

Alienation in The Girls from Overseas

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Nergis Dalal is one of the prominent Indian English writers in post-independent era. She published the novel, *The Girls from Overseas* in the year 1979. The novel, *The Girls from Overseas* is nothing but comprehensive study of foreigners in their close relationships with Indians in India. The important female characters in the book are five alien girls who belong to different cultural background. These are Lousie (Canadian), Michelle (French), Sandy (American), Jane and Gertrude (British). In fact, all these females represent their different racial and cultural characteristics through their manners and behaviour. In this foreign land, India they have the feeling of togetherness among them that rests on only one thing- India is not their country. This shows their feeling of alienation and in order to compensate they come together. So, all these girls meet every week for coffee at one or other of their houses to deliberate over:

"The million problems, they encountered each day by just being foreigners in an alien land."¹

The same kind of feeling can be explained with another example from *Bye Bye Black Bird*. Adit Sen and Dev are the male protagonists in the book residing in London. There, Adit Sen married Sarah and Dev married Bella, both English girls. In the beginning out of curiosity for the alien land they feel comfortable but the feeling of alienation gradually surfaces in them due to cultural contradictions. English wives try their best to adjust with Indian husbands in vainly and their husbands, to free themselves from the feeling of rootless ness in an alien meet their compatriots regularly like the foreign girls in *The Girls from Overseas*. A critical

comment made with reference to Adit Sen and Dev in *Bye Bye Black Bird*, indicates the same thing:

Sarah, with all her understanding and co-operation, finds herself misfit in company of the Indians who gather periodically at some ones' house. She and her white acquaintance, Bella married to another Indian faik to appreciate Indian Jokes that go round in such gatherings.²

One more thing that creates friction in between the Eastern and the Western culture is that all these foreign women hobnob at the parties and at their houses. They don't feel anything odd in it. They drink together to celebrate and to ease their tensions. So, the readers come across various brands of wine mentioned in the book. Jane very easily asks her friends:

"Come on let's go inside and have a drink."³

On the contrary in the Indian conservative society drinking by women is not permitted and tolerated. It results in cultural clash. The cultural differences could be observed through the following examples. Lousie, a Canadian girl married Dinesh. She had been in India for five years. She truly loved her husband but there was feeling of separateness in her mind. She finds a kind of communication gap in between her and other members of the husband's family. The statement of Louse projects her aloofness:

"You know foreigners marrying Indians should be given an orientation course."⁴

In one of the passages, Lousie said that she couldn't adjust with the Indian culture and its people she has aired her hatred about so-called backwardness of the country. In her opinion, in India children are forced to over work, girls marry at an early age, stray cattle wander on the roads and no one

cares for it. At the same time beggars and handicapped people sit by the sides of the road. Despite of all these, she tries to adjust with the society to which she was totally alien but becomes unsuccessful. The thinking of the foreign girls could not be matched with their respective Indian families.

This disparity of thoughts makes them feel alienated. Nergis Dalal through Lousie and her mother-in-law delineates the difference in thoughts and cultures. Lousie was shocked by the system of arranged marriages in India. In India according to her marriages are arranged by consulting horoscopes between a young man and girl who are totally strangers. This system of marriages considered immoral by Lousie. But her mother-in-law with the same intensity as that of Lousie disapproved love marriages. Thus, this is one more contradiction in the eastern and the western culture:

Horoscopes were consulted and marriages arranged between two young people who often total strangers to each other, a practice that Lousie considered as shocking and immoral as Dinesh's mother considered of love marriages.⁵

The living styles and dressing manners of the foreign girls didn't fail in showing their separateness from the Indian society. The novelist has cleared the point through Gertrude. Gertrude, an English woman married Mr. Das before thirty years but she couldn't adapt herself to the native culture and manners. She never wore sari, the symbol of Indian culture. Four of the five women wore saris on special occasions but they couldn't wear properly.

One more reason discussed in the novel that prompted these foreign ladies, not to accept Indian culture as their own is their superiority complex. Nergis Dalal brings this to the notice of the readers with the help of Gertrudé. Gertrude in one of the meetings exhorted her friends to preserve their individuality and safe-guard their separateness. She asked them not to demand and accept Indian citizenship. Gertrude makes scathing indictment against Indian culture and people, which shows her hostility and hatred. This attitude of foreigners widens the cultural rift. Gertrude said:

"And as for identifying with this country, on the contrary, I have done everything possible to retain my separateness. I have no desire at all to merge with people who are at least a hundred years

behind the times, who use bullock-carts, pile their filth on road sides and have no sense at all of public sanitation. All their western sophistication is surface deep and underneath they are violent people, with violent emotions. Every moment that I am outside of my house, I am assailed with this violence, this filth, this cruelty to their own kind as well as to animals. They are savage people and don't tell me about their ancient civilization. We are like prisoners who must stay forever in this jail".⁶

In Indian culture mother has been given the place of God. Indian mothers are characterized by their special cares for their children but the western materialistic culture of Jane forces her to misunderstand the affection of her mother-in-law for Dr. Sunil, Jane's husband. The feeling of Jane is exposed through the following quotation. Jane said:

"I am sure that, they all have this secret desires to sleep with their sons."⁷

A critic's evaluation of Jane, stresses her sense of detachment:

"She fails to find any meeting ground with Sunil and 23 his family."⁸

In this novel, the novelist has delineated the theme of alienation not only through cultural differences and manners but also she supported it with nature and geographical facts. As Sandy felt:

"There is much difference between the temperate and tropical zones as there is between night and day and there is equal difference in the day to day life and mind."⁹

Emphasizing the influence of nature and geography of the particular area on human nature a critic points out:

"If man allows the natural differences in temperature to have proper effect on him and argues on the basis of that experience, it will not be long before, he will arrive at a more realistic estimate of the different mentalities of man beast and plant in different climates."¹⁰

Nergis Dalal hints skillfully at the cultural distinctions by giving the example of the manner in which houses are decorated and different deities are worshipped. When Jane married Dr. Sunil, she had made lot of alterations in the house as per her wish. One can better say as per her culture. She changed the dark colour of the walls to plain and white. She removed embroidered cushions and chair backs and

coloured pictures of the gods and goddesses that is the particular method of decoration generally practised in India. The eastern culture and its characteristic, which distinguishes it from other cultures, is well exhibited in the following extract.

"Here they hung pictures of Krishna sporting with the gopies and filled the small alcove with garishly coloured plaster statues of the gods. Here, they burnt pungent incense sticks."¹¹

It appears failures of all the alien women to adjust with the eastern culture, despite their hard efforts and their subsequent feeling of detachment is revealed by a critic, O.P.Bhatnagar in his critical essay:

"The girls have nothing in common with themselves yet they move ghostly camaraderie in the shadows of their self imposed isolation."¹²

The critic further comments:

"They live in the closed world of their foreignness and refuse to come out of it."¹³

Thus, in India foreigners come across strange social norms and cultural principles that make them feel intensively that they are in the alien land. One can conclude with the following opinion of the critical analyst:

"The foreigners meet on the intellectual plain but they find it hard to merge with the socio' cultural and ethicomoral order and styles of Indian life."¹⁴

Thus Nergis Dalal, the novelist very skilfully presents feeling of alienation among the protagonists, which is the product of cultural and emotional differences.

References:

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