



Trauma and Cultural Estrangement of Immigrant Children in Marina Budhos' *Ask Me No Questions*

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Abstract— Children form the most vulnerable group in the context of violence, including war, riots, and racial and communal conflicts. They easily become the victims of social, political and cultural injustices. Unimaginable emotional and psychological trauma is endured by kids who are uprooted from their home country and kept apart from their parents. In the course of their personality development and character formation, it will have everlasting repercussions. The novel *Ask Me No Questions* by Budhos is a riveting investigation of the pain, identity, and cultural estrangement experienced by immigrant children, particularly in post-9/11 America. This article aims to shed light on the emotional and psychological toll that immigrant children and families experience as they strive to rebuild their lives in a foreign land.



Keywords— Children, Estrangement, Identity, Immigration, Trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

Children are the most susceptible demographic in situations of violence and conflict. The majority of children are forced to migrate and relocate due to various forms of violence both inside and across nations. Many children lose their homes and are split up from their parents, which causes them to be uprooted from their homeland. In children's literature, the anguish and suffering of children have taken the front stage. Over time, children's literature has undergone significant changes, and in the post-modern age, its contents are largely similar to those of adult literature. The present-day children's literature deal with trauma, identity crises, cultural estrangement, immigration problems, terrorism, death, war, starvation, natural disasters, and pandemic diseases. "Children in modern times have been caught in the crossfire of many racial, cultural and war clashes. Immigration problems, wars, terrorism, natural disasters and annihilation have become an inevitable part of children's literature" (Elshaikh, 2015, p. 176).

In *Ask Me No Questions*, Budhos tells the story of a Muslim family from Bangladesh, consisting of two

daughters and their parents, who immigrated to the USA. The narrative delves into the challenges the family encountered following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the US. Nadira, a fourteen-year-old girl, narrates the story of her family as they navigate difficult circumstances such as being arrested and facing deportation. The objective of this article is to clarify how cultural alienation and identity crisis intensify the emotional and psychological strain that immigrant families and children face while attempting to start over in a new country.

II. DISCUSSION

People migrate overseas in search of better living conditions, top-notch educational possibilities for kids, and more chances for their families to develop socially, culturally, and economically. Nadira's father emigrated to the US with the same intention. Her mother and her older sister Aisha make up a household of four. Nadira and her family had a sense of disconnection from their homeland, just like any other individual who misses their mother nation. They never lose the enduring recollections of their

native country and draw strength from it. Nadira says, "Even though we left when I was seven, sometimes if I close my eyes, it's as if I were right there. I remember the *boroi* tree outside our house, the stone wall where Ma slapped the wash dry, the metal cabinet where Abba kept his school books" (Budhos, 2008, pp. 5–6). These words highlight the suffering of being uprooted and how hard it is for them to mentally adjust to their new home.

Nadira and her sister, who come from a Muslim family in Bangladesh, experience a strong sense of lack of belongingness in America. "You forget you don't really exist here, that this really isn't your home" (2008, p. 8). Despite all of the options available in America, they do not feel at home there. They hoped to become affluent, attend college, and finally settle down when they emigrated to America. In reality, however, things were not going well because they lacked the requisite legal papers to prove their presence. They live in constant terror of being discovered and imprisoned since their father has an expired passport. "In the US, in particular, many undocumented parents have been increasingly arrested and/or deported by the immigration task forces since that fatal date. As a result, many immigrant children have undergone some inexpressible physical and psychological traumatic events" (Elshaikh, 2016, p. 12). Their immigration status is a source of constant apprehension and uncertainty for them. They are traumatised by the constant fear of impending deportation, which makes them preoccupied.

Following the September 11 attacks on America, the nation's immigration and visa regulations were tightened, and citizens of Muslim-majority nations began to be treated with distrust, prejudice and discrimination. Many Muslim immigrants were arrested and deported particularly those who lacked valid visas and other legal documentation. A new rule was enacted in the US requiring all men from specific Muslim-majority countries - Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Pakistan, and Bangladesh - who were over the age of eighteen to register. Of those who did, some were detained or expelled from the nation. Nadira recalls her mother's worry and nervousness when they just landed at the airport, as well as how insecure they felt in a country that they considered their dream destination. "How her mouth became stiff when the uniformed man split open the packing tape around our suitcase and plunged his hands into her underwear and saris, making us feel dirty inside" (2008, p. 7).

After reaching in, the family tried hard to blend in and assimilate into the American society thinking that they would be able to obtain their American citizenship. Understanding the fact that returning to Bangladesh does not have anything good to offer them, every member of the

family attempts hard to assimilate into American society by trying to make them believe that it is their home. Nadira's father tried to do all the possible work available to earn for his family and to fit himself into American society. Regarding her father's genuine efforts to get socialized and raise income, Nadira comments:

Once we got here, Abba worked all kinds of jobs. He sold candied nuts from a cart on the streets of Manhattan. He worked on a construction crew until he smashed his kneecap. He swabbed down lunch counters, mopped a factory floor, busses dishes in restaurants, delivered hot pizzas in thick silver nylon bags. (7–8)

He and his family are constantly afraid that they will be detained and deported because they are illegal immigrants. They do not believe that they can live in America with the certainty of security and safety. It creates a traumatic condition which affects the children in the family adversely. Nadira and her sister Aisha are at a stage in their life when they start to dream about a bright future and established careers. The insecure life brings shadows over their prospects.

Trauma is of various forms - psychological, physical, individual and collective. Nadira and her family members go through all the different forms of trauma as they are interconnected. One kind of trauma will lead to the other and its effects on the individual will carry to other people who are associated with them. Trauma is when an individual loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat to and process his or her emotions or experiences resulting in a feeling of helplessness (Van der Kolk, 1987). Nadira's family goes through it, and the family's helplessness is highlighted when the father is jailed and the mother is forced to remain in a public asylum. As their efforts to continue in America failed, they attempted to travel to nearby Canada but were sent back by the authorities.

In post-September 11 America, with the increased strictness of immigration rules, the identity of Nadira and her family members became more visible. They were considered illegal aliens and started to face a serious issue of identity crisis. Many of the Muslim community members lost their jobs or could not make money. Life has become miserable for people who fail to produce valid documents. Many Bangladesh families seriously started to think about returning to their homeland, but many like Nadira's father found even that a futile thought as they already had sold their houses in Bangladesh and had nothing to go back to. They recognized themselves as unwanted 'other' in America. The fear and terror of the situation are well expressed in Nadira's words: "Each bit of news was like a

piece of hail flung at us, stinging our skins. *Homeland Security. Patriot Act. Code Orange. Special Registration*" (2008, p. 9). The family has experienced enough suffering as illegal immigrants in America, particularly the two daughters. "Children of unauthorized immigrants... are more likely to report anxiety, fear, sadness, posttraumatic stress symptoms, anger, and withdrawal" (Potochnick & Perreira, 2010, p. 470).

In America, Nadira and her sister experienced a severe kind of cultural estrangement. Aisha wanted to lead an American style of life so she tried to observe how her American classmates spoke, dressed and ate and started to follow it. But Nadira was not so particular about imitating the American style, but she also confronted the difficulties of getting shifted to a new cultural setting. Nadira did not make any efforts to shape her lifestyle like that of her American friends. But Aisha was determined to overcome this cultural estrangement and she found her means to get mingled with her American classmates. Nadira says: "She began to study the other kids - especially the American ones. She figured out how they walked, what slang they used" (2008, p. 24). Aisha determined exactly which group of girls she wanted to join in her higher grades. She took note of what they were wearing, such as their flare-leg jeans and macrame bracelets. Then she persuaded her mother to take her shopping so she could buy the same items. This attitude from Aisha demonstrates how much she desired to modify her living style to that of a native to be recognised in American culture.

Nadira and Aisha experience a difficult time balancing their desire to fit into American society with their cultural heritage. This conflict has resulted in a tangle for their cultural identities. Their identities are further shaped by this fight, which also heightens their sense of cultural alienation. They must navigate issues related to faith, attire, and cultural norms while attempting to win over their classmates' acceptance and understanding. After the 9/11 attacks, the girls' Muslim faith became a source of ongoing stress as they dealt with discrimination and misconceptions related to their religion, which played a crucial role in their identity construction.

After their horrific encounters with various forms of trauma, Aisha and Nadira feel scared, depressed, anxious, and distant. Their mother was taken away from them when their father was imprisoned. By residing at their uncle's house, the two sisters began to engage in every action essential to release their father. When their uncle was arrested for illegal residence, Nadira and her sister recalled their father's incarceration, and the same painful sensations of anxiety and stress surfaced in their thoughts. On hearing

the kind of treatment that their uncle had from the police after his arrest, they used to have nightmares and distress:

That night Aisha yells out in her sleep. She thrashes beside me, her hair springing up in wild coils. Her eyes look strange and unmoored. "What is it?" I ask.

"I keep having this dream," she whispers. "Every time I go up on the stage, these policemen come and tell me, 'You don't belong here.' Then they take me and lock me up in a cell with no light." (Budhos, 2008, p. 102)

Lack of belongingness, identity crisis and cultural conflicts caused frustration and disappointment for the girls. Aisha gave up the plan of appearing in the long-awaited interview at Barnard University and decided not to attend the function in the school to receive the award of valedictorian.

However, these stressful events improved their ability to interact with the outside world. "Indeed, the traumatic events of being separated from their parents, taking their father into detention, accusing him of being a terrorist, and living under constant threat of deportation, turn both Nadira and Aisha into experienced adults" (Elshaikh, 2016, p. 15). Nadira and Ayisha decided to test their abilities to challenge and overcome the traumatic situation in which they were placed. Despite knowing it is a difficult task, they are determined to save their family. "The child who has been directly exposed to a traumatic event has had the opportunity to test his ability and gain strength on his own. In this case he may have been able to face the danger and surpass it peacefully by internalizing it so he is less afraid/anxious" (Srour, 2005, p. 89). Srour's observation proved to be true about these teenage girls as evidenced by their actions to save their family.

Nadira appears for her father in court when his lawyer gives up and successfully defends her father and the right of her family to live in America. She shows the court that the authorities have the wrong person since her father spells his name 'Hossain' with an 'a,' whilst the other one they are looking for is 'Hossein' with an 'e.' She proves that her father's payment to the Islamic Centre was a means for him to save money for his daughters' college tuition rather than financial support to a terrorist group. Aisha had a change of mind and delivered her valedictorian speech in front of a sizable audience, demanding things on behalf of everyone who faces a similar circumstance. "All I ask of you is to see me for who I am. . . I want what you want. I want a future" (Budhos, 2008, p. 152). Her words capture her unwavering desire to be accepted for who she is, as well as the strength and resiliency she gained from her ordeal.

III. CONCLUSION

Following the September 11 attacks, the United States reinforced its internal security measures, which presented several challenges for undocumented immigrants in the country, including arrest, incarceration, and deportation. Budhos deftly addresses the trauma, identity, and cultural alienation that immigrant children - especially those of Muslim descent - face in *Ask Me No Questions*. Nadira and her sister experienced the psychological and emotional consequences of uncertainty about their immigration status and struggled with their cultural identities. They represent millions of immigrant girls around the world who confront and overcome the obstacles to survive in the existential struggle.

IV. DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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