**FROM CLAUSTROPHOBIA TO BROMIDROPHOBIA: LACK OF
BELONGINGNESS AND SENSE OF PLACE IN RADHIKA JHA'S *SMELL***

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Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to examine the perturbed experience of an immigrant in Radhika Jha's novel *Smell*. The novel explores the issue of ethnic identity and belongingness through its protagonist Leela, an immigrant of Indian descent in Paris. Leela negotiates her cultural identity in order to survive in the foreign land, which triggers diasporic anxieties in her. The researcher has identified and analysed these anxiety disorders that Leela goes through because of abrupt migration. The pain of separation, sense of loss, and disorientation made Leela lose her sense of belongingness and place in the foreign land. In her quest to finally feel at home, Leela falls victim to various anxiety disorders which include claustrophobia, social anxiety disorder, and bromidrophobia. The researcher expands on the analysis about how these diasporic anxieties manifest in the life of Leela as a result of sudden migration and how she assimilates herself to overcome the fear of rejection to finally feel at home.

Keywords: Claustrophobia, Society Anxiety Disorder, Bromidrophobia, Diasporic
Anxieties, Radhika Jha's *Smell*

Life and literature are inseparable. Since time immemorial literature has recorded and speaks of conflicts and tensions that arose as a consequence of spatio-cultural displacement. Migration involves the risk of losing one's identity, complicated relationship with home and

belongingness, since it is not merely a geographical displacement but rather a displacement of culture and ideas hence psychological imbalance and moral conflict are its repercussions accompanied by a sense of loss and yearning. Writers across the globe have used these painful experiences as a subject for their character building and depiction of anxieties that manifest because of uncertainties and identity crisis in the process of migration. Diasporic anxieties are a direct response to memories, nostalgia and romanticized loyalty to homelands, a retrospective utopian vision because of which the subject is not able to connect to its current surrounding.

The central debate in the narrative revolves around Leela the protagonist of Radhika Jha's *Smell*, is an immigrant in Paris from Kenya but with an Indian descent. Forced to take the brutal and sudden transition because of her father's death, Leela undergoes emotional unrest, a persistent struggle between self and identity. The constant uncertainty accelerates anxiety and fear in her. Coming from open, comfortable, cozy and secure space of home in Kenya to a restricted, boxy apartment in Paris, Leela suffers from claustrophobia. Claustrophobia is

the fear and avoidance of enclosed spaces. For the claustrophobic person feeling trapped or being in a confined space should almost invariably provoke fear and discomfort if the phobia is mild or anxiety or panic attack if the phobia is more severe. The patient usually avoids the feared claustrophobic situations or endures them with intense anxiety, discomfort, and desire to escape. (Bouchard 145)

Leela feels suffocated and trapped in the crowded setup of her new living with her aunt and uncle at their house. On the very first day at her new house, she mentions to have felt imprisoned, looking desperately for windows to feel the fresh air. It is evident that Leela's psychological fear of restriction in her new life makes her feel ensnared in the immediate setup, finding solace in memories from the past, reminiscing every minute detail

of her room and childhood. Klaus Stierstorfer and Florian Klager assert, “As individuals and collectives construct ‘homes’ in the past, and as they variously attempt to act on these constructions, they encounter challenges and opportunities for self-making that offer intrusive insights into the dynamics of diaspora”(3). Memories play a vital role in Leela’s struggle to construct a social and personal identity in the world, where subjectivity was now fragmented. Vijay Andrews reflect upon the role of memories asserting that memories “can be nostalgically evocative of imaginary homelands and places of birth and origins as well as antidote to the struggles of present.”(10)

Leela is not able to connect to her new world and has an unremitting feeling to be at loss. She whimpers at the absence of her family and country. This sense of not belonging makes her feel alienated, isolated, and unhappy. She feels restless, dissatisfied, depressed, and at times pessimistic at the drastic change in life and longs to return back to her homeland, living in an illusion to return. It is noticeable that Leela has internalized her not belonging to her new surroundings. Trying to adjust to the new reality Leela compromises her bright educational future to assist her aunt in cooking and uncle at the store but still never feeling at home. John McLeod defines home as “a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of place in our world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong” (221). Leaving her home, language and culture behind Leela could never resettle in the new environment in a way that would have made her feel like home. In her efforts to reconcile with her mother, her last hope to finally return home and to be with family collapsed when she learns that she has been forsaken by her own mother.

As the novel proceeds it is observed, Leela struggles to survive switching jobs, meeting new people but she has a persistent fear that she won’t be accepted and will have to face embarrassment because of rejection. At the beginning of the novel, she fears interacting with people and finds it convenient and comfortable to be at home and not go out. This discomfort

in meeting new people is very evident, when in an episode she is invited by a friend at a party she expresses her internal immense fear as “The press of the people around it made a black shield around the entrance. I was tempted to run back downstairs”(128). Emotionally distressed, Leela feels a shrill of fear to find herself among many unknown people and restrains at first to even be a part of her friend’s party. The first thought that comes to her mind, is to quit the party and return back to her home. To put it in medical terms, Leela falls victim to “Social Anxiety Disorder”. Social Anxiety Disorder is defined as

Individuals suffering from SAD dread social interactions because they fear scrutiny or negative judgment from others. Hence, interaction with other people can automatically bring on feelings of self-consciousness, judgment, evaluation, and inferiority and can lead to feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, humiliation, and depression. (Bouchard 187)

Oftentimes Leela alludes herself to a lonely rat, which is indicative of her own lonesome life. Her incompetence to speak in French makes her feel embarrassed and reminds her of her incompatibility with the people around her. “Social anxiety disorder imply that avoidance of social situations is more likely to co-occur with fear of public embarrassment than it is fear of spiders, which suggests that there are plausible causal relationships between avoidance of social situations and fear of social situations” (Toner, Robinaugh 3). Leela is reminded of her lack of belongingness as she believes “The rat was my symbol because like me, he couldn’t speak French”(Jha 106). The metaphor of rat appears in the novel from time to time as Leela associates her beingness with a rat. In her mind, rat is reflective of her existence in the foreign land only with the difference that the rat has accepted the foreign land as it’s home. The existence of the other people around it didn’t affect it anymore. In Leela’s words “He was perfectly happy to be alone” (Jha 60). As the novel accelerates, she learns French as she strongly desires to appear and sound like the society she lives in but also

knowing deep inside her aspiration is unattainable. It is because of her poor grasp of French that she is not able to socialize. In diaspora “the logic of the sedentary is a persistent feature (and desire) in people’s migration; and diaspora communities rely on ongoing engagement with the homelands, as well as the civic spaces of the host country to define and assert themselves”(Gholami 51).

Upon being asked by her friend Lotti, to what would she like to become, she replies, “I’d like to be invisible... So, that I can pass amongst these people as one of them”(Jha 53-54). In the novel it is evident that how the majority larger culture shapes the racial and cultural identity of the minority culture. Leela constantly struggles to negotiate with cultural codes in order to attain acceptance and identity. James Clifford asserts “Constitutive suffering coexists with the skill of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism and stubborn visions of renewal. Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope of defining tension”(312). As identities are socially constructed, dependent upon time, place, and social context therefore unstable, Leela’s fluctuating life becomes a representation of the complex socio-political conflict surrounding cultural assimilation and racial othering. There is an interminable switching of identity between the assimilated cultural codes and the new gained identity.

The sense of belonging to a place, state, or group reinforces collective identity and social solidarity, which is lacking in Leela’s life ramifying into her feeling estranged. She tries to persist her ethnic identity by wearing her mother’s saarie at her friends wedding and by eating and cooking Indian food still oscillating between the dual identities, confused if she should carry her cultural identity or become like her autochthonous peers. Georgina Tsolidis observes that “people persist with their differences and families carry sense of somewhere else into multiple migrations to multiple destinations that ripple out from imagined homelands over many generations” (4). In her persistence and struggle to maintain her cultural identity Leela has to live through racism. The otherness is constructed and voiced in

many episodes. One of them being, while on a weekend trip to South France with her friends, Leela becomes an object of mockery in the market, where the French flower woman overcharges her for not being French. In her defense to not feel embarrassed because of rejection, Leela develops an obsessional fear of smelling bad, describing it as “a dark feral smell, too strong to be civilized, too powerful to be hidden. A smell so shameless, it belonged to the night or to those private moments of solitude that cannot be shared” (Jha 108). She put’s in humongous efforts to get rid of the unusual smell by applying expensive cosmetics and intense perfumes, but all her efforts in vain as the smell keeps reappearing time and again. What is even more bizarre is that upon asking her friends about the strange smell, they refuse to accept that the smell ever existed. Medical science terms this abnormal state as “Bromidrophobia”. Bromidrosiphobia, which is also called Autodysosmophobia is “Morbidity fear of smelling bad, or a delusion of having offensive odor” (Corsini 83). Bromidrophobia may also be linked with Obsessive-compulsive disorder. In OCD, the compulsion is washing hands while in bromidrophobia focus is on the removal of smell. Obsessive-compulsive disorder is fear provoked by some thought, image, or object resulting in mental discomfort. Any persistent thought, impulse or image experienced repetitively results in marked anxiety and distress. Leela’s persistent fear of smelling bad is Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, where we observe that whenever she fears rejection, she is deluded by the fear of intense unpleasant smell coming from her body. From the very first incident at the café, where she approaches the assistant until the end of the novel where she pleads the puppeteer not to forsake her, it is perceptible that only when she fears rejection does she experiences a musty, stale smell reeking from her body. The smell becomes a defence against her powerlessness, a way to blame herself before anyone could reject her. Living in a foreign country where Leela struggles not only with cultural conflict but also racial discrimination and rejection. Leela internalizes this fear to a level of insanity. The smell which actually doesn’t exist and is only

a creation of her mind becomes a reality in own mind's created world. This is a reflection of Leela self- effacing her physical and cultural identity, since her body odour, which is reflective of physical difference from actual people that belonged to that country. Physical appearance and the cultural difference becomes a hindrance in her mind which restrains her from feeling at home and develops a fear of rejection. Leela struggles hard to transcend her fear but is never able to understand the ground reality of the cause of fear until she meets the puppeteer who with his wisdom identifies Leela's fear makes her aware of her mind's created illusion of fear.

You don't smell. You have never smelt,' he says at last. It is just your fear talking.

You fear that you will once more be rejected. You want to think you smell because that way you will be able to blame yourself. That way it will become impossible for anyone to hurt you, because that way you have already rejected yourself. (Jha 288)

In this conversation with the puppeteer Leela experience an epiphany, realizes, and identifies her insecurities. She not only overcome those to finally feel at home but also re-acclimatizes herself and redefines the meaning of home embedded in dual cultures and spaces.

To conclude, Jha's *Smell* is replete with conflict of identity and ethnicity in transnational spaces. Leela reinvents her identity in the wake of migration and homelessness. Through the engaging and enchanting narrative, Jha weaves diasporic anxiety disorders as a manifestation of the conflict and negotiations that Leela undergoes to establish her autonomous identity and transcend the lack of belongingness in a foreign space to finally feel at home. In Leela's journey from dislocation to resettlement, the dynamics of fear and rejection imposed on her, reconstructs her personality into a whole new being who not only accepts and establishes her identity in the foreign land but also conquers her anxiety disorders.

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