html [accessed 12/10/2007].

[11] Siddiq, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 281.

realities of the new world we live in. The story is presented to the reader in the context of racial, religious, cultural and sexual contradictions brought about by the contact between two different cultures. The culture of the diaspora community of the Gujarati shopkeepers as seen in the lifestyle of the Mohanji family and more elitist professional Indians like Mrs Henara who moved to the British-colonised part of East Africa, in this case Uganda, immediately after the Partitioning period, is presented in contrast to that of the indigenous black community where people see themselves as bearing the brunt of colonialism on two fronts. From a literary perspective, the question of identity and national affiliation becomes complex and indeterminate with the new mode of multiculturalism that becomes the norm in an infiltrated society. As Dominic Head observes, 'the novel has proved to be a fruitful site for investigating the hybridized cultural forms that might be produced in an evolving, and so *genuinely* multicultural [society]'.[12] Through the eyes of the Brat, Sidiqqi tells the story of the multicultural community that Pearl represents while at the same time examining the depth of the human condition through the experience of Diaspora. In addition to this, we also encounter in Pearl how the domineering tendencies of immigrant populations may also be detrimental to the nation and its nationals.[13]

At the level of religion, questions of faith usually engage a lot of emotion as it becomes for many people an integral part of an identity which cannot be compromised. This generates another level of conflict in societies inhabited by migrants. Some migrants carry with them elements of faith which may be at variance with the beliefs of their hosts. In some cases, religious conflicts erupt among people of the same faith or ethnicity. In *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, this conflict is evident in the relationship bringing the Brat in contact with the bald-headed but heavily bearded Guru and the Maulama. While each of the religious teachers would like the Brat to seek knowledge in accordance with their own religions, she chooses to believe in an 'obscure' Moon God–Moses and the 'Ten Condiments'–thereby creating a crisis of confidence as both the Guru and the Maulama find her character too strange for comfort. When, for instance, a singer encourages the Guru to respond to the inquisitiveness of the Brat he (Guru) simply dismisses her on the basis of her faith:

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[12] Dominic Head, *Modern English Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge, 2000), 156.

[13] The word 'national' is used here to refer to any citizen of a state who displays allegiance to that state irrespective of the controversial dimensions to citizenship often brought to the fore by questions of ancestry.

> She just likes hanging around where she's not wanted. She's not even from among us. They are Muslims. Her mother likes listening to bhajjans, so they come here, and I never stop them. This is God's house after all and everyone is welcome. And then the Muslims in town are so reasonable, completely in line with our Panchayat … We're all Indians you know, same culture, bhai-bhai, we can all get on. [14]

This othering of the individual on the basis of faith speaks to the question of conflict not just among different religious beliefs but at times within the same religion in the proliferation of sects. Social cohesion is almost always threatened where there are religious differences and migrants often have a deep sense of commitment to the protection of religious capital. Religion at times becomes a tool with which they negotiate contacts and socialise themselves into the community of fellow immigrants who they find useful for survival purposes. In this vein, there are instances when religion becomes a pull factor for migration or for a migrant to identify with a particular group of individuals.

In spite of the multiculturalism that permeates societies like Pearl, where migration has resulted in a hybrid population, the struggle for space, economic and political power often leads to serious dichotomies which set the stage for the 'othering' of identities. The process of 'othering', which seeks to draw a line between a particular group and another based on cultural practices and perceived orientations, usually begins with an aggregation of stereotypes and an analysis of the implications of the presence of the 'other' for the well being of a group. In history, there are cases where migrant populations have become so powerful as to enjoy more privileges than 'natives'. A good example of this is seen in the relationship between colonial powers and the subjects of the colonies where certain privileges accrue only to the colonisers whose presence in the first place was brought about by migration. Such a development was personified in the apartheid institution of the old South African order. As Mahmood Mamdani points out, there are different political logics applying to different categories of people and even in different geographical spaces in the bifurcated colonial state. In this case, even the rights of free association and political representation are denied on the basis of racial and racist exclusions.[15] In this instance, citizenship becomes a thing that people struggle to attain

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[14] Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 191.

[15] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (New Jersey, 1996), 15.

when the concept is viewed from the point of view of what volume of rights or privileges accrue to individual subjects. In *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* the overt domination of the economic space coupled with oppressive profiteering and capitalist tendencies displayed by the immigrant Indian population sets the stage for conflict. Mrs Henara's conviction that 'Mohanji added sawdust to the red chilly powder to increase its weight' is, for instance, a potential source of mutual suspicion and conflict which defines the relationship between the upper middle class and the lower middle class represented by the individuals concerned.[16] Another crucial contention represented in the text is illustrated in the treatment meted out to the Black Africans in the culture of water distribution:

> Unofficial apartheid manifests itself in the strangest of ways. The Africans were sold their drinking water in empty jam or fruit tins, complete with jagged edges where the tin had been clumsily and primitively cut open. It required real skill to drink from such a container without shredding your lips. The Indians got their free drink of water in a stainless steel cup, but good manners dictated that the mouth should not be allowed to touch the cup … But European hippies received a real glass into which to pour their free beers and sodas, which were then sipped from multi-coloured, candy-striped straws.[17]

The repulsion felt by the author resonates in the way she introduces the issue of water which is considered a basic amenity in any society. The blame for the indecent treatment of the Black Africans is squarely laid on Mohanji: 'he then charged Black Africans ten cents for the privilege of being able to drink an ice-cold version of the sweet water of their own land, a land abundant with rivers and fresh water lakes'.[18] This kind of discrimination on the basis of colour reflects a provocative humiliation of the native, degradation of the self and hegemonisation of the White 'other' which defines the politics of power and identity as represented in the text.

Even with cosmopolitan citizenship, which is one of the major stakes of globalisation reinforced by free movement of labour and capital, this kind of imbalance is noticeable in the way privileges are conferred on different categories of people in spite of the attempt to present the entire world as

[16] Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 47.
[17] Ibid, 17.
[18] Ibid.

the constituency of everyone irrespective of nationality. This division is, in fact, becoming more obvious with the neo-liberalism of multi-national corporations like the soda manufacturers alluded to by Siddiqi in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*. From all indications, Pearl has two forms of invasion to contend with; the one imposed on it by colonial authority and that which is posed by the new community of settlers who have found a new haven in this land. These examples further signpost the strife between the rhetoric of globalisation and the reality of nation-statehood as 'many people in the contemporary world are structurally placed so as to have multiple loyalties' like the colonial masters and the Indian settlers in Pearl.[19] This kind of structural alignment brings to mind the fact that the 'ecumenical or universalistic and inclusionary political culture' which the disciples of unbridled globalisation often attempt to force down the throat of the entire universe is 'limited in its reach and import by identity politics'.[20]

The politics of identity, which often characterises communities inhabited by natives and migrants like we have in Pearl, provides a huge amount of material for study of the frosty relationships that sometimes develop between migrants and their hosts. In fact, a good proportion of the crisis spots in the world today have come into being as a result of migrancy and its after effects. In most cases, such crises are a product of the contestations for power which produce different kinds of hegemonies or the attempt by one group to unjustly dominate the other. Inasmuch as we can plead the inevitability of migration in the world we live in today, the lack of proper understanding of the different cultures that keep grappling for space in the resultant multicultural society remains one major factor that keeps making the avoidance of conflict in such societies a mirage. Adekunle Amuwo, though vilifying the host community for a shortcoming which is not its exclusive preserve, contends that:

> Cosmopolitanism is a fascinating phenomenon, but is often limited and circumscribed by the backgrounding and foregrounding of different cultures and the inability or unwillingness – or both – of host cultures and peoples not to dialogue with – or even attempt to understand – the cultures of the different others … In other words, whilst, on the

[19] Thomas Eriksen, 'Rethinking Ethnicity: An Alternative Approach to the Study of Identification' in Trude Andresen, Beate Bull and Kjetil Duvold (eds), *Separatism: Culture Counts, Resources Decide* (Bergen, 1997), 51.

[20] Adekunle Amuwo, 'Cosmopolitan Citizenship and Identity Politics: A Theoretical Exploration', Paper presented at Wits University Symposium on Cosmopolitan Citizenship, April 2007.

> one hand, we are living in a supposedly exciting world – a world of multiple identities and imagined cosmopolitan citizenship – we are also confronted with the territorial hegemony of particularistic cultures that assail and rubbish cosmopolitanism.[21]

The problem with this lack of understanding and the absence of willingness in appreciating the other is clearly not that of the host community alone as Amuwo contends but that of both sides. In fact, the opposite of Amuwo's thesis is presented in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins* where the migrant population distances itself from the host to the extent that it is completely unwilling to risk the taboo of inter-racial marriages. The green-eyed second born of Mohanji is the least intelligent of his children, yet as the narrator states:

> He is the nicest looking of all the Mohanji boys, and many Dukavallas hoped they would acquire just such a son-in-law via their virgin daughters. But the green-eyed one disappointed everyone by falling in love with a Black African girl. Mohanji maintained she had used 'Jadoo' – witchcraft – to ensnare a good-looking Indian boy.[22]

For Mohanji and his fellow Indians, racial orientation forbids any genuine love between a Black African and an Indian. The tragedy of the violent death which the girl suffers in the text points to the desperation which attends such racial biases in multicultural societies. This violent prohibition of miscegenation, which tends to further fracture society in various other ways, is reminiscent of the Immorality Act (1950) in apartheid South Africa. In Pearl, as was the case in South Africa, there is an overt construction of the black population as so degenerate as to warrant a containment of its genes or, where outright containment proves ineffectual, avoid a contamination of the other race(s) which erroneously confers on itself a phoney superiority.

It is instructive to point out the importance of dwelling on the institution of marriage here. In one sense, marriage can be read as a form of migration because of its association with movement and relocation; it signifies a kind of fraternising intercourse between different cultures or different classes of people. In the case of the different races in Pearl, marriage would have been one of the institutions to be deployed for cultural translation and better integration but for the lack of willingness on the part of the different racial

[21] Ibid.

[22] Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 16.

groups and the superiority strife which makes such contact impossible. This kind of discrimination also tends to deny the essence of migration which has a productive creativity in both biological and epistemological terms. The issue of marriage, in another sense, brings to mind the census politics which marks multiracial societies. In this instance, population is a kind of power and if we are to think of the import of modernist democratic culture, the idea of the majority in terms of number becomes crucial in the question of access to power. To give out a daughter especially in marriage would be to inadvertently add to the population of the other as a result of the inherent productivity that defines the institution. The culture of separation which is encapsulated in the aphorism, 'Don't mix with the natives', is further strengthened by the establishment of a separate morality committee to moderate Indian moral values. In the novel, the 'Panchayat' or The Indian Morality Committee of Five Elders who are at the same time the 'Custodians of Shame, Honour, Dignity and Female Chastity' are bothered only by the affairs of Indians in the community as the blacks are not considered 'civilized' enough to handle moral conflicts involving the Indians because 'they were as shameless as the Whites'.[23]

The assumption of cultural superiority is also carried on to the gastronomic level in the novel. Food is no doubt a very important element in the institutionalisation of culture in that it occupies a pride of place as one of the major markers of cultural difference. It should be noted, for better understanding of this difference, that what is considered food in a particular culture may not be seen as such in another. For people in the Diaspora, therefore, food can even be a rallying point where cultural memory is evoked and a sense of satisfaction can be conjured. The celebration of the feast which runs through the narrative as well as the constant cooking and the abundance of food in Mohanji's house can be seen as foregrounding what Michael Duffy refers to as 'gastronomic chauvinism'.[24] The fact that Mrs Henara allows her child to attend the feast and also eat the food can be seen as a kind of cultural solidarity given vent by the perceived assurance of gastronomic security. As the Brat informs:

> Even my snobbish mother always insisted I go, although more often than not, these events were held in poorer neighborhoods. Not the kind of areas my mother would normally have approved of. But class

[23] Ibid., 45.

[24] Quoted in Gesa Stedman, 'Pox on Your Raggi, Your Supos, and Your Catlotti: Literature, Cultural Exchange and Gastronomic Chauvinism in Early Modern England', *European Journal of English Studies,* 10 (2006), 270.

> difference temporarily collapsed on such occasions, for this was an essential religious ritual.[25]

Gesa Stedman reminds us that:

> Food in general is a useful marker of cultural exchange because changes in diet as well as changes in the representation of diet tell us something about the way one culture reacts to the impact of another, not only in material terms but also in terms of self-definition and self-fashioning.[26]

Added to the question of identity and definition is the gratifying and consummative dimension of food, especially for people living in places that are at a far remove from their 'original' home.

The portability of identity and memory which makes it possible for people to traverse both spatial and temporal spaces with a good amount of their cultural heritage can be adduced as one of the major reasons behind the possibility of a proliferation of cultural practices which, when not properly managed, degenerate into conflicts in multicultural societies. Apart from the obsession with food which we find in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins,* there is a preponderance of the popular art forms of the migrant population which, as the writer suggests, dominate the art space to the detriment of the cultural heritage of the natives. This is evident in the central stage taken by Bollywood in the novel as well as by the presentation of Indian popular music as the most appreciated form of music from the cacophony of sounds at the Market Square:

> Sewing machines screeching in tune with dozens of shop-radios blaring Indian film songs, and occasionally, very occasionally, the sounds of African pop music–Congolese bands–hastily lowered in volume, in preference to the orchestral sounds of Bollywood. It was proudly asserted by the likes of Mohanji that if the shop radio pumped out melodies from Shankar-Jaikishen and O. P. Nayyar, then his Black customer volume doubled. This was cited as proof that the Blacks, the indigenous native population to whom this beautiful country belonged, were, after all, capable of understanding and appreciating the finer things of life.[27]

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[25] Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 3.

[26] Stedman, 'Pox on Your Raggi, Your Supos, and Your Catlotti', 270.

[27] Siddiqi, *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, 14.

The endangering of the culture of indigenous people which this kind of scenario engenders can only be a breeding ground for conflict. In contrast to the man on the street, the black government, which seeks to protect the cultural heritage of the land, is likely to see any attempt at abrogating indigenous culture as a danger to the normative practices of its people.

Proponents of global integration often seek to convince us of the immense benefits of a seamless transnationalism. But evidence, as we see in the trajectory of the Asian and black African populations in Pearl, has shown that migration does not necessarily reduce disparities in development across the world. Some ethnographic studies have shown that multiculturalism, if not properly managed, further fans the embers of discriminatory imagination of identities which tones down development or at least skews it in favour of a particular group.[28] As Dhoolekha Raj rightly observes, 'multiculturalism is a product of a sociocultural environment in which "otherness" is an overt policy concern'.[29] This concern usually stems from the advantages and disadvantages as well as the lack of balance in the distribution of opportunities which attend the concept of transnational identification in the modern world. Therefore, migration and inequality have continued to assume a kind of mutuality that dictates some form of circumspection when we try to consider the implications of transnationality and its underpinnings.[30]

The vulnerability which the politics of identity generates tends to detract from what ordinarily should have been the gain of transnationalism for communities populated by a democracy of cultures. The basic idea of cultural relativity presupposes an allowance of space for the cohabitation of a multiplicity of customs and traditional practices which, in the course of interaction, should have resulted in a form of creativity and robust egalitarianism which could have made even the migrant feel, in the words of Doris Sommer, 'at home abroad'. As Sommer suggests, the oxymoronic sense which comes out of the 'othered' hyphenated identities of people makes it

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[28] Conrad Kottak and Kathryn Kozaitis, *On Being Different: Diversity and Multiculturalism in the North American Mainstream* (New York, 2003); Lorraine Brown, 'An Ethnographic Study of the Friendship Patterns of International Students in England: An Attempt to Recreate Home Through Conational Interaction', *International Journal of Educational Research,* 48 (2009), 184–93; Maykel Verkuyken, 'Immigration Discourses and their Impact on Multiculturalism: A Discursive and Experimental Study', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44 (2005), 223–40.

[29] Dhooleka Raj, *Where Are You From?: Middle-Class Migrants in the Modern World* (Berkeley, 2003), 190.

[30] Different forms of migration are also bound to bring varying effects in their wake.

difficult for them to show a complete sense of belonging which, in certain cases, should have been to the advantage of the community.[31] Cultures, no doubt, have a way of rubbing off on one another. In multicultural settings, therefore, it is possible for people to select aspects of cultures other than their own which can be of benefit to them in the way they grapple with the challenges of daily life and the overall understanding of the realities of the hybridized community which they have to confront. In other words, the coming into contact of different cultures ought to provide an opportunity for people to take advantage of more diverse positive ways of dealing with the challenges of the modern world than be an incentive for rancor as we witness in *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*. The manifest opposition which marks relationships among the Africans, Indians and Europeans who all dwell in Pearl makes the kind of social cohesion required for the reaping of such benefits a remote possibility.

It is becoming more obvious by the day that as borders keep collapsing people will have more reason to migrate. Even within the geography of nation-states, as Paul Silverstein argues, 'there has occurred a series of shifts in the imagination of internal and external boundaries'.[32] These migrations will also continue to produce multicultural societies in which identities become multiple. The need to shift ground and transcend sentimental differentiation of the non-inclusive population as the 'other' and be prepared to negotiate the borderlines of identity to let others in will presumably become more urgent. There is a need to embrace that pragmatic spirit which John Dewey describes as a revolt against the 'habit of mind which disposes of anything by tucking it away in the pigeon holes of a filing cabinet'.[33] The 'babelization' of identities which is likely to attend a failure to find conciliatory means of approaching the question of space, citizenship and nationality can only lead to further conflicts which, in the long run, confer no special status, in the real sense of the word, on any hegemonic group. Since 'foreignness' suggests that which is unhomely and unfamiliar, a more careful approach to labeling in the process of identity politics will, hopefully in the long run, 'bring home' the excluded and create a diverse cross-cultural new nation in which suspicion may give way to solidarity and a better understanding of cultural differences brought about by transnational identities, be they prefixed or hyphenated. Though it may be

[31] Doris Sommer, 'At Home Abroad: El Inca Shuttles with Hebreo' in Susan Suleiman (ed.), *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (Durham, 1998), 109–42

[32] Paul Silverstein, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race and Nation* (Bloomington, 2004), 75.

[33] Quoted in Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, 1998), 23.

inconceivable to think of a world without the 'other', the more people come to terms with the phenomenon of migration and its inherent implications the quicker we are likely to attain a regime of fewer conflicts arising from cultural tensions and, by implication, a less volatile world.

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