

## Intricacies of Identity, Space and Relationship in Ameena Hussein's *The Moon in the Water*

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### Abstract

Ameena Hussein's debut novel *The Moon in the Water* (2009) tries to capture the paradox of the search for identity through complex identities, relationships and spaces. It narrates an enthralling tale of search for one's roots and routes, identity and depletion of identity within shared memories and transcending ethnic and gender divisions. This paper tries to examine the protagonist's struggle to find her identity and space in the complex familial and social relationship she is compelled to be in. The paper also tries to examine the complexities of religious beliefs amongst conventional and unconventional believers as presented in the novel.

**KEYWORDS:** Space, identity, relationship and family.

Khadeeja Rasheed, the protagonist of the novel is a young, beautiful Sri Lankan Muslim girl who lives in Geneva with a successful career and engaged to an African Malawian man, Abdullah. She is happy with a loving family, a fulfilling career and an adoring boyfriend. Hussein portrays a strong female character through Khadeeja, whose tryst with destiny is the central theme of the novel. The story depicts the sense of loss and gain, pursuit for happiness, loss of identity, search for roots, awareness of spatial sensibility, religious sentimentalism, complexity of relationships and existence in different spaces.

Khadeeja is the eldest in the family with one sister and two brothers. She comes back to Sri Lanka as her father dies in a bomb blast. On her arrival, she realizes with a great sense of shock that she is adopted in her family, and, that she cannot inherit from her father's property who dies without making a will. Further, she also realizes that she has a blood brother, Arjuna, who is adopted by another family. Khadeeja goes to find her biological brother who represents the most different life than her.

Another important feature of the novel is its presentation of religious complexities in beliefs and practices. Ameena narrates the complexity in the life of Muslim ethnic minority in Sri Lanka through the perspectives of the protagonist Khadeeja and her mother RaushenGul. She also invokes debates on Muslim traditions and practices. Also, she richly populates the novel with supporting characters like, the tongue-less servant who tries to stand up to the JVP i.e. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front); the imam who suffered horribly in a seminary in Pakistan; Khadeeja's adoptive sister and brothers, her fiancé and many more. Hussein, also brings in the horrific impact

of tsunami and rehabilitation of the people towards the end of the novel. The writer draws a dramatic portrait of loss, identity, spatial instability, bewildering love and forgiveness in this story of deep desires, identity, spatial trajectories and passion.

*The Moon in the Water* is set in different spatial markers and nationalities like Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Geneva and America during 2004 and 2005. Hussein projects two diverse worlds through Khadeeja and Abdullah – a couple dissimilar in culture, identity, location, language and tradition decides to spend their life together. Both stay in Switzerland and share their otherness of geographical location, national identities, ethnicities and cultures. These two colonial subjects from two developing nations, thus, struggle to establish their space and identity in a rich and affluent country. As a staunch Muslim from east, Khadeeja is aware that her family will never allow her to marry Abdullah, who is from Africa. On the other hand, they want her to marry a Sri Lankan Muslim, to maintain their cultural and spatial belongingness.

While Khadeeja and Abdullah are enjoying their blissful moments in Geneva, the author provides a shock to Khadeeja as she receives the news of her father's demise in a bomb explosion in Sri Lanka. Unable to bear the news of her father's untimely death, she decides to return to Sri Lanka to pay her last homage. The grieving daughter remembers her father and expresses her helplessness on his death. Ameena underlines the grief of Khadeeja who reports not only the death of her father but also the growing brutality of regional nationalism. She narrates:

My father is dead. He didn't die in his sleep. He didn't die of a heart attack. He didn't die of a long illness or a short one.

He died brutally.

Killed.

Ripped apart by a bomb. (Hussein 10)

Hussein turns the plot by uncovering certain realities as Khadeeja revisits Sri Lanka. This revisit resets relations revealing new equations due to the death of her father. She comes to know that the person whom she adored as father was not her biological father. She was adopted by the family. The space which she coveted as her home turns into foreign space all of a sudden. Further, she also comes to know that she has a blood brother, Arjuna. Hussein highlights the dilemma of unknown and uncertain identity of Khadeeja who desperately embark on a journey to find her biological brother, Arjuna and to know about her parentage.

Hussein articulates that a child who is adopted by a Muslim family cannot have Right to Property according to Muslim Law. Such a child cannot inherit property and name from her father's family. Though, Raushen Gul wishes to divide the property equally amongst her four children, the elder son Saif objects. Her brother objects her for being an equal shareholder of the property. His parochial dominance is evident when he states that it is the religion that does not allow her to be the inheritor of her father's property. This brings her on roads within no time. Saif argues, "What I want to know,...

is if she is going to inherit?...What rightful share? She doesn't get any, under Islamic law. That is not me making the rules, it is Islam." (Hussein 231) the fixity of religion in terms of law turns Khadeeja penniless though her mother wishes to give her the property.

Ameena Hussein introduces Arjuna, the biological brother of Khadeeja who is adopted by an affluent family. Further, he is living in a low country tea estate with a servant Swaris. Khadeeja reaches the place after a long journey from Colombo. While asking for a place to stay in the low country tea estate, she is directed to Hamu Mahattya, the town innkeeper, who in fact is Arjuna himself. He is called by this new name by the town people due to the family reputation he carries. When Arjuna enquires Khadeeja's purpose of being there, she lies him that she is an anthropologist studying the housing conditions of the tea-pluckers and wants to write down her research staying there. Khadeeja tells Arjuna, "I have actually finished much of my research,...I just need a quiet place to do the writing." (Hussein 63)

Within few days Arjuna and Khadeeja come close and explore new places together. Arjuna offers to take Khadeeja out to explore new places, "'D'ya have plans for the weekend? I'm off on Saturday so if you want I can take you on my bike and we can check out some of the nearby areas. So, what d'ya say?" (Hussein 66) Khadeeja starts to feel for her brother but uncertain of his response she does not reveal her real identity. Also, through her conversation with Arjuna she learns that he is married to Christine, a German girl. He informs how he met her and how both came close and decided to marry. He tells her that Christine is in Germany since few months in order to make money for both of them to live happily in Sri Lanka.

Another important feature of the novel is its bold representation of religious orthodoxy. Ameena Hussein presents RaushenGul as a rebel against the fundamentalism in Islamic practices. She is liberal and factual in her attitude towards her religion. She dislikes and discards the cultural fixities on woman, especially a widow who is made to mourn for four months and ten days. Ameena writes:

RaushenGul had practical views about the custom of mourning for Muslim wives. She had agreed that she should wear a white sari for the four months and ten days of seclusion (*but where exactly does it say it has to be white?*) Refused to listen to people who wanted her to take it to an extreme and wear white slippers, white nightdress (*in any case she said, I wear pyjamas*) and to remove mirrors, pictures and listen to prayers 24/7.

'Mourning comes from heart,' she would say to her daily visitors. 'No-one but I know the marriage that Rasheed and I had, so no-one can come and tell me that I am not mourning him properly.'

... Isn't it a bit ridiculous to prescribe a time of mourning? And what if the marriage was a bad one, why on earth should a woman mourn? She will instead be quite happy at the death of her husband. (Hussein 36)

RaushenGul's pointed questions on Islamic customs and practices trouble the visitors and her mother. They are often left perplexed and angry because of her queries. Only few braver ones would tentatively put forward response to her unaccustomed questions. For example, when RaushenGul criticizes the practice of *idda* as a feminine and marital fixity yoked upon women by patriarchy under the pretext of religion, her relatives argue:

We have been told that *idda* is to ensure that if there is a pregnancy the widow will not rush into another marriage and, you know, confuse the paternity of the unborn child'...' (Hussein 37)

RaushenGul launches her attack on the justification of *idda* that decimates her relative's reasoning and leaves them more confused than before. She attacks the rigidities on women placed by religion. The Islamic practices are religious fixities that create many injustices with women. She argues:

If a woman who has just been widowed desires to contract another marriage immediately on her husband's death...and if her new husband to be is willing to accept the financial responsibility of looking after the child,...then who cares about paternity? What goodly use is it? Secondly what about woman like me, who are passed the age of child-bearing? Of what advantage is this seclusion to us? Mourning *cannot*, must not be enforced. It makes a mockery of the very concept of sadness. (Hussein 37)

Ameena Hussein is an educated Muslim woman of Sri Lanka who evaluates Islamic religious practices from her westernized and educated perspective. RaushenGul is her mouth piece from whom she satirizes and, at times, attacks Islam and parochial normative hegemonies. RaushenGul is not ready to follow the customs in Islam blindly that a Muslim woman has to follow after her husband's death or divorce. As per Muslim law, a woman has to observe *idda* for four months and ten days after the death of her husband or after divorce. RaushenGul does not trust in these beliefs. Her liberal and moderate attitude towards the prescribed period of mourning enrages her mother. She responds, "'RaushenGul,' her mother said sternly, 'it is my fault that you have become a stubborn and spoiled woman. I will have to accept the blame of all when they say that I brought you up badly and you have become a bad Muslim.'" (Hussein 38) RaushenGul responds to her mother's argument, "'What nonsense, you talk Umma,...Everything about Islam is interpretation. So you keep to your interpretation and I will keep to mine. Just as much as I do not force my opinion down your throat, please do not interfere with mine.'" (Hussein 38) RaushenGul reflects her progressive attitude through her arguments which does not tally with conservative beliefs and mentalities.

Ameena projects how Muslim women in the patriarchal society of Sri Lanka face multiple marginalizations. They are marginalized as female as well as Muslims. In a way they are doubly marginalized in the society which considers Muslims as outsiders. There is a constant fear in Sinhala public that Muslims are intended to ruin their culture and heritage like they did in many former Buddhist countries. Being an ethnic minority in the

Sinhala majority, Muslim men and women are looked upon as threats to the Buddhist culture. Due to such reasons, constant violence and riots are common in Sri Lanka.

In relation to space, Michel de Certeau makes a distinction between ‘tactics’ and ‘strategies’ (Certeau xix) He argues in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) that strategies are the tool of the majority, of the dominant spatial power. They are the method through which said power makes a space of its own. Similarly, the Sinhala majority exercise their dominant spatial powers through adopting various strategies like imposing social and economic boundaries on Muslims. Likewise Muslim men impose social boundaries on women through their strategies and confine Muslim women to the four walls of house.

The writer explores multiple spaces – familial, financial, cultural, marital, ethnic and social – through her narratives. Space is complex phenomenon that is formed by feelings, images and reactions of human beings. In other words, it does not remain a physical or geographical area alone. Harvey in his scholarly book, *Social Justice and the City* (1973), rightly points out the relationship between social space and identity which Ameena’s characters rightly project. He says, “Social space is made up of a complex of individual feelings and images about and reactions towards the spatial symbolism which surrounds that individual”. (Harvey 34) Muslims, especially Muslim women, are subjected to definite space and areas. They do not have access to the spaces and places occupied by the majority. Space for Muslim women is rather a matter of great concern. Their social spaces are limited to either their home or their family members. In *The Moon in the Water*, Hussein projects and highlights the specific and customary space allowed for women to tread through. The kind of barriers imposed on RaushenGul is an example of this. She was expected to act the way society and people demand which she straightaway denies and which invites her mother’s wrath.

Most of the Muslim women have internalized religious and social oppression without questioning the authenticity of the reason put forward by the stakeholders of social and religious values. Ameena Hussein personally and also in her narratives highlights such kind of internalization that are prevalent and common in the Muslim Society in Sri Lanka. But there are also few women who refuse to give in to the demands and suppression forced on them and oppose firmly. As many feminists propose, the first step to overthrow the concept of a fixed space and to acknowledge difference in space is to expose the reinscription, enclosure, hierarchization of space and the imperial history. Hussein proposes such resistance through her works. Unless women stand against oppression, they will not be granted their rights and space of their own.

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