

Dislocation and Identity Crisis in Kaiser Haq's Poems

Saimuna Tarin, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Southern University Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper investigates the dislocation and identity crisis of people in South Asia presented in the poems of Kaiser Haq, the preeminent Bangladeshi poet in the English language. The people of South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, are fascinated to migrate to European or American countries in search of a better living, better education, and secure life. Some of them are forced to leave their country to avoid social or political turmoil they somehow get entangled with. In Bangladeshi society, some people are dislocated from one region to another and must endure various trials and tribulations only to survive. People of rural areas in Bangladesh sometimes tend to leave their permanent habitation to earn a better livelihood and fall victim to different conspiracies of the urban godfathers. Cultural identity crisis is another discord that the people of this region experience while living in a migrated area. Even being in their territory, these people sometimes cannot avoid feeling culturally alienated by the western world because of the discrimination and racism practiced by the latter. Once a colonized country under British rule, Bangladesh still could not get rid of that impression and continues to experience difficulty finding its own cultural identity. Kaiser Haq is a poet who writes about contemporary Bangladeshi society and its disparity, a common

phenomenon in this country. This paper will focus on some of Haq's most celebrated poems like A Diasporic Tale, Pariah, Ode on the Lungi, Battambang, and Published in the Streets of Dhaka to find out what he has to reveal to the audience about people who are dislocated and feeling the loss of identity from various perspectives.

Keywords: Dislocation, Diaspora, Migration, Identity crisis, Alienation.

The literal meaning of the word 'dislocation' is dislodging from an original or usual place or state. Social dislocation is someone's physical and emotional change of habitation, which makes them vulnerable to society. An identity crisis is a feeling of anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and insecurity in which a person's sense of identity is in jeopardy because of a problem in their acceptance into a specific community that does not meet their expectation. Post-colonialism is the academic study that covers the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism of the western European nations and the control and exploitation of the colonized people and their lands. Kaiser Haq is a post-colonial poet who empathizes with the South Asian people, struggling with their identities in the wake of colonization. He

has focused on the theme of dislocation and identity crisis of the people of this region in a number of his poems which will be investigated in this paper.

Having discussed the terms dislocation, identity crisis, and post-colonialism, I now intend to examine his poems in which he dealt with these concepts. A Diasporic Tale is a story of a man named Ali Hamza who was sentenced to jail as he killed his adversary, throwing an iron rod into his skull. He was the kabaddi king possessing immense strength. Though the adversary started the quarrel by giving Hamza a push, followed by throwing a brickbat at his head, he hurled the former to the ground in retaliation to that audacity and killed him. He fought with his rival like Achilles, the great Greek warrior. Luckily for him, his son won a US immigration lottery and went to the land of The Statue of Liberty. Then the son sponsored the father's diaspora to the USA. Hamza got a job as a security guard as he learned how to use a few English words and phrases very well. He started enjoying his life there with little exchange of words with the natives and becoming addicted to burgers and fries, which were yummy and affordable to him. He thought if there is a paradise on earth, this is it. He felt that he would continue to live in the land of The Statue of Liberty for ten more years, and afterward, maybe he would be able to go back to his home and die in peace.

Social issues sometimes make people dislocate themselves from their place. This man, Hamza, was not a noble person himself. He was a sidekick to a village physician, a maternal uncle of the

speaker of the poem. Both the physician and his sidekick were not well-liked by the villagers because of their arrogance and unlawful use of physical power: "Ali Hamza became a thorn/ In the side of a big guy/ In the next village but one." (A Diasporic Tale 22-24) Hamza was like a thorn to the nearby villagers as he used to get himself involved in scuffles quickly. He was a well-built and hot-tempered person who killed a fellow villager in the heat of the moment. After that accident, he had to face the consequence of serving some years in prison though he managed to migrate afterward to the USA with the help of his son's sponsorship. Hamza relocated to a first-world country and was enjoying an extravagant life there. He got the opportunity of dispersion and seized that opportunity instantly. He migrated himself to a place of better living standard but didn't plan to stay there for good. Haq is never fond of being a part of the diaspora. He also expressed his aversion to it through his characters; Ali Hamza is the character in this case. Hamza was not a person of good character; he was still thinking of returning to his homeland to die in peace. He knew very well being a diaspora for the rest of his life would only increase his crisis of identity in a foreign country: "Ten years and I can go home/ And die in peace." (A Diasporic Tale 68-69)

Pariah is Haq's one of the most talked about poems. The word 'pariah' means an outcast or persona non grata; it is an Indian word and originated from the Tamil language. So the poem's title indicates that the poet is talking about someone who is not accepted in a particular

social group. The poet here is narrating about a local stray who suffered in his life because of his desperation for power. He wanted to acquire higher power by adopting some unusual approaches. Those approaches, instead of earning him capacity, made him suffer severely and alienated him from society:

at dead of a moonless night in a
cemetery, stark
naked, he'd recite backward from
scriptures,
and such power would then accrue, he
said,
whipping out a dirty hanky and letting
it swing,
that if he wished he could make earth
swing like that;
we joined in his laughter, more manic
than ever. (Pariah 28-33)

He was soon dislodged from his service in his dead father's office. Unable to bear the embarrassment, he tried to commit suicide by cutting his throat with a safety blade. Social pressure and failure to acquire power made him melancholy from a very jovial person. He refused to recognize his disciples and critics because of his predicament. He tried to flee from life in desperation, but things didn't work out for him the way he wanted. Neighbors had taken him to the hospital and put him in a rehabilitation center afterward. The doctors finally wrote him off as a lost cause, and nothing positive had happened to him from that point. The speaker, who was one of his disciples, refused to acknowledge any association with him when the dog catchers

were on their periodic rounds in the neighborhood and caught a local stray:

he became the local lunatic,
avoided people's eyes and vice versa
as if he had a gorgon's stare,
grew skeletal in dirty rags, smoked
thrown-away cigarette butts
and in the depth of night
raged with inarticulate guttural roars and
hammered the steps, he sat on with a
brick and alternately broke into hideous
laughter (Pariah 58-66)

The boy was forced to alienate himself from society emotionally and physically. Most of the people from his neighborhood were his disparagers. It is the norm of our community to outcast the overtly exceptional and curious people from the mainstream to please the social and political authority. Haq, a liberation war activist and an epitome of patriotism, portrays the everyday social and political problems and the deterioration of people, communities, and conventions across Bangladesh in his poetry. He sometimes is severe yet humorous in his diction. Sometimes he is sarcastic and ironic as well. He has focused on the political turbulence during the liberation war in this poem. People were more vulnerable than acknowledging someone exceptional or experimental as their own. Everyone around was incessantly intimidated by the power and force of the authority. A little mistake can cause death—that's how people lived then. So they treated the local boy as the pariah dog who barks insanely in the neighborhood alleys. The then indifferent ruthless society, which is still prevalent in the present time, has thrown the boy away

and compelled him to feel a crisis of identity.

As Khushwant Singh affirms, Kaiser Haq is a jovial litterateur with a macabre sense of humor; his poem Ode on the lungi complies with that affirmation. It is Haq's most famous poem outside Bangladesh, as he is bold and vocal against the hypocrisy of the western world over the issue of sartorial inequality. He begins the poem by addressing Walt Whitman as grandpa Walt. Whitman was an American essayist, journalist, poet, and humanist. Haq urges Whitman to look into inequality in estimating the lungi compared to the jacket-tie combination or kilt. Haq thinks people around the world are far from the democratic ideal:

And how hypocritical!

“All clothes have equal rights”—

This nobody will deny

, and yet some

are more equal than others. (Ode On

The Lungi 20-24)

Haq strongly avouches: "there are more people in lungis/ than the population/ of Europe and the USA" (Ode on the Lungi 44-46), and then he vehemently declares that even grandpa Walt, the laureate of democracy, will not be allowed to enter into the white house wearing a lungi. He sees it as hypocrisy and utter discrimination of the West. He is disheartened and, as a representative of his nation, feels the crisis of identity here because of the neo-imperialism and sartorial hegemony practiced by Europe and the USA:

You would if you
affected a kilt—

but a lungi? No way.

But why?— this is the question

I ask all to ponder. (Ode On The Lungi
52-56)

Lungi is a vastly popular outfit in Asia and Africa. It has numerous names in these regions, such as sarong, Munda, htamain, salaam, pinon, ma'awaiis, kitenge, kanga, and Kalki. In Srilanka, colorful sarongs are used as party wear. In Myanmar, political leaders put on this outfit to receive foreign delegates. Still, Myanmar remains "a half pariah among nations" (Ode On The Lungi 78). It means the people of these countries, even with their official outfits, are not regarded among people of the elite class. They do not have the privilege of being recognized through their own identity of culture and clothing. They need to wear a tie and jacket or suit to be recognized as people of weight. Western society determines the universal sartorial elegance and controls our minds as well. Our family member feels embarrassed at times seeing us in a lungi. We don't hesitate to wrinkle our noses at compatriots and close relations in this modest outfit when we consider ourselves 'sahibs' in chic suits. The poet, in a depressing yet sarcastic tone, states:

Hegemony invades private space

as well: as my cousin in America

would get home from work

and lounge in a lungi—

till his son grew ashamed

of dad and started hiding

the "ridiculous ethnic attire ."(Ode On

The Lungi 82-88)

Haq cannot leave the matter like this; hence he is vocal against the treatment.

He thinks that something needs to be done.
He wants to overcome the identity crisis by
undertaking some initiatives:

I'll proudly proclaim
I AM A LUNGI ACTIVIST!
friends and fellow lungi lovers,
let us organize lungi parties and lungi
parades,
let us lobby Hallmark and Archies
to introduce an international Lungi Day
when the UN chief will wear a lungi
and address the world. (Ode On The
Lungi 97-104)

The poet states with a staunch attitude that lungi is an "emblem of egalitarianism ."He is not at all reluctant to claim his identity, even wearing a lungi, no matter what place, time, and the situation he is in. His feeling of identity crisis lies in his desperate standpoint. This crisis is not only for himself but also for the entire community of South Asian people.

The poem Battambang, composed in 2003, is about the plight and sufferings of a refugee who left her land ten years ago. According to the poet himself, this poem was commissioned by the Barbican Arts center for a reading series to accompany an exhibition of photographs of migrants, refugees, and other displaced people taken by the Brazilian economist Sebastian Salgado. According to the fellow academic, translator, and Professor Tahmina Ahmed, looking at these photographs, the poet realized that behind them lay a tale of great existential significance. His experience of the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence fused with the nightmarish story of the madwoman from Indo-China in Marguerite

Duras' novel reflects the extreme situation of so many of Salgado's displaced people.

The effect of the scars left by the war and political unrest was immense on society and its people. Many people are dislocated from their homes and native lands because of the political turmoil. Many of them are forced to accept uncertain refugee life. Ahmed says, looking at the photographs of Salgado, Haq discovers three worlds at the same time: the world of Salgado's refugees, the world of the refugees fleeing to India during the independence war of 1971, and the world of the madwoman from Indo-China in Marguerite Duras' novel The vice-Consul. The madwoman in Battambang is a sad and poor woman who does not know anything other than her village name, Battambang. Haq states in his note at the end of the poem that this awkward-sounding name symbolizes the home all exiles have left behind and the home they seek to create for themselves wherever they have fetched up. The refugee woman has lost her sense of time and number because of the stress she has gone through. The representation of the impact of war or any kind of political turmoil through the depiction of this character is potent; needless to say, the appeal of this representation is universal:

Hair, pulled in despair, comes off in
clumps
leaving her looking like a grubby
Buddhist nun.
Lying in a gravel pit, she gazes
mesmerized
At distant stars, nearby town lights
were thousands like her huddle in wind
corridors.

She turns into her dead child
walking through mountains and city
walls in dreams. (Battambang 25-31)

The dislocated people continue to live wretched life for a long time. The madwoman of Battambang moves from place to place only to collect food for her survival. People in these new places insult her and shoo her away instead of helping her in her distress. She is not well accepted wherever she goes. The scenario is quite similar for all the alienated people around the world. They continue to suffer from eternal miseries and look for permanent shelter years after years. Going through the crisis of identity without any solution to it is a common phenomenon in their social lives.

The poem *Published In The Streets Of Dhaka* was composed in 1978 and began with a quotation from an article by Gore Vidal, a versatile American writer and public intellectual known for his concise wit and elegant style of writing. But his article, "On Prettiness" from which Haq used an excerpt as the epigraph, has created an enormous outrage. Vidal has investigated the issue of migration from his viewpoint and is hence quite defamatory in his remarks about the Bangladeshi capital and its people. The poet, in his response to Vidal's underestimation of Dhaka, says:

I was born and live here.
Your pretty tale swinging into print
Under the bamboo, the banyan, and the
mango tree
Is the height of absurdity—isn't that your
point?

Point taken. Now imagine the dread.
Of a writer from Dhaka. Yes, a writer,
For Homo Scriptor has a local branch,
you know,
And at bazaar booksellers' such things
As lyric verse and motley belles letters
Peep out of routine stacks of Exam
Guides
Like rusty needles—I too have
perpetrated a few.

(Published In The Streets Of Dhaka 11-21)

He is very defiant in claiming his own identity as a writer from Dhaka. Though he wants to circulate his works worldwide, he is pretty loathsome to migrate to other countries or adopt their cultures. Shamshad Mortuza, an interviewer who talked to Haq, thinks it is an existential crisis that people of the less developed part of the world are confronted with: to migrate or not to migrate. Our poet is gratified with living in his city and publishing his works in this city:

What are we to do, Mr. Vidal?
Stop writing, and if we do, not publish.
Join an immigration queue, hoping
To head for the Diaspora dead-end,
Exhibit in alien multi-cultural museums?

No way. Here I'll stay, plumb in the center
Of monsoon-mad Bengal, watching
Jackfruit leaves drift earthward
In the early morning breeze (Published In
The Streets Of Dhaka 36-44)

Fellow academic, writer and translator Fakrul Alam realizes Haq's profound attachment to his country and has shared it in one of his articles. According to

Alam, Haq is only too aware that he lives in a world where things are falling apart, but he knows very well that "evil requires no axis/ To turn on ." (Published In The Streets Of Dhaka 49) He loves Dhaka with all of its imperfections and loves to talk about all those imperfections proudly in his writing. He does not want to leave his country and be a part of the diaspora. He might face some obstacles in publishing his papers as there are stacks of examination guides, but Dhaka is not so worse for living and being in reveries to write a piece of literature:

And should all this find their way
 Into my scribbles and print
 I'll cut a joyous caper right here
 On the tropic of Cancer, proud to be
 Published once again in the streets of
 Dhaka.

(Published In The Streets Of Dhaka 51-55)

Haq remains a uniquely South Asian Bangladeshi poet with modern western tradition in his style. His contentment in publishing his poetic creations in the "humble streets of Dhaka" is quite understandable because of his sense of cultural roots. Though he cannot overlook Vidal's disparaging remarks on the culture, environment, and quality of literature of Bangladesh, he is unwilling to submit to the latter's claim. He refutes those comments straight away and, in doing so, represents a cultural crisis of identity all his nation's emerging poets and authors are going through.

Post-colonialism is one of the most significant aspects of contemporary literature. Litterateurs who write about this

theory have a resisting power in their minds which leads to certain reclaiming of lost status. Post-colonial literature focuses on reviewing the implications of colonial rule around the world. The litterateurs remind their audience how colonization had impacted the reshaping of the world's political map and remodeling of the colonized nations' social and cultural values. Kaiser Haq has the perfect post-colonial attitude in his writing, which energized him to protest against the West's eclipsing of an occupied country like Bangladesh in its political, cultural, and literary circle. He continues to search for his own identity and establish that identity in front of the world. As a post-colonial poet, he has his sense and knowledge of cultural identity. According to Fakrul Alam, Haq uses the tones and rhythms of everyday English and yet manages to convince his audience of his location as a Bangladeshi poet. Despite all his attempts, Haq is not satisfied with the response of the elite people. They are not yet ready to regard him or his successors as equal to them in any aspect. So, the vulnerability of identity in his literary creations is still prevalent.

Haq openly expressed his distaste for diaspora or dislocation of people from one country to another in his poetry. The reason for dislocation could be so many; some people might adopt diaspora to give themselves better life but some are forced to embrace the life of aliens in new territories. Haq sympathizes with the second group of people. The first group of people may find some felicity in life initially, but after a particular time, they also begin to feel an identity crisis. The

poet has a keen sense not to forget his root and is wise enough to bring that sense through his poems' characters.

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