

## Negotiating Spaces and Cultural Transactions in Mena Abdullah's *The Time of the Peacock*

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*“Cultural differences should not separate us from each other but rather cultural diversity should bring a collective strength that can benefit all of humanity.”*

- Robert Alan Manners

Culture is a complex term that includes the way of life; the customs and beliefs; art and social organization of a particular country or group acquired by persons through their capacity of learning. The social system consisting of the roles associated with men and women, the rituals, celebrations, myths and folktales all form a part of the culture of a community. The stimulating and captivating writings of Asian-Australian writer, Mena Abdullah are replete with cultural, political, historical and social aspects of the society. She explores the diversity of life of different cultures like that of Australia, India and Pakistan in her literary works especially in *The Time of the Peacock*, which would be the main focus of study for this paper. The present paper intends to discuss and focus on Mena Abdullah's works as a part of multicultural literature where varied historical events, as well as cultural aspects of the people are explored and irrespective of cultural differences, human bonding holds its own importance.

Literature is a reflection of the society that induces us to contemplate upon varied aspects of society; relationship between the individuals, individuals and groups, between the groups. The writers inspired by life events, weave them into the characters of their works and

through their words, these intricacies of life are brought forth for us to read, visualise, explore as well as reflect. Mena Abdullah's works imbibe a spirit of history and her works of historical fiction are riveting. She lays stress on the importance of family histories and culture even in writing. As defined in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, history is all the events that happened in the past or the past events concerned in the development of a particular place, subject, etc. (Hornby: 737).

Malcolm Bradbury aptly defines 'culture' in this way: "Culture is a way of coping with the world by defining it in detail." (Bradbury: 1978) Mahatma Gandhiji said, "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people". (Allahabad Conference: 1936) According to Kofi Annan, "We may have different religions, different languages, different coloured skin, but we all belong to one human race". (Nobel Lecture: 2001) These are the great quotes by intellectuals on culture and its significance. Sir Francis Bacon, writing four hundred years ago, stated that, "All negotiation is to work, to discover and take risk." (Of Negotiating: 1625) He was aware that this could not be accomplished fast or by merely splitting differences. Even very straightforward and simple talks are usually turned out to be too complex for that. What we need is negotiation space to express, to share and to test our assumptions, to learn about one another, to exchange ideas, to compromise wisely and to assure that what we promise to do will be done. The concept of negotiating space rests on the fact that we need more time and space to negotiate than we usually allot to making the best and most prudent deal possible for both sides.

Representations of Asian women in Australian literature have much in common with popular representations of the landscape and its culture: both tend to be depicted as highly gender-biased, yet passive; erratic, cruel, and unforgiving. While critics have ignored this similarity between portrayals of the landscape and of Asian women, the women writers from

Asian-Australian origin have emphasised the link themselves: they have emphasised the landscape in their work, and used landscape imagery to subvert stereotypical representations of Asian women. This paper deals with a short-story collection of the writer from Asian-Australian origin that draws directly from landscape iconography. Mena Abdullah with her unique style and distinctive narrative skill discussed immigrant experience in her literary works. *The Time of the Peacock* is considered as a monumental work and made valuable contributions to the rewriting of dominant Australian attitudes to Asian women, and Australian identity by focusing on the multiculturalism and ethnic diversity. This paper focuses on Mena Abdullah's *The Time of the Peacock* as a celebration of the culturally hybrid nature of the country. In each of these stories, representations of relationships with the culture and Australian landscape itself are used as metaphors for socio-cultural interactions and the self.

Mena Abdullah's *The Time of the Peacock* has received considerable critical attention over the years both as a work of Australian fiction and as a part of the Diasporic writings from the Indian subcontinent. *The Time of the Peacock* is a collection of stories that contains twelve stories, eleven of which are set in rural Australia, while the last one, "A Long Way", takes place in rural Pakistan. While most 'third-world' immigrant writers in developed countries deal with urban issues; it is particularly fascinating here to read such an intimate portrayal of rural experiences. (*Striking Chords: Multicultural literary interpretations*: 1992) These sequential, refined, simple, and interlocked stories project the perspectives of Indian Muslims who initially immigrated to rural Australia in the second half of the last century; their initial job was to train camels across the wilderness, settling afterwards as farmers. They were curiously referred to as 'Afghans' during the era of The White Australia Policy,

categorising *'all who wore turbans, exotic attire and shared the Moslem [sic] faith, regardless of their various cultural and linguistic backgrounds.* (MacDermott. 203).

Twelve short-stories, most of them narrated by Nimmi, "a dark girl in a white man's country, a Punjabi Muslim in a Christian land" recall Memories of immigrant-childhood on an Australian farm in its early years in an alien land. Nimmi reminisces how her brother Lal greeted the birth of a baby sister with great disappointment as he was portrayed as a male-chauvinist Punjabi even as a toddler. She recalls fable-like involvements with unorthodox pet animals: a peacock brought from India, reluctant to open its tail in this unfamiliar land; a fox, domesticated, then released to its doom ("She had not learnt how to kill and hunt"); an eagle, capable of violence, but referred and loved by the children as the "High Maharajah" who helps them find a kite. Additionally, there are memories of culture-clashes: the dark-skinned children's first exposure to the "nigger word" at school; an overheard story of a Punjabi patriarch, who was finally ready to accept his son's inter-religion marriage to a white woman; and the division or split in Nimmi's own family, which consists of a Muslim father, a Hindu-born mother, and a pious Hindu grandmother who never forgives. . . until Lal's near-fatal bout with meningitis brings the family together across the boundaries of caste, creed and religion. Mena Abdullah has done a fabulous job of capturing trivial and mostly shapeless glimpses of an India-haunted Australia. Some weird nuances with enough curious specifics have been very well described by the writer to reward those vulnerable to cross-cultural charm and oddity.

These interlinked stories, in which characters from one family often reappear in different episodes, are given focus by the maturing voice of its sensitive, observant narrator, Nimmi. Her pleasing vigour, imagination, and inquisitiveness - for which she is mockingly

branded as 'the questioner' (p. 5) and 'the dreamy one' (p. 11) - drives the narrative ahead. Suggestively, Nimmi explicitly and emphatically affirms her ethnicity:

*'I, young as I was, could see the whole of my life as strange- a dark girl in a white man's country, a Punjabi Muslim in a Christian land' (p. 21).*

This stark statement lends credence to the notion that one's ethnicity does not refer 'to a thing-in-itself but to a relationship ... typically based on contrast' (*Werner Sollors 'Ethnicity', in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., Critical Terms for Literary Study (Chicago and London: U. of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 288*) which is here distinguished on the basis of colour, gender, national origin, and religion, with the latter receiving a somewhat accentuated emphasis in the collection as a whole.

Throughout, the contrast manifests itself in the forms of binary categories such as us and them, and in terms of what is judged to be properly Muslim as distinct from what is perceived to be typically Australian. In order to preserve their cultural values and practices, the Indian Muslims resort to the defensive attitude of constructing family-centred cocoons, whereby they inhabit an approximation of life in India. They formed a unique bond with the Indian landscape by inventing a semblance of India in order to help themselves to overcome their sense of alienation. In order to create "her own little walled-in country," Nimmi's mother creates an Indian flower garden (p. 2). By developing a matching connection with the animals, which are given respectable Indian names or addressed in familial or affectionate words, this symbolic attachment to the new and old lands is strengthened in this way. The eagle named as "High Maharajah." (p. 53); the vixen (a female fox) as Kumari, a princess; ShahJehan, the peacock, as Nimmi's 'little brother' (p. 7); the 'Grandfather Tiger' as fictitious and wise tiger; and the little bird 'Russilla' as 'a friend, from heaven' (p. 13). In spite of their marginalisation, Indian Muslims find the landscape more welcoming and the animals more

hospitable than Australians who refer to them as "Niggers" in the story "Because of the Russilla" and make fun of their clothing and cuisine in the story "Grandfather Tiger."

As a parallel to these occasional instances of racism, the narrative, significantly, highlights the acts of affection and solidarity on the part of other Australians who befriend the Indians, respect their religion, and make them feel 'like relations' (p. 19). It is very interesting to find how the narrative in "The Singing Man", combines the Indians' nostalgia and longing for their Kashmir or Punjab with those of wandering Irish accountant, Paddy-the-Drunk who sings and longs for the green meadows of Ireland. Similarly, the juxtaposition of the story of the Australian 'bushranger' Thunderbolt with that of the Punjabi 'dacoit' Malik Khan (through the technique of story-within-story in "The Outlaw") indicates the similarities in admirable codes of conduct among people of all races, even among those who are compelled to resort to the extremes of violence.

More importantly, the narrative foregrounds the diversity in the response of the Indian Muslims to their 'foreignness' in Australia, problematizing in the process the lack of uniformity in the manner of their affirmation of ethnicity. In "The Child that Wins", we witness a range of attitudes with regard to Hussein and Anne's marriage. Hussein's father is opposed to it, and he is joined by Nimmi's favourite Uncle Seyid, a comic relief character as he has got a very good sense of humour. Though Seyid is not a relative but becomes a close friend of her father. The father worries (perhaps too presciently) that the children of a cross-ethnic marriage 'belong nowhere' (p. 74), neither Australians, Indians nor Muslims; Uncle Seyid, a well-intentioned and benevolent conservative believes that a Muslim should marry only someone who shares his faith because 'your own is your own' (p. 74) and 'what was right was right forever, and that what was Muslim was always right' (p. 73). On the other way, Nimmi's parents, whose own marriage symbolizes a stunning example of a syncretic union

between a Muslim and a Brahmin, and also cautiously and covertly supports the marriage. Their attitude reflects a certain sophisticated, reconciliatory idealism rooted in Nimmi's mother's vague principle that 'people are people' and in Nimmi's father's declaration that 'If you stay anywhere long enough ... people get used to you. They take you in to their houses and their ways' (p. 74). Of course, Hussein's action signifies, alternatively, a readiness for organic integration justified by both genuine bonding and pragmatism. The conflict is resolved through cleverly confluence these diverse streams with the birth of a baby, heralding hope and harmony.

“The Child that Wins” emphasises the inevitability to adapt and adjust to the realities and requirements of immigration. A centrifugal tendency simultaneously emerges among the characters, pointing towards assimilation into the new culture without necessarily deracinating themselves even as the discourse reveals an obvious pride in the character’s sense of their ethnicity and empathy for their anxiety over losing it in an alien land at times of hostile culture. When it comes to educating the next generation of Australian-born Muslims which is concerned with this issue assumes more prominent role. In “The Babu from Bengal”, the foresighted Wali Husson urges his friends to send their children to Australian schools to learn and to integrate into their new society, so as to spare the parents the exploitation of the Babu, a half-literate conniving clerk:

*The white people send their children to school. We send ours to work in the paddocks. The white children are learning to choose. Ours are learning to be farmers, peasants, people the Babu can use to make money from. This is because their fathers are stubborn and dislike change. (p. 89)*

What is being articulated here is not merely a strategy for survival, but a genuine willingness to meet the other and to emulate qualities that the Muslims can comprehend and

relate to such as the pursuit of learning. The story emphasises compromise and acceptance of their new identity as Australians while valuing their Indian heritage, affirming this spirit of change throughout. The triple sets of binary oppositions along the axes of time, space, and ethnic barriers (then/now, there/here, and us/them) are thus deftly defused and reconciled through statements like “The old ways were good, but the new ways are better” (p. 104). Similarly, in the story “High Maharajah”, the gravid act of reconstructing a damaged kite, from Indian bamboo reed and Australian paper (potent symbols for cultural roots and acquired identity) making the hybridized 'Australian kite sing' (p. 57), indicates the evolution of a new composite personality, expressing a distinctively Asian-Australian sensibility that is part of Australia's history," and represents the development of a new composite identity. (Gooneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 118) Accordingly, the discourse of *The Time of the Peacock* functions, to extend Edward Said's musical metaphor, 'contrapuntally' (Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), pp. 66-67) it suggests, perhaps a little idyllically, that compromise is quite possible when exercising flexibility and foresight. It is significant to note that all the concerns and the concessions are one-sided: the minority must be accommodative of the majority.

The final narrative, 'A Long Way' is the pinnacle of the toleration and compassion of ethos. The story operates allegorically through the metaphor of a difficult journey undertaken by a Pakistani mother desperate to deliver a jumper, conjuring up in the reader's imagination Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. The mother has made it for a son who studies in Australia; as she tries to arrive in Karachi on time to hand-deliver it to a friend departing for Australia, when this Muslim mother encounters people from other religions such as Hindus, untouchables, and a Christian priest, every one of them show adoration and affection for her. The story, along with the entire collection, comes to an almost didactic conclusion by



building up to the central idea of the book, "The world is all our people," which is stated on the last page of the book (p. 112). This all-encompassing insight supports Nimmi's innocently pastoral vision of a child, which is expressed in the book's opening sentence, "The world was our farm and we were all loved."

The atmosphere of universal tranquillity that permeates *The Time of the Peacock* deflects hostile situations. By keeping this in mind, one Australian reviewer aptly writes for the Bulletin eloquently stated, 'that kind of book: to be passed on within a family, with love.' (Maurice Shadbolt, quoted in *Gooneratne: Pg.115*) The book's fascinating thematics thus progresses from the 'dissociative sense' (Sollors, *op. cit.*, p. 288) that emphasizes ethnic distinctiveness being jealously guarded in a daunting environment of immigration/exile towards an integrative ethos that embraces and celebrates a caring, compassionate humanity: as Rashida, Nimmi's mature sister and one of the book's privileged voices, insightfully declares: "In all things beautiful Allah smiles" (p. 27).

Though the way of life, customs and beliefs of people may differ from one another, there are many similarities which make them unified humans above everything. Through her gripping narratives, Mena Abdullah not only brings to the fore the history and culture of different places but lays emphasis on humanity and traces the journey of life where the magical powers of care, affection and love connects human beings. Reading, exploring and discussing about different cultures makes one more awakened to the unknown territories of culturally diverse life in this world.

The advent of literary theories like post-colonialism and cultural studies have provided added advantage to the South Asian diasporic writers in Canada in charting out their own "cultural territory." Viney Kirpal states in *The Third World Novel of Expatriation*:

“Whether modern or traditional, it is humankind's eternal yearning to find "roots"

or a place to call home and develop an emotional and psychological connection.” (45)

Culture clashes, the process and resulting guilt of fleeing a restrictive background or tradition, the problem of being displaced from one’s own culture and one’s own homeland finding oneself in a totally new world. These are issues that an increasing number of people in today's globe are facing in a brand-new setting. Therefore, the three coordinates of the diasporic imaginary are culture, identity, and resistance. The entire issue of an individual's identity becomes an unreachable ideal in such a situation where the person is perceived as geographically, culturally, linguistically, or occasionally psychologically separated. The Asian-Australian fiction, especially from the writers of south Asian origin, abundantly reflects these anxieties, the sense of dislocation and alienation of individuals caught in a world of conflicting values. Hence, there is diasporic resistance for identity and empowerment.

To conclude, society consisting of multi-cultural, religious and linguistic groups undergoes the process of constant negotiations, conflict, assimilation and more of accommodations. Diversity and unity have to be observed as dialectical process. Society which is free from conflict, cooperation and accommodation is exists only in myth. Negotiating space can be created by putting a string on concessions. Making a concession in exchange for something invigorates calm discussions with fresh ideas. It gives both sides the opportunity to respond in a variety of ways. Some responses to requirements or strings provide hints about hidden motives. These offer areas for additional exploration. The relationship can develop if there is room for negotiation: space for each side to build respect and trust in the other, to accept the other as a collaborator rather than an opponent, to

discover the things they have in common and to recognise the genuine significance of their differences.

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