



RESEARCH PAPER

Post-9/11 Trends and Themes in Short Fiction: A Study of East-West Dichotomy in Eisenberg's *Twilight of the Superheroes* and Afridi's *The Price of Hubris*

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ABSTRACT

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Post 9/11 Fiction dominates the literary canon in terms of the depiction of crisis, both internal and external. In this regard, various trends in literary theory like Postmodernism and Postcolonialism not only demonstrate the East-West dichotomy but also the ambivalence which lies within the binaristic division of East versus West in the wake of September 11. Postmodernism in conflation with Postcolonialism conveys post-9/11 aesthetics in terms of subversion towards unified reason in the form of fragmentation and chaos. The present research deals with Eisenberg (2010) and Afridi's (2006) engagement with identity crisis issue through giving voice to fragmentation and chaos inherent in the identity of individuals in the context of 9/11. The study attempts to present a genealogy of September 11 incident in terms of the absence of unified epistemological construct of reason and hence, emphasizes the nullification of purist notion of freedom through pointing out the implicit patterns of oppression in the context of globalization. Through this stance, Eisenberg and Afridi significantly maintain the ambivalence within the representations of the 9/11 aftermath particularly regarding East-West dichotomy.

Introduction

Deborah Eisenberg's *Twilight of the Superheroes* is one of the short stories in her latest collection of short fiction *The Collected Stories of Deborah Eisenberg* (2010), which deals with the impact of 9/11 on individuals and significantly demonstrates the emotional experiences in the aftermath of attacks. The author received much praise for providing a psychological insight, which comprises of loss, fear and uncertainty in individuals. On the other hand, Humera Afridi's *The Price of Hubris*, a part of Muneesa Shamsie's collection of short stories *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women* (2006), emphasizes upon 9/11 as an incident which changed the

course of the world sociologically, politically and economically respectively. The study tends to explore the patterns of identity crisis as a result of fragmentation and chaos in the wake of September 11. It also aims at exploring the identity crisis in the form of a sense of meaninglessness, which captivates the lives of individuals in the post 9/11 context. Moreover, despite the differences between the experiences of individuals in the East and the West, the study tries to establish the ambivalence within the dichotomy of East versus West regarding the psychological dilemma of individuals in the context of 9/11 aftermath.

This research is focused upon two major points: First, we take as our starting point Eisenberg's and Afridi's short stories as representative of post 9/11 crisis; to further find out the disintegration and fragmentation in the identity of individuals which finally results in identity crisis. Second, the key issue of our research is to link our reading of Eisenberg's and Afridi's short stories to the wider theoretical debates of Postmodernism in conflation with Postcolonialism – with its focus on the absence of unified reason in order to point out the ambivalence within the East versus West dichotomy in terms of genealogical analysis of the incident that is, 9/11.

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in post-9/11 fiction, particularly from the perspective of skepticism towards identity and unified reason in the wake of September 11. Therefore, significant works have been done on the depiction of crisis related to 9/11 aftermath like study on trauma and violence (Bird, 2007), Postcolonial approach towards post 9/11 Pakistani fiction (Azeem, 2016), theme of War on Terror (Sadaf, 2018), study of ethics in relation to response towards 9/11 (Gleich, 2014). This study is unique as it tends to explore post 9/11 trends and themes in short fiction from the perspective of Postmodernism in fusion with Postcolonialism as the research is premised upon two stories; one American and another Pakistani in order to find out the patterns of ambivalence within East versus West dichotomy regarding the individual experiences in the wake of September 11. Moreover, the issue of loss of unified identity and reason in post-9/11 short fiction has not been yet explored in Eisenberg's (2010) *Twilight of the Superheroes* and Afridi's (2006) *The Price of Hubris*.

We first give a brief sketch of methodology used in our research followed by research questions and theoretical framework on which textual analysis with instances from the selected stories is premised. Finally, we tend to maintain a stance that unified and fixed notion of foundationalist narratives of identity and reason is a hyper-real in the post-9/11 context.

Material and Methods

The present research is non-empirical as the researchers intend to apply certain theoretical tenets of Postmodernism in unison with Postcolonialism on Deborah Eisenberg and Humera Afridi's short stories. The research employs interpretative paradigm with its focus on socio-historical context of the selected texts. Moreover, the technique used for contextual analysis is cloze reading of the selected texts as the paper intends to address what the text signifies with logical inferences, citing significant references from the text in order to support conclusion and findings drawn from the text (Lapp et al., 2015). Hence, the paper mainly tries to juxtapose anti-

foundationalist paradigm of Postmodernism along with Postcolonialism within the selected texts in order to problematize the notion of unified identities and reason in a post-9/11 context. The two selected short stories Eisenberg's (2010) *Twilight of the Superheroes* and Afridi's (2006) *The Price of Hubris* have been chosen for their fragmented narrative structures which signify not only identity crisis but also the meaninglessness and chaos created as a result of 9/11 aftermath.

Theoretical Framework

Postmodernism is mainly a deconstructive theoretical paradigm, which tends to subvert the authority of totalitarian and universalistic ideological constructs and hence, decenters the modernist assumptions of enlightenment. It significantly brings out the notion of fragmentation and chaos in reason within the pluralistic depictions of reality. Moreover, Postmodernism shares ideological features with Postcolonialism in a way as both theories have a tendency towards the subversion of received authority and wisdom which Hutcheon (1988) points out through Jameson's notion of 'cultural dominant'. In this regard, Acheraiou (2011) has worked on the common ideological strands between Postmodernism and Postcolonialism. According to him, both theories share common sensibilities like "difference, heterogeneity, multiplicity, contestation of foundational narratives and overarching discourses of emancipation, the cult of ambivalence, indeterminacy and collage" and thus, contain "counter-hegemonic impulse" (Acheraiou, 2011, p.144).

Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) talk about the lack of unified reason in terms of enlightenment as a mythical construct, which in turn deconstructs the totalitarianism inherent within the fixed notion of reason with pre-defined rules of human judgment. They also talk about the ideological construct of identity in terms of its epistemological multiplicity and plurality. According to them, epistemology or knowledge cannot stay unified and thus, there is no singular "logo" or idiom to define identity as according to Lyotard (1984) as it "exists in a fabric of relations" (p.15).

Baudrillard (1994) dismantles the notion of real through proposing the notion of Simulation, which is a way forward towards establishing the notion of ambivalence and the loss of unified referent. Simulation, according to Baudrillard, is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real" (ibid, p.1). He further demonstrates the Postmodern ambivalence in the form of a lack of stable signifiers and thus, points out the poststructuralist instability between the binaries of 'true' and 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary' (ibid, p.3) and hence, gives way to metonymical representations which Lyotard (1988) calls "differends" or "phrases in dispute" which signify the inadequacy of language as a stable system. Baudrillard (1994) further deconstructs absolute binarism in the form of absence of totalitarian ideologies. He states:

No more subject, no more focal point, no more
center or periphery: pure flexion or circular
inflexion (p.31).

The concept of identity crisis is central to the assumption regarding skepticism towards ontological constructions of unified identity. Polt (1999) takes on the project of stating Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*, which marks the difference between *essentia* (study of essence) and *existentia* (study of existence). Heidegger, in this way, lays emphasis on the study of everyday existence in comparison to the study of human essence. In this context, Heidegger elaborates the concept of *Angst*, which signifies meaningless and confused moment of existence. Moreover, this meaninglessness is devoid of a singular site and is recurrent with a continued state of human anxiety and hence, "involves a deep crisis of meaning" (ibid, p.77).

Bhabha (1994) talks about ambivalence and cultural impurity in terms of hybridity, which decenters the Eurocentric image of East versus West. Bhabha, in this regard, talks about Postmodern globalization in terms of cultural impurity or hybridity and terms it as "international culture". In this context, Bhabha talks about identity crisis in terms of the negation of unified identity as hybridity, which according to him, "...is better conceived of as a process rather than a description" (Kalra et al., 2005, p.71).

Young (1995) talks about hybridity in terms of "heterogeneity, cultural interchange and diversity" which, according to him, is "the self conscious identity of modern society" (ibid, p.4) as it creates a dialogic encounter between the "indigenous and colonial culture" as presented in the form of dichotomy between East and West. Moreover, according to him, hybridity establishes a "double-voiced" ambivalence within the purist representations of "colonialist" and "native" discourses and hence, shatters the binaristic representations in the form of Colonizer/Colonized, East/West and etc. (Ashcroft et al., 2000)

Liotard (1984) talks about Postmodern ambivalence in terms of the notion "unpresentable". According to him, this unpresentableness is a marker of narrative fragmentation and hence, plurality within narratives having no defined "forms" with "no pre-established rules". This narrative fragmentation exhibits a sense of instable signifiers with no definite meanings. In this regard, certain Postmodern narrative techniques are important to consider regarding the representation of chaos in the era of globalization. Lyotard (1984) talks about narrative fragmentation in terms of "Eclecticism", which refers to the amalgamation of various styles in order to subvert the unified representation of reality. "Eclecticism" is also termed as pastiche, which Jameson calls "blank parody" (Bertens, 1995). Historiographic metafiction is also a significant Postmodern narrative technique which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction as Hutcheon (1988) takes both history and fiction as human narrative constructs. Foucault (1977), in this regard, talks about genealogy in terms of deconstruction of Platonic modalities of history in terms of the study of history as parodic (subversion of traditional attitudes towards reverence through parodic representation of reality), dissociative (subversion towards unified notion of identity) and sacrificial (subversion towards epistemological representations of truth).

Results and Discussion

As already mentioned, the stories *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2010) and *The Price of Hubris* (2006) have been written in the wake of September 11. The world's

super power America encountered terrorist attacks when four hijacked airplanes attacked significant sites of the country. Amongst four, two planes hit twin towers of World Trade center in New York. The third plane attacked Pentagon and the fourth one with an intention to hit Washington D.C. crashed into Pennsylvania field. The American people along with the people across the globe witnessed horrific scenes like the falling of the bodies from the upper stories of the twin towers, burned and bloodied bodies on the streets striving to survive. The attacks killed thousands of people leaving unforgettable marks on the minds of people around the globe followed by the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. In short, 9/11 triggered enormous chaos and destruction worldwide. In this context, the title of the story *Twilight of the Superheroes* is symbolic of the beginning of the obscurity, ambiguity and gradual decline of the superpower like America at the level of both personal and public. The story *Twilight of the Superheroes* by Deborah Eisenberg encapsulates that how a political and social crisis in the aftermath of 9/11 makes its way into the individuals' lives and finally leads them towards existentialist crisis. The story revolves around Nathaniel and his uncle Lucien who continuously try to make sense of the world three years after 9/11. Lucien, the owner of an art gallery, suffers delusions in the form of visits by his dead wife Charlie while Nathaniel, son of Jewish immigrant parents, lacks all ambition to survive in the mega city of New York. Whenever Nathaniel finds an opportunity to step into the humdrum of New York in order to make his way out of his average life, he flinches back into the world of idleness and imagination. On the other hand, *The Price of Hubris* by Humera Afridi revolves around an unnamed protagonist, whose life is suddenly changed in the city of New York in the aftermath of 9/11. The story captures the identity crisis of a woman who was once living a peaceful life in the metropolitan city of New York. The story is a part of Muneeza Shamsie's collection (2006) *And the World Changed: Contemporary stories of Pakistani Women*. The collection itself is an emblem of the turbulent time period when Pakistan was considered as "the world's most dangerous places" (Waterman, 2009). In this context, the title of the story *The Price of Hubris* is symbolic at multiple levels. On one hand, America is satirized for having *hubris* in the form of assuming a godlike status in the world and hence, reminded of its shortcomings in the wake of September 11. On the other hand, the people who live in America have also been satirized who took refuge in the country as a safe haven and hence, consequently paid price for their delusional belief in America as an open-minded state.

Eisenberg (2010) significantly maintains Postmodernist skepticism towards unified notion of reason and enlightenment through narrative fragmentation which Lyotard (1984) calls "Eclecticism" and Jameson "blank parody" (Bertens, 1995), in order to give pluralistic depictions of reality. In this context, she divides the story *Twilight of the Superheroes* into various fragments with a sum total of twenty-two parts, each part with a different title. Each piece contributes to the depiction of 9/11 but does not give a unified version in order to subvert the authority of received ideology regarding 9/11 aftermath. In the very first part, titled *Nathaniel Recalls the Miracle*, Lucien imagines that how Nathaniel will narrate the occasion of celebrating the beginning of new millennium to his grandchildren as a 'miracle' as everyone was expecting terribly bad to happen but nothing of this sort happened on the eve of the year 2000. The whole narrative of *Nathaniel Recalls the Miracle* is italicized because the

whole piece recalls the celebrations of the new millennium, which is ironic as it finally leads towards the chaos of 9/11. Lucien comments on the inevitable ignorance of humankind as “blindfolded”, and can never know what is to come in future, which is not only a Postmodern skeptic stance towards the determinacy of absolute knowledge or truth but also uncertainty in the minds of individuals during post 9/11 aftermath. Lucien states:

... no one knows what even the very next second

will bring! (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1468. Emphasis original.)

Eisenberg (2010) in *Twilight of the Superheroes* significantly maintains Postmodern ambivalence in terms of the instability of signifiers of “true” and “false”, “real and “imaginary” (Baurillard, 1994). In this context, Eisenberg takes 9/11 as an instable signifier with multiple interpretations. Lucien, during the course of the story, makes several references towards the explicit descriptions of 9/11 almost in every part of the story particularly in *Context, Frogboil, Innocence, All this, Continuity, Farewell*, not only to give it multiple interpretations but also it tends to signify Postmodern skepticism towards the unified representation of September 11. The metonymical and simulated representation of 9/11 is depicted in the part of the story titled *The Age of Digital Reasoning* as September 11, according to Lucien, stands for “country’s open wound” or a “pretext” for further destruction worldwide. The people of America, in this respect, tried to exhibit the metaphorical depiction of 9/11 aftermath in the form of choice of their pets like “snarling hounds”, “boa constrictor” and “tiny, trembling dogs” (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1527) in order to depict reality as a “hyper-real” (Baudrillard, 1994). More significantly, 9/11 has been described in terms of “a curtain painted with the map of the earth” (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1524). From the description of curtain, Eisenberg intends to blur the difference between fact and fiction through Postmodern narrative technique of Historiographic Metafiction (Hutcheon, 1988). On the curtain, there are beautiful pictures of “oceans and continents” along with “Lucien’s delightful city” that is, New York. Then, all of a sudden, the curtain is torn and shattered by planes and exposes all the darkness present behind the delusional beauty of this world. 9/11, in this regard, has also been compared with a theatrical performance, “a *propaganda* movie” (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1532) with propaganda italicized because the chaos in the wake of September 11 itself fails to come to unified meaning or representation. Lucien, in this regard, not only gives multiple reasons for the sudden power cut and unemployment but also points out the failure to come to a single notion, which Lyotard (1984) also calls Postmodern ‘unpresentableness’, to define 9/11 chaos worldwide. He states:

The newspapers seemed for the most part to
agree that the cause of both was terrorism. But
lots of people said they were both the consequence
of corporate theft. It was certainly all beyond Lucien!
Things that had formerly appeared to be distinct, or

even at odds, now seemed to have been smoothly

blended, to mutual advantage (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1526).

Eisenberg (2010) also dismantles the belief in language as a stable system as Lyotard (1988) puts it “phrases in disputes”. In this regard, Lucien in *The Age of Digital Reasoning* demonstrates the concept of war concealed under a rubric of language and particularly, mocks the wars in the East as camouflaged under various labels like “patriotism, democracy, loyalty, freedom” (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1525) which take different shapes and attires according to the need of the time as if these linguistic tags are made up of “funny plastic” which depicts Postmodern skepticism towards language as a stable system.

Eisenberg’s (2010) *Twilight of the Superheroes* significantly displays Postmodern skepticism towards the unified notion of epistemological constructions like identity and hence, shows that a single “logo” or “idiom” is impossible to define identity (Lyotard, 1984). In order to depict identity crisis, Eisenberg illustrates the deep crisis of meaning inherent within the existence of various characters in the story. Lucien is shown to be in a permanent state of psychological dilemma after 9/11 and the death of his wife Charlie. He tried his best to get on with life through “throwing his parties” (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1496) but in the humdrum of his busy life Lucien is always captivated with a sudden moment of Heideggerian *Angst* like “...what had happened to the planet?” (Ibid, p.1497) when he contemplates the contemporary scenario of 9/11 aftermath. The identity crisis in the story is also depicted in *The Age of Dross* through the characters, friends of Nathaniel, losing their superpowers. Nathaniel has been given a metonymical representation of a comic character “Passivityman” who has become a “kind of passive-aggressive” (ibid, p.1505) in the wake of September 11. He protects himself from the corporate greed with his “greed-repelling shield of sloth” (ibid, p.1506), which is not only symbolic of his passivity but also of his lack of interest in pursuing healthy life. Heideggerian *Angst* or human anxiety is significantly portrayed through the parody of an expression ‘Back to normal’ in *The Frogboil*. 9/11 for Lucien is de-humanizing at the basest level that is, “Something like, you drop the frog into a pot of boiling water and it jumps out” (ibid, p.1472). Moreover, Lucien displays his *Angst* in the form of his psychological turmoil when he recalls his fifth grade history lesson in Miss Mueller’s class. The teacher asks the students to closely look at the statue of the Roman Emperor but what Lucien sees is the background of the picture replete with frightened people “The real people, the living people...” (ibid, p.1538) who know the reason of demise of their empire that is, imperialism. Lucien also manages to hear the tumbling sound of the fallen empire. For this brilliant observation, Miss Mueller enthusiastically awards Lucien with a gold star “Gold star, Lucien! Miss Mueller cackles deafeningly, and then she’s gone” (ibid, p.1542). Eisenberg through the description of the fall of Roman Empire not only satirizes Bush’s imperialist democracy but also symbolizes the fall of America in the form of twin towers in New York.

Afridi (2006) depicts the chaos of 9/11 in the very beginning of the story. She describes America in the wake of September 11 as “a world destroyed, mangled,

spitting fumes of burnt steel, flesh and plastic" (ibid, p.42). The unnamed protagonist gets short of grocery and decides to move out of "circumference of the five square blocks" (ibid). She was not allowed to move beyond the assigned place since 9/11 attacks, as the girl happens to be Pakistani. She mocks the liberty to move beyond the "circumference" as this freedom is accompanied by a continuous sense of anxiety. She states:

Anxiety prickles at her, anxiety about this

strange new freedom (Afridi, 2006, p.42).

Afridi (2006) illustrates the concept of identity crisis through her unnamed protagonist as a hybrid character having both Eastern and Western influences and hence, exhibits ambivalence within the East/West dichotomy. The story also exhibits the notion of "cultural impurity" in terms of the depiction of America having an "international culture" (Bhabha, 1994). On one hand, the protagonist wears jeans and proclaims herself not a "devout" follower of "tradition" but, on the other hand, wears a scarf to cover her hair. Moreover, the protagonist is shown to have an illicit relationship despite being a married person. The disaster of September 11 also brings an end to the relationship because the protagonist happens to be a Muslim. More significantly, during the course of the story, Afridi (2006) reveals America as a hybrid culture with people from all over the world like Arabs and Palestinians and hence, deconstructs the notion of cultural purity. A "double-voiced" ambivalence is established within the binary of Colonizer/Colonized in a way as America not only stands for the Colonizer but also the Colonized and also the protagonist (as representative of East) not only stands for the Colonized but also for the Colonizer in the wake of September 11. This dilemma is portrayed when not only protagonist and the "brown" cab driver face harassment on their way to "Madina Masjid" because of their race but also the white Americans are depicted as infuriated as a result of fear and fright they faced in the 9/11 aftermath.

I'm going to f...kill Osama. I want you to know

I'm going to get him.

Okay, Okay, very good, the driver says like he's

soothing a colicky baby.

The man at the window looks at her, says: I'm

telling this cabbie here I'm going to kill Osama

(Afridi, 2006, p.44).

Afridi (2006) establishes a dialogic encounter between East and West in terms of hybridity almost at the end of the story when the protagonist reaches the mosque and bears resistance from a man due to her Western attire. The protagonist resists and enters the mosque but when the protagonist inquires, "Where are the women, please?" she gets the answer that there are no women in the mosque and she is asked to move

out of the mosque. A dialogic encounter is established in a way as the protagonist stands for both East and West here with her identity crisis as *Angst*, a continued state of anxiety, because the protagonist feels ashamed of her rootlessness somewhere between the two opposite worlds with no home. She states:

Shameless; adulteress; wine-drinker: her jeans
seem to say this to the men, as do her boots
and the fact that she is here alone on a day
when the women are secure at home (Afridi, 2006, p.44).

Eisenberg (2010) and Afridi (2006) present a genealogy of history in terms of deconstruction of Platonic modalities of history. For them, the study of history in terms of progress is a human illusion; rather history itself is an emblem of a parody of human insight, knowledge, progress in terms of enlightenment and reason and a search for truth and unified identity. Afridi (2006) states this in terms of dilemma of cyclical existence of humanity where a sense of human progression is a mere illusion because according to Afridi's protagonist "When you awake tomorrow, and the day after and the day after that, this is where you will be" (ibid, p.45). On the other hand, Eisenberg (2010) in *Nathaniel Recalls the Miracle* gives a genealogy of history in terms of futility of human effort. Despite of the search for knowledge, search for enlightenment and identity, humans subsequently fail to comprehend their fate. Lucien, through the voice of Nathaniel, states:

*And so, when it comes down to it, it always
turns out that no one is in charge of the things
that really matter* (Eisenberg, 2010, p.1469).

Conclusion

To conclude, Deborah Eisenberg (2010) through *Twilight of the Superheroes* significantly shatter the binaristic representation of reality through the study of ambivalence in the above-mentioned text and also through various Postmodern narrative techniques like Eclecticism or Pastiche and Historiographic Metafiction in order to establish a simulated reality – hyper-real. The author portrays identity crisis in characters through the depiction of *Angst* in individuals and the instability of language to illustrate the crisis in the wake of September 11. Afridi (2006), on the other hand, takes a Postcolonial stance towards the depiction of 9/11 as hostile for Pakistanis. The identity crisis in *The Price of Hubris* is portrayed through the depiction of protagonist as hybrid having both Eastern and Western influences. Moreover, ambivalence is created within the binary of Colonizer/Colonized for both Pakistanis and Americans and hence, a dialogic encounter is established between East and West in terms of cultural impurity and hybridity. Both writers significantly mock the existentialist crisis of humanity in terms of genealogical analysis of history where human effort and search for knowledge, unified reason and identity are futile in the course of history.

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