



Trans-cultural and Trans-national Trauma: Exploring the South Asian Migrant Lives in *Ask Me No Questions*

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Abstract

Every migrant family in the world has a profound sense of cultural dislocation and alienation, which disrupts the battle to survive and settle in the new region. The new socio-geographical environment creates a trans-cultural and trans-national complexity in the individual's psychological condition, leading to catastrophic life experiences. Migrants' lives are subjected to social, political, and cultural disparities in their new abode, adding to their suffering. Marina Budhos' novel *Ask Me No Questions* is an engrossing examination of the transcultural and transnational trauma experienced by South Asian Muslim immigrants, particularly in post-9/11 America. The Ahmed family's experiences can be used to analyse the intricacies of trauma that go beyond individual problems to cover broader cultural and national dimensions. Nadira, a 14-year-old Muslim girl, recounts her family's story as they relocate from Bangladesh to America, hoping for a better life. Members of a family find it difficult to fit in when they are moved to a place with a completely different culture and way of life. Nadira and her family, which included her mother, father, and elder sister, struggled with an identity crisis and cultural alienation in addition to the suffering that all members of the American Muslim community went through in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how transnational and trans-cultural trauma contributes to the physical and psychological toll that immigrants, including women and children, experience while striving to rebuild their lives in a foreign country.

Keywords: Culture, Nation, Identity, Immigration, Trauma

Introduction

Migration, defined as the movement of people from one place to another, can occur either voluntarily or due to compelling circumstances. Voluntary migration is often driven by goals such as seeking employment, improved living conditions, or educational opportunities. Conversely, involuntary migration is usually caused by natural disasters, armed conflict, diseases, poverty, or forced displacement. Regardless of the causes, migration presents a range of significant challenges that greatly affect migrants' lives, often resulting in traumatic experiences. The cross-cultural and trans-national trauma associated with migration requires substantial academic attention, especially considering the importance of migration and migrant issues in the current global discourse.

In her novel *Ask Me No Questions*, Budhos chronicles the journey of a Muslim family from Bangladesh to the United States in their quest for a better life. The narrative is conveyed through the perspective of fourteen-year-old Nadira, who recounts her family's challenges with maturity and grace against the sociopolitical backdrop of post-9/11 America. The family, comprising Nadira, her mother, father, and elder sister, faces significant challenges due to cultural dislocation, which ultimately results in post-migration trauma. The objective of this paper is to critically analyse how Budhos's novel portrays the trans-cultural and trans-national trauma experienced by Nadira's family, focusing on the challenges they face as they endeavour to adapt to a new sociopolitical context.

Materials and Methods

The primary data is collected from a close reading of the primary text, *Ask Me No Questions*. Secondary data is collected from the studies on the novel, as well as the theoretical books and articles on trauma. Through the descriptive analytical method, this study sheds light on how transnational and trans-cultural trauma contributes to the physical and psychological toll that immigrants, including women and children, experience while striving to rebuild their lives in a foreign country.

Results and Discussions

The concept of post-migration is frequently explored in contemporary discourse as a framework for addressing the cultural challenges and societal shifts that migrants face (Gaonkar et al. 2021). One of the primary difficulties that any immigrant encounters when trying to integrate into their new environment is the process of cultural negotiation and social adaptation. This adaptation process can be severely hindered by the challenges of crossing cultural boundaries, especially if the sociopolitical and cultural climate of the host country is unwelcoming or exclusionary. The daily struggles of migrants are compounded by an unfriendly atmosphere, making even the most basic acts of survival an ongoing struggle. These difficulties, which further isolate migrants and hinder their integration, can manifest in various forms such as xenophobia, discrimination, and marginalisation. The combined effects of these obstacles often lead to intense psychological distress, known as post-migration trauma. This trauma can significantly affect an individual's mental health, social identity, and sense of belonging. Therefore, examining post-migration experiences is vital to understanding the broader impacts of migration, as an inability to cope with these challenges can have serious consequences, endangering not only the quality of life but also the very existence of those affected.

Striving for the social, cultural, and financial upliftment of his family, Nadira's father left Bangladesh for the United States, intending to provide his daughters with superior living conditions and educational opportunities. However, the American culture in the aftermath of 9/11 was found to be unwelcoming and did not fulfil their aspirations. A hostile environment was created by the widespread national, linguistic, religious, and racial prejudices, particularly towards Muslim groups. This unwelcoming attitude led to discrimination and cultural alienation for Muslim families, transforming their pursuit of a better life into an incessant struggle for acceptance and survival.

Like everyone who misses their home country, Nadira and her family had a profound sense of alienation from their motherland while in America. The *boroi* tree outside their Bangladeshi home, the stone wall where her mother used to slap the laundry dry, and the metal cabinet where her

father stored his schoolbooks are all memories that Nadira shares. She says, “Even though we left when I was seven, sometimes if I close my eyes, it’s as if I were right there” (Budhos 2008, 5). The culture, language, way of life, cuisine, and attire were all foreign to Nadira and her family, who suffered from a severe sense of alienation in the new land (Li 2016). Aisha was especially impacted, experiencing an identity crisis that jeopardised their feeling of safety. The family became marginalised in American culture due to social isolation brought on by this cultural alienation. They feel that they “don’t really exist here” (2008, 8) and it's not their home.

While America provided the promise of a better life, Nadira and her family faced substantial barriers due to their unstable legal status. They were particularly vulnerable to the stringent immigration regulations that were put in place after 9/11, as they did not have the necessary documentation to verify their status. During this time, the rise in security concerns led to more stringent restrictions on migration and visa renewals, which had a disproportionate effect on Muslim communities. The increase in racial profiling and widespread distrust of Muslim immigrants created an environment of bias and discrimination. The situation was further aggravated for Nadira's family by their father's visa nearing expiration, which left them in a constant state of anxiety. Any sense of security they might have hoped for was compromised by the persistent threat of detention and deportation. As they navigated a hostile sociopolitical environment under the constant threat of legal action and removal, this fear-induced trauma permeated their daily lives, resulting in ongoing stress and psychological suffering.

Women and children are especially susceptible to post-migration stress, frequently going through difficult and dehumanising situations. When they first arrived at the American airport, Nadira's mother had a distressing event that brought to light the family's extreme sense of unease in a place they had anticipated would offer security and peace. Her response broke their hopes of a safe fresh start and highlighted the psychological toll of facing an inhospitable environment. Nadira explains, “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, 7). The family was overcome with worry and anxiety as a result of the upsetting experience they had upon arriving. Their lives were shadowed by the continual fear of arrest and deportation, even though Nadira's father worked every menial job he could to provide for them. A condition of trauma resulted from this widespread instability, which especially affected Nadira and Aisha at a pivotal juncture in their lives when they were keen to seize fresh chances and create a bright future. The feeling of unpredictability and instability dashed their dreams of a safe and satisfying existence in their new nation (Ehrkamp, Loyd, and Secor 2022).

Nadira's family confronted significant hurdles in adjusting to a vastly different sociocultural environment in America, which resulted in profound cultural alienation (Kar 2017). This transition was particularly arduous for Nadira and her sister Aisha, who were both in their teenage years. They frequently found themselves spending weekends with the children of their parents' Bengali acquaintances, as the American families in their vicinity were unwelcoming, thus restricting their social interactions. However, Aisha was resolute in her pursuit of recognition, respect, and acceptance, particularly from Native Americans. She began to adopt American cultural practices, including styles of dress, dialects, culinary preferences, and accessories, in an effort to fit in. Aisha was deeply troubled by the persistent barriers posed by her Bangladeshi heritage, even after her

attempts to integrate. Her ancestry consistently marked her as an outsider, and the hostility she faced within American society only heightened her feelings of alienation. This internal conflict between her ethnic identity and her desire for acceptance caused her significant distress, ultimately affecting her sense of self and belonging.

Trauma is defined as a condition in which a person is deprived of the safe space needed to process emotions, which results in a crippling sense of powerlessness (Van der Kolk 1987). It can appear at the individual, group, psychological, and bodily levels, among other aspects (Ceciu 2020). Crucially, these facets of trauma are interrelated; as the suffering worsens, a person who first experiences trauma at one level frequently finds it leaking into other areas. As Nadira's family deals with the difficulties of migration and cultural dislocation in America after 9/11, Marina Budhos depicts the complex anguish they endure in *Ask Me No Questions*. The father's detention because of his illegal status is the first of many hardships the family must endure. The family's main source of security and stability is taken away by this incident. The family's sorrow is increased when the mother, who is left defenceless and unprotected, is compelled to seek public aid (Elshaikh 2015). Nadira and her sister Aisha feel helpless due to the abrupt loss of parental protection and the exposure to social and legal risks. Cultural alienation, fear of deportation, and a generalised sense of insecurity all exacerbate their pain. The difficulties encountered by thousands of immigrant families from Muslim-majority nations are reflected in Nadira's family's experiences. These families faced institutional discrimination, suspicion, and prejudice in post-9/11 American society, which made their quest for a safe life tumultuous on both a psychological and emotional level.

The United States enacted stringent measures against unauthorised persons and drastically tightened its immigration regulations in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Migrants of Muslim heritage were particularly impacted and experienced increased scrutiny, job losses, and dire financial difficulties. The family lived in continual fear and uncertainty as a result of the several people swept up in this wave of enforcement, including Nadira's father, whose visa had expired. Nadira's family was left without the choice to return to their country of origin, unlike some other Bangladeshi migrant families. Before leaving Bangladesh, they had sold their house and possessions, putting all of their money into the prospect of a better life in America. Feeling like 'others' in a culture that was growing more antagonistic towards Muslim immigration, they battled a deep sense of alienation now that they were stuck without a safety net (Elshaikh 2016; Kim 2024). They struggled with social marginalisation and economic precarity in a foreign country, which exacerbated their post-migration stress.

Nadira and Aisha frequently encountered bias and discrimination in school, which was a stark representation of the general public's perceptions about Muslim immigrants in America following 9/11. At first, Aisha, who had always been a driven learner with high expectations, found it difficult to stay focused. Her drive and feeling of duty started to suffer as a result of the upsetting things that were happening in their family. Her formerly promising educational trajectory was impacted when she lost interest in her studies due to the ongoing stress and mental weight. It had a significant psychological influence on both sisters. The girls felt exposed and defenceless since their mother was detained and their father was imprisoned since his visa had expired. They experienced severe dread, anxiety, and depressive episodes as a result of their parents' absence and the unfriendly social setting. They fled to their uncle in search of shelter, but when he was also caught

and put in jail, their predicament only became worse. Their anxieties were heightened by the news of their uncle's arrest and the torture he endured while in custody, which prevented them from feeling secure or at ease. The girls' ongoing anxiety and stress left them emotionally spent, causing sleep disturbances and a generalised feeling of dread to overwhelm their everyday lives. Regarding Aisha's reaction, Nadira says, "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" (2008, 102). These lines eloquently capture the depth of the psychological agony they endured.

Nadira's family suffers from the most extreme kind of existential crisis, which is frequently brought on by an identity crisis. They have ongoing sentiments of isolation and alienation as Bangladeshi immigrants in the United States. They struggle to integrate because of their unique cultural heritage, which leaves them marginalised in the job, at school, and in American culture at large. This ongoing feeling of alienation not only diminishes their sense of value but also makes it more difficult for them to fit in, underscoring the significant effects of social and cultural displacement on their identities and mental health. Aisha just requests the audience to acknowledge her identity and embrace her for who she is in her valedictorian address. "All I ask of you is to see me for who I am. Aisha" (2008, 152). Her statement demonstrates the intensity of her desire to be accepted for who she is.

This represents the desire of many migrant victims to be recognised amid geographic relocation and cultural conflicts. Migrants frequently experience marginalisation and exclusion in their new nation, being excluded from prevailing social and cultural narratives. With restricted access to the rights and benefits enjoyed by the native people, they are deprived of their position and regarded as second-class citizens. Their fight for acceptance and equal chances in a foreign country is exacerbated by the lack of integration and acceptance, which puts them in a position of liminality where they are neither completely assimilated into the host culture nor able to restore their original identity.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States implemented substantial changes to its immigration and security policies. These alterations created significant challenges for migrants worldwide, particularly for those who had long viewed America as a land of opportunity and a fresh start. Focusing on the hardships experienced by individuals of Muslim descent in a post-9/11 America marked by heightened xenophobia and suspicion, Budhos skillfully examines the complexities of cultural dislocation and the suffering endured by migrants in her work, *Ask Me No Questions*. The narrative centres on the experiences of Nadira and Aisha, two teenage sisters caught between their Bangladeshi roots and the expectations of American society. The sisters grapple with a profound identity crisis as they strive to navigate the pressures of assimilation in an unfamiliar and at times unwelcoming environment while remaining connected to their heritage. Their experiences illuminate the painful reality of cultural conflicts and the obstacles young migrants face as they seek to belong in a place where they often feel out of place.

Additionally, the novel examines the role of the family's Muslim identification in shaping their social and legal status in America. They are often viewed with suspicion and face discrimination due to their religious and cultural background, which subjects them to intense

scrutiny. The narrative illustrates how these biases lead to social isolation and a lack of legal protections, ultimately erasing any sense of safety or belonging they might have had in their new environment. The story of Nadira's family reveals the complexities of post-migration trauma and cultural alienation, while also serving as a poignant example of the broader challenges faced by many Muslim immigrant families in America.

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