

## Interrogating Muslim Identity: Distinctiveness and Voluntary Adjustments in Adib Khan's *Solitude of Illusions*

M M Shariful Karim<sup>1</sup>  
Comilla University, Bangladesh

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### Abstract

This paper aims at a critical reading of Adib Khan's second novel, *Solitude of Illusions* (1996), in order to examine how an Indian Muslim makes voluntary adjustments of his historical identity crisis that transcends rigid cultural tags. With a view to maintaining an unchallenged control over the Indians, the British had purposely inflamed religious antagonism in colonial India, causing disunity and rivalry among the Hindus and Muslims. Being victims of the coloniser's "divide and rule" policy, these two communities experienced a feeling of insecurity about their respective distinct identity. After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the Muslims in particular experienced a setback concerning their discrete politics, education, language and culture. The reputed Bangladeshi-Australian diaspora writer, Adib Khan (1949-), has reflected these issues in his novel, *Solitude of Illusions*. This paper analyses Khan's attempt at reconfiguring the history of the Indian subcontinent to scrutinise the lifestyle, struggles and changing attitudes of Indian Muslims of Bengali heritage from the colonial to the postcolonial era. It is noted that while focusing on the life and identity crisis of these Bengali Muslims, Khan also favours a compassionate and positive approach to overcome cultural anxieties. This paper investigates how the culturally dislocated Muslims make themselves adaptable to the changing postcolonial world.

### Keywords

Postcolonialism, Muslim identity, linguistic crisis, partition, diaspora, history of the Indian subcontinent

### Introduction

The history of the Indian subcontinent is incomplete without referring to the British colonial interventions that occurred beginning from mid-eighteenth century to mid-twentieth century, during which immense changes came to the lives of the natives. Several waves of change, including the Industrial Revolution,

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. M M Shariful Karim has been teaching English literature since 2001. He is currently working as an Associate Professor at the Department of English, Comilla University, Bangladesh. He obtained his Ph.D. in English Literary Studies from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 2018. His academic and research interests include Postcolonial studies, South Asian Diaspora literature and Bengali literature. E-mail: karimshariful@gmail.com.

the introduction of new forms of transportation and a modern communication system, swept over India. The impact of British rule could also be seen in the economic, political, social, cultural and religious spheres, which conversely caused much damage to the indigenous traditions. Any attempt to trace the images of Indian postcolonial culture, therefore, necessitates reconfiguring its colonial history. Bangladeshi Australian writer Adib Khan's novels reflect the legacy of this colonial culture. His subcontinental cultural inheritance and migrant experiences have provided him with myriad images of depicting and representing postcolonial South Asian culture. Since he was born in East Pakistan, he automatically became a Bangladeshi national after the country's independence from West Pakistan in 1971. Therefore, he is privileged to have first-hand exposure to the cultures of three post-independent South Asian countries, namely India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Khan moved to Australia to pursue higher education in 1973 and subsequently obtained Australian citizenship. Therefore, Khan's imagination and creative canvass is the result of crossing many borders and living in the intersection of cultures identified as "Third Space."

A leading figure in contemporary cultural discourse, Homi K. Bhabha, used the term "Third Space" (1994) to identify a location beyond the boundaries of cultural identity. He also holds that in this "in-between" space, new cultural identities are formed, reformed and remain constantly in a state of *becoming*. He puts importance on this concept as it goes together with hybridity. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that this hybridity serves as an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). Diasporas are the culturally dislocated people who remain in a continuous process of reinventing their communal and personal selfhood. As such, Adib Khan is a diaspora author whose dialogic dimension of mind portrays communal violence and hatred with moral disapproval, only to look for a "home" of harmony and mutual confederacy. In his novel *Solitude of Illusions*, Khan represents his Indian Muslim protagonist, Khalid Sharif, as being tolerant of different cultures and having the ability to figure and reconfigure his identity with the changing cultural context. Khan even documents the colonial culture by bringing it in the broad context of postcolonialism. During his time in Australia, Khalid's Indian cultural identity undergoes a metamorphosis. He befriends his Australian neighbour, Angela, a white Australian woman who also comes out of her colonial prejudices against the Indians. Khan's subcontinental cultural heritage and migrant experiences have provided him with myriad images to depict a synchronised society characterised by its difference and not by stagnation, fossilisation and cultural binarism.

Throughout his fictional works, almost all of Khan's major characters are on a quest for "home" from where they can look back at their past memories. Instead, it only serves to refresh the memories of their "lost home" and seek

atonement for their troubled souls. Khan's preoccupation has been the search for an identity for his deracinated protagonists. Their troubled and unsettled souls find anchorage in their individuality, albeit by locating themselves synchronously in *being* and *becoming* (Hall 225). A diaspora's identity lies between these two vectors of similarity and continuity. *Being* is located within his collective history while *becoming* recognises the circumstances of his new home. For diasporas, the home seems to be a "Third Space" from where they can enunciate their differences and accommodate others. In his article, "Diasporas," Clifford presents some positive aspects of diasporas by stating that the experiences of loss, marginality and exile help them acquire "skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal" (312). He further observes that by being empowered by a transnational connection, the displaced people ultimately break the binary relation between "minority" and "majority." Far from being guided by religion, race, gender or national constituents, it equips them with an alternative view of looking into the present complexities of modern life.

However, it is from this alternative view that Khan sheds light on the identity crisis of the urban Muslim elites and their gradual change in attitudes in their dealings with new political and global situations. Khan, who was born into an elitist Muslim family and later became a diaspora, shows his potential craft while portraying the Muslim protagonist as one who observes the identity concern of his childhood community. The author reflects the diminishing linguistic distinctiveness of the colonised Indian Muslims. Facing an identity crisis due to British manipulation, the Indian Muslims tended to maintain their individuality in terms of their language, literature, manners, rituals and eating habits. This paper endeavours to interrogate the Muslim identity documented in *Solitude of Illusions* with focus on the colonial interventions that destabilised the distinct cultural identity of pre-partition Bengal.

As the present is conditioned by the past, Khan reminisces about his lost home and reconfigures its colonial history that is delineated through the memory of his elderly protagonist, Khalid. Going beyond the distinct cultural legacy that the subcontinental Muslims wanted to retain, Khan's accommodating view constructs Khalid to embrace the changes and respond to the call of a multicultural world that is devoid of any exclusivity. It thus debunks the stereotypical image of Muslims that is propagated by the European colonialists who "have long stereotyped the Muslim clergy or *ulama* as a conservative class of men obstinately hostile to change" (Eaton 312). Eaton contends that this stereotyping lingered long after the end of British colonial rule (312).

This paper thus sheds light on Adib Khan's portrayal of an Indian Muslim protagonist of Bengali heritage who was brought up in colonial Bengal and later migrated to Australia during the postcolonial time. It analyses how Khalid makes voluntary adjustments to his new home, which is surrounded by people of

different races and cultures. In his portrayal of Khalid, Khan asserts his position against the conservative and fossilised view of cultural identity. His position is, in fact, obtained through his secular upbringing and, therefore, his diasporic dimension of mind is discussed at the beginning of this essay. Subsequently, this paper discusses Khan's portrayal of Indian Bengali Muslim identity in terms of their language, family, manners and traditions, as well as eating habits. The paper concludes with Khan's Australian episode, which demonstrates his empathy with multiculturalism developed at the "contact zone" of the two cultures.

### **The Making of an Accommodating Mind**

In recent years, interest in the literary works of diaspora writers has increased significantly and it is in these works that we can explore their creativity. Due to these writers living at the intersection of two cultures, they are able to see the shifting aspects of the twenty-first century world from an alternative perspective. The new global scenario marks the celebration of inclusiveness, challenging the traditional preoccupations of cultural fixity and purity in the formation of personal as well as national identity. Having been exposed to multiple cultures and living "in between" them, diaspora writers are particularly preoccupied with the search for a new identity.

Likewise, Adib Khan finds himself capable of restructuring his identity in the "contact zone," which is identified as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt 5). In his writings, he tends to find an identity that cannot be defined by any pre-known essence. It is the pluralistic and creative self that can articulate the richness and anxiety involved in espousing and straddling more than one culture concurrently. In Khan's own words, "it is by no means an arid ground for the mind to discover a multiplicity of voices and what they have to say. The migrant's voice tells me what it is like to feel a stranger and yet be at home" ("In Janus' Footsteps" 28). In another essay titled "Diasporic Homes," he explains that diasporas experience paradoxical polarities of cultures, that is, they are burdened with missing their past and blessed with creativity. Their desire for a better and more peaceful life is served as an impetus for minimising the tension and unhomely feeling of dislocation. Accordingly, Khan's experience of multicultural views enables him to demonstrate positive voluntary adjustments to the postcolonial socio-political, economic and religious structures.

Khan's exposure to multiculturalism is the result of many historical incidences. Born in a postcolonial environment in 1949, he studied in English schools. In his biographical essay, "In Janus' Footsteps," he gives an account of his own upbringing in the postcolonial subcontinent. He mentions various influences such as the English-medium education he received in a Christian Missionary school, exposure to religious texts, as well as secularism, that helped him develop an understanding of humanity. His upbringing was a mix of different

cultures, resulting in hybridity. He explains this confluence of cultures in his personality in the following excerpt of his essay:

On the one side there were Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. On the other there were the influences of *The Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, the Moghul poets, Iqbal and Tagore. The two sides met, not in combat, but in a synthesis of ideas out of which I emerged considerably enriched in thought and feeling but without any clearly defined sense of belonging to a monocultural society. (“In Janus’ Footsteps” 28)

Such diverse experiences caused cultural multiplicity in Khan as a diaspora writer. Despite going through a process of harmonising between home and abroad, his nostalgic self tends to find refuge that is hidden in his lost home. He also acknowledges his elitist upbringing in a family that would send their boys to Colonial Missionary schools. He contends that his “splintered life is not entirely the result of migration. It was a natural consequence of an upbringing that was strongly influenced by history” (“In Janus’ Footsteps” 27). Other multi-layered experiences such as the British colonial rule, Bangladesh’s War of Independence and migration to Australia also dislocated Khan from his home culture. Therefore, it is crucial to note that the protagonists of this multifaceted author are always in search of home and identity.

Homeland linkage is a recurrent discussion in almost all the discourses of diaspora texts. However, migrants are equipped with both a partial and a plural view of the world. As a result, they seem to be in a privileged position by being able to realise that all systems of knowledge are incomplete or totalising. Moreover, they live in a position where the influence of home and host cultures are operational simultaneously. Salman Rushdie (1992) holds that such postmodern diaspora writers have double perspectives as they are both “insiders and outsiders” of society. They have the choice of making any great literary figure from any country as their role model. Such writers can also present a world without a “politician’s version of truth” (*Imaginary Homelands* 14). He is of the view that these writers do not occupy “an infertile territory,” and explains that “if literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspective may provide us with such angles” (*Imaginary Homelands* 15).

Nonetheless, in their creative writings, such multicultural and diaspora writers can express the potentiality of their being. Such accommodating capability helps them make voluntary adjustments to their alien surroundings, albeit while also retaining their distinctiveness. Khan’s protagonist Khalid is a university-educated middle-aged man who encountered many Muslims in his childhood struggling for a distinct identity. Through him, Khan provides a sarcastic presentation of the linguistic crisis of Muslims in his narrative. The lavishness in the dietary habits of Muslims is represented so as to hint at their identical

inheritance of Mughal traditions. In his portrayal of Khalid, Khan asserts his position against the conservative and fossilised view of cultural identity. Commenting on the privilege of being diasporic, Khan contends that “in creative writing, an expatriate finds the opportunity to widen and diversify the cultural landscape” (“Diasporic Homes” 9).

### **Crisis of Subcontinental Muslims**

During the nineteenth century, Britain became the epitome of colonial power and maintained this position until the end of the Second World War. The eminent Indian historian, Nitish Sengupta, in his book *Bangabhumi O Bangalir Itihas* (2008), includes the history of British rule in India. He notes that after being attracted by the prosperity of two European companies that had been trading in India in the sixteenth century, eighty businessmen from London set up the British East India Company for trading with the charter from Queen Elizabeth I on 31 December 1600. Later in 1650, the company received permission to trade in Bengal. In 1757, the East India Company won a historic decisive battle against Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah that determined the fate of India and Britain. The colonisers' greed for material prospect would continue to victimise the Indian economy.

However, following a series of strong resistance from the natives, the British monarchy intervened in 1857 and ruled for next 90 years. One foremost Muslim thinker, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98), “criticised the company rule very strongly and suggested that the revolt was the end product of accumulated wrongs and frustration built up over decades” (Geaves 25). After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British not only consolidated their power over the subcontinent but also formulated a new policy to rule over it. They adopted the “divide and rule” policy that set ablaze communal antagonism among the natives. The partition of Bengal in 1905 was an ultimate result of the artificially-created dispute among the Hindus and Muslims in colonial Bengal. The new colonial policy, as well as religious antagonism, caused identity crisis among the Indians. A huge cultural change was also observed following the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny. The British held the Muslims responsible for this Rebellion and no longer trusted them. The Muslims, on the other hand, believed that the Government would slowly convert everyone to Christianity.

This distrust accelerated the decadence of Urdu language and literature with which the elite Muslims in particular associated their identity. Urdu was actually a version of the Persian language used during the end of the Mughal regime when the British took over their power. In their research article, Mussarat Jabeen, Amir Ali Chandio and Zarina Qazim comment, “Due to the interaction of local population and the ruling Persian-Turkic-speaking Muslim elite, a new language evolved and was known as Hindustani. Its Persianized form was called Urdu” (100). Urdu-speaking Muslims used to enjoy better job positions as most of them

were from the Northern regions, which was the base of Muslim rulers and colonial empires.

Before the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the colonisers continued the use of the Persian language for colonial administration in India. After Persian, Urdu was used as the official language in the law courts as it was the dominant lingua franca. Besides, the Indians could not use English because it was a foreign language and only few people were familiar with it. But it was in 1867 that some influential Hindus in Benaras protested against the use of Urdu language claiming that it was a language used only by the Muslims and it was also a symbol of Muslim culture (Kaleem Reza Khan 90). To create disharmony among the natives, the British targeted this language controversy since it served as a driving force behind the unity of people. Conceding to the demands of the Hindus, Sir Anthony MacDonnell, the Deputy Lieutenant Governor of the North Western provinces, favoured Hindi as co-official language in law courts in 1900 (Kaleem Reza Khan 91). Being bilinguals in both Hindi and Urdu, the Hindus got privilege in government jobs.

Actually, the British held the Muslims responsible for resisting their colonial rule in India. As Muslims were mainly located in Delhi, Lucknow and Punjab, the British expelled them from these places. In his translations of Sir Syed's essays, *Selected Essays by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, Wilder notes that "one of the saddest outcomes of the sack of Delhi and Lucknow was the destruction of libraries, colleges, and other centers of learning" (19). This caused considerable damage to Urdu literature produced and treasured by the Muslims. It was also the time when Delhi College, a place of both Oriental and Western learning, was converted into an affiliated college under Calcutta University. Gradually, the Muslims were cornered and weakened in the socio-political arena:

Muslims were reduced to a dependent status by the British by the beginning of nineteenth century. The British East India Company was the paramount power and real ruler in India for the next fifty years. The Mughal ruler, however, was left as the formal sovereign. Following the uprising of 1857, Muslims lost even this façade of power, forcing them to confront the fact that they were no longer India's ruler. (Wilder 15)

Moreover, the demise of Urdu language triggered some form of identity crisis in the Muslim community. According to Benedict Anderson, an "imagined community" is formed via a common language. Although Urdu was such a language for the Indian Muslims, English was pushed forward after the Indian Military Uprising of 1857. The Indian Muslims initially refused to accept English as it was the language of Christians. Due to their cultural dislocation and distinct identity crisis, the Muslims strived to uphold Urdu as part of their identity marker, as they believed that only Urdu could preserve their Islamic culture and values.

With growing antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims, linguistic antagonism also began to emerge. Instead of Urdu, Hindi began to gain prominence in the new Education Policy. In this context, Gupta observes that “the historical perspective of Urdu’s decline has been directly linked to Hindi’s rise” (qtd. in Yaqin 126). Proficiency in Urdu was no longer an advantage in securing government positions. The Muslims, specifically Bengali Muslims, fell into the trap of linguistic politics of the British rulers, which caused an identity crisis among them. To retain their separate identity, the elitist Muslims in Bengal went to such an extent that they started neglecting their mother tongue Bangla in favour of Urdu. Reflecting on the identity crisis of the Bengali Muslims, Rafiuddin Ahmed notes:

The cultural ambivalence of the Bengali Muslims found its most characteristic expression in their attitude towards their mother tongue, Bengali, which came to be closely identified with a non-Muslim culture. But unlike the Hindi-Urdu controversy in Northern India, which proved to be one of the most divisive issues between educated Muslims and Hindus, the linguistic dilemma of the Bengali Muslims did not contribute so much to Hindu-Muslim tension as to the consolidation of their cultural identity. (119)

In this context, English education was promoted since the British aimed to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Chand 5), in order to retain their hegemonic control over the colonised. Jobs were offered to those who were proficient in the language of the colonisers. The Hindus responded to this change immediately and enjoyed the upper hand in the British administration. Many Hindu intellectuals, however, felt the need to adopt modern language and scientific knowledge in order to remove ignorance from their caste-ridden and prejudiced society. In this regard, the establishment of *Brahmo Samaj* was initiated to free the society from ignorance and prejudice. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) and members of Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) family were active participants in this movement. Many noted Hindu leaders such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated the need for English education among the natives. He set up an English institution, the Hindu College in Calcutta, in 1817, in collaboration with David Hare. However, this period also witnessed an increase in Hindu-Muslim rivalry, which hindered the unification of Indians in their movement for independence.

Being frustrated by the failure of the Indian Rebellion, the Muslims resigned to the fact that the British rule could not be uprooted. Nevertheless, many Muslim leaders stepped forward to improve the conditions of Indian Muslims and even formed many organisations to regain Muslim influence. Muslim leaders such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98), Abdul Latif (1828-93), Syed Amir Hussain (1843-1910) and Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928), were the pioneers of this



endeavour. Despite their differences of opinion, all of them agreed that Muslims should acquire modern Western education to improve their livelihood in colonial India. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan contested in his writing that Muslims were solely responsible for the 1857 uprising. In his book titled *History of Indian National Movement (1857-1947)*, Sharma (2005) observes:

Sayyid Ahmad believed that unless the Muslims remained loyal to the British rulers and accepted Western education they could not hope to make progress and compete with the Hindus for higher positions. He wrote that the Muslims should welcome the system of education introduced by the British, otherwise they would not only remain a backward community but also sink lower and lower until there will be no hope of recovery left to them. (309)

During the early nineteenth century, social and religious awakening in the Indian Muslim society was initiated by Muslim leaders, particularly Haji Shariatullah (1781-1840) from Bengal and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in Uttar Pradesh. The latter went to England and was influenced by Western enlightenment. He advocated the necessity for Indian Muslims to learn English. Considering the contributions of the above intellectuals, we can deduce that a significant number of initiatives for promoting education among Indians were undertaken by Indians themselves. Although the British rulers were negligent regarding the education of the natives until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the local elites played an active role by becoming patrons of *Pathshalas* or *Maktabas* in their respective areas. It is in this context that in *Solitude of Illusions*, Khan presents a local elite of early nineteenth century Bengal, Zahid Sharif, who establishes a one-room school in his village, appoints the only semi-literate man in Modhunagar as the master and derives immense satisfaction from what he considers as his magnanimous contribution to the modernisation of rural India that has been monstrously neglected by the “Angrez” (English) (5).

The novel under discussion brings forth this linguistic and identity crisis of the then Muslim families. Along with mirroring the decline of Urdu language in his narrative, Khan also reflects on the distinct culture of the Muslims through the portrayal of the Sharif family. The narrative also refers to the religious and political antagonism witnessed in Colonial Bengal. It is noted that while documenting the anarchical episodes, the author seems to hold an antipathetic position.

### **Distinctive Identity**

In *Solitude of Illusions*, Adib Khan represents the Muslim community that desperately tries to retain their Muslim identity realistically and accurately. The Sharif family, as depicted by Khan in the novel, is a typical Calcutta Muslim family. In a conservative Muslim family and Muslim community in India in the 1940s, matters concerning marriage were fixed by the elders of the family. It was

uncommon, if not impossible, for Muslim boys and girls to mix freely once they reached a marriageable age. The only reprieve they had was at sundown during the *Maghreb* prayer. This was when all the elders would be focused on their prayers and the boys would go out in their best clothes while the girls would giggle at them, unseen, from balconies. Male members of the family would sit together and gossip while the female members would remain separate from them. Thus, this Calcutta Muslim family is noted for being conservative and being supervised by the family's patriarch.

This typical Muslim elite family displays the consciousness of their distinct identity in terms of traditional manners, etiquettes and eating habits. It is noted that food is another significant identity marker that the community would carefully maintain. The Muslims have their own cuisine comprising “*chapatis* and rice, *bhajis*, *dhal*, beef, mutton and chicken cooked in *ghee* with a rich texture of masalas” (108). The dining habits of the Sharif family are depicted in detail so as to project the cultural identity of the Muslims in colonial Bengal. The economy of the Muslim-dominated Eastern region is agrarian. Therefore, their dietary habits are mainly based on rice, meat, fish and milk. They would not consume fish for dinner as this was supposedly a Hindu practice. The novelist writes, “[i]t was a custom which originated from the fallacious belief that only the Bengali Hindus ate fish for dinner” (108).

The description of food consumed in Muslim families in India gets special attention from Khan. His description of the Sharif family's dining table represents the luxury of eating culture that was common in Muslim families of that time. The food was enough to feed three times the number of people that were present at the table. To such elite Muslim families, feasting was a ritual. The old would express their gratitude to the almighty – *Allah Shukur*. Huge amounts of various items of food would be served on their dining table: “There was an obsessive family tradition never to allow a significant part of the table to be bare. That would have demonstrated a niggardly spirit, a meanness that was tantamount to a blasphemous rejection of Allah's generosity” (108). Again, they were careful enough not to waste any morsel of food. The leftovers were given to the servants, beggars or fortunate dogs. Khan's representation of the Muslim dining table focuses on their extravagance. In a somewhat satirical note, he also hints at their communal separationist attitude that is evident in their eating habits. He describes, “the Sharifs, who prided themselves on their naive notions of cultural identity, spurned anything that was even remotely associated with the polytheistic believers of the land” (108). Khan mentions all the traditional food items associated specifically with Bengali culture. This description of Bengali eating habits also implies his sense of nostalgia that pervades in the tone of all diaspora writers. Thus, we note that Khalid's Australian migrant son, Javed, takes his father to an Indian restaurant that serves traditional Indian food.

Khan's nostalgic self mentions the traditional Bengali food items that represent his Indian Muslim culture. He lists *dbal*, *bhaji*, *firni*, *sanchipaan*, *booka* and *notungurer swandesb* in their Bengali names and not in their translated form. A detailed description of the foods and drinks is provided by Khan when he describes the culture at Khush Manjil, a house of Islamic culture and manners. It is a reminder of the Muslim rule in India as well as the luxury and extravagance of rulers who lost their power to the British. The food and drinks presented there replicate the practices of the Mughal court:

The evening began with a lavish feast. It was a superb spread with exotic offerings of rice, bread, meat and sweets, piled on glistening silver plates and bowls. There were ample servings of *kakori* and *boti kababs*, *nargisi koftas*, *sheermals*, *murg musallam*, *rumali rotis*, *chicken korma*, *mutanjan* and *pulao*, *mash ki dal*, *kheer*, *halva*, and *muzaffar*. The aroma of pure saffron, spices and rose water lingered in the air long after the dishes and finger bowls were taken away and the sanchipaans, peek-dans and the hookahs brought in. (169)

However, the transition of Muslim culture during the colonial period finds its expression through the image of the Bengali Muslim family represented by Adib Khan in this novel. With the new Education Policy, English education became more widespread and many universities were established in India. The reformists from both dominant religions, the Hindus and Muslims, campaigned for scientific and modern Western knowledge. Calcutta University was established in 1857 with this view and became the first established university in the subcontinent to provide secular and multidisciplinary education. The protagonist, Khalid, is English-educated and wants to pursue tertiary education while his family wants him to take over their family business and get married. Khalid intends to study philosophy but his conservative father, Shahid, disapproves of it because he believes that it is the subject of the *Angrez*: "he reads books written by white skinned people! History! Poetry! He prefers to dream rather than help us run the family business" (113).

Concerned about his son's future, Shahid discusses this matter with his brothers, and they all agree that Khalid should marry soon and be prepared to manage the family business. They also agree that Khalid should first learn manners and culture before taking on such a responsibility and decide that he should be sent to Tabassum Begum, to whom many elite families have sent their *lafagna* (worthless) boys with promising results. Tabassum's Khush Manjil was a gathering place for Urdu-speaking Muslim sophisticates. Here, Urdu *ghazals* and the poetry of Mirza Ghalib were recited and courtesans would dance and sing along with the appealing appreciation and gifts received from the attendants in their evening *mehfils*. The decoration in Khush Manjil is noteworthy as it represents Mughal and Persian motifs. During this time, the Muslims preferred

Urdu to Bengali or English and, thus, a conscious struggle for retaining pure Urdu language is seen among the inhabitants of Khush Manjil.

Khush Manjil represents the courtesan culture that was very popular during and after the Mughal dynasty. Before the colonial period when the courtesans became common prostitutes, the *tawaiifs*, as the profession was called, had influence in politics. They excelled in poetry, music, dance and literature. It is noted that the young would-be *nawabs* were sent to these *tawaiifs* to learn *tameez* (etiquette) and *tehzeeb* (refinement). They would learn polite, good manners, refined culture, music and literature. These women were mistresses of the *nawabs* and were often involved in sexual activities. Having relationships with influential persons made them rich and, so many beautiful ladies took up the profession of *tawaiif*. Tabassum Begum, the Begum Shaheba of Khush Manjil, is highly influential since she has good connections with the Muslim elites of Delhi, Lucknow and even Bengal.

The attempts of Bengali Muslims at linguistic as well as cultural decolonisation are also witnessed through Khalid's experiences in Khush Manjil. Khalid used to feel insecure as he did not have the same level of knowledge of Muslim culture as the gentlemen who gathered there every evening. Being "an ignorant, bumbling, uncouth male," "he sat entranced by a foreign world of cultural sophistication which synthesized learning and pleasure into an elixir to enrich the entire being" (168). There is a comic scene in Khush Manjil that presents the rivalry of two old men, Nur Muhammad and Rafi Murtaza, over winning the superior claim of being the descendent of a city that is the abode of pure Urdu culture and literature. This scene is imperative in analysing Khan's attitude towards the obsession that Muslims of pre-partition India would hold concerning their identity. Such disunity among the Muslims in colonial India is also represented in the Mir Mursid and Sharif families on the occasion of Khalid's marriage to Jahan Ara. Both families boast of their ancestry and proficiency in the Urdu language as well as their Muslim culture. This disunity among the Muslims ruptured their organised move for materialising their true independence from the colonisers who supposedly destroyed their cultural heritage.

Khan focuses on the disintegration among Muslim nationalists. The Muslim leaders, at the advent of the Independence movement, urged for a separate territory and were in favour of partition. Some Muslim leaders advocated for a separate Muslim land in order to retain their Muslim identity, which was at the risk of suppression by the Hindus. This idea propagated the two-nation theory and the partition. Despite having a strong consciousness about their cultural identity, the Muslim elites in Bengal were not really involved in politics. However, just as other Muslim businessmen, the Sharif family would contemplate their business prospects after the partition. In fact, many Muslim elites were not unhappy about the partition of Bengal as they felt that it would offer them a separate space to retain their distinct Muslim culture and even create new business

opportunities. However, in the meantime, the British bellowed the fire of communal anarchy and succeeded in implementing their “divide and rule” policy. Sharma contends that “the two-nation theory and Muslim separatism received encouragement as it presented them [the British] with a very handy and effective weapon to weaken nationalist forces” (310).

This antagonism among the nationalists resulted in communal riots that killed several lives before independence in 1947. Khan presents the grim experience of communal violence in *Solitude of Illusions*. In the year of Independence, Calcutta became a dangerous city; communal violence reached its culmination in the form of torching, looting and raping. Many people were killed simply for belonging to a different religion. Khan notes that in 1947, instead of ensuring law and order, the *Angrez* were too busy finalising their departure from the country. Observing the chaotic situation, Sharma comments:

In the cities, where the Hindus and Muslims had lived peacefully for centuries, each was determined to destroy the other. A Hindu would not live in the area where the Muslims predominated and vice versa. There was no security of life or property. People were disposing of properties in areas inhabited by the other community. (348)

Khan’s attitude to the religious discord and communal violence among Hindus and Muslims at the time is aptly reflected in his narrative: “For over a week the Sharifs had voluntarily imprisoned themselves behind shuttered doors and windows, listening uneasily to distant noises of mob fury.... Their grave demeanours expressed their concern for the city” (206).

However, the riots in Bengal were the results of political and religious dispute that culminated in the partition of Bengal in 1906. The British became successful in dividing the Bengali nationalists by breaking up the Bengal Province into two on religious basis. Thus, the Muslims were cornered in the East while the Hindus were in the West. Of course, many Bengali nationalists protested against this division. Together with the anti-partition movement, they started an anticolonial movement, namely the *Swadeshi* movement, which later turned into two trends, identified as “constructive *Swadeshi*” and “political extremism.” The latter used violence against the British administrators and occasionally fomented communal hatred and violence among Hindus and Muslims.

The violence in Calcutta had a traumatic effect on the life of Robert Morton, father of Angela Barrett. He was a civil servant posted in Calcutta in 1947 and became a victim of extremists just before her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. Angela found her father lying on the footpath, almost dead. His face was covered in blood while the mob was yelling and laughing at her as they saw her beside an *Angrez*.

The Indians really killed Robert Morton that afternoon, Angela concluded much later in her life. The administrative power of an imperial civil servant

had deceived him into an assumption that he was invincible. Suddenly his arrogance was crushed. He was humiliated for the first time in his life. (38)

Khan focuses on another image of horror, which is the violent activities that took place just before the British were preparing to leave India after facing strong opposition from the Indians in the 1940s. Khan represents Khalid as a liberal humanist who looks back on one incident during this time of turbulence that destabilised the political scenario of Bengal. One day, while resting in his reading room, Khalid is startled to see a wounded *Angrez* seeking help at his window. As an Indian, he bears hatred against the colonisers who had caused damage to his culture but he could not accept that a mob bearing butcher knives, axes and *lathis* would run after the life of a person, even someone whose fate and greed had brought him to a land far from his homeland. By presenting such a touching scene, Khan represents the anarchy that may threaten humanity. His antipathy towards the extreme political intolerance of the time is presented in the following lines:

'Gentleness has disappeared from the world,' he murmured to himself. He was weary of the dark reality of India's changing political order. It was now like a human slaughterhouse – indifferent, mechanical and savage in the way it systematically sought the extinction of life. (220)

The image of riots impeding the nationalist movement demonstrates the atrocities that stemmed from religious and ethnic intolerance. It reflects a negative aspect of modernity in Khan's narrative. He depicts the killings and violence that goes against humanity, leaving many traumatised. However, it is noted that in his narrative, Khan has carefully endeavoured to present an accommodating society that transcends communal and ethnic bigotry. This attitude of the writer comes across in his presentation of the Australian episode, which configures and reconfigures cultural identity by breaking up the binaries of religion, colour, language and nationality.

### **Voluntary Adjustments**

In *Solitude of Illusions*, Adib Khan presents Asians and Australians side by side so as to focus on both cultures simultaneously. Khalid Sharif's trip to Australia in the novel offers a wide range of issues that draw our attention to focus on the "contact zone" between South Asian and Australia cultures. Khalid's friendship with his Australian neighbour, Angela, gives us an opportunity to examine the two cultures together. The fence between the houses of Khalid and Angela mark the dividing line between the two cultures. To Khalid, the other side of the fence is another country inhabited by Angela who, as Khalid is told, does not like Indians. This exclusivity is witnessed in Angela's preference for living in a house that is situated on higher ground than that of her foreign neighbours. The raised

position of her plot “was compatible with the moral superiority she enjoyed over her materialistic and status-conscious neighbours” (32). Angela represents the attitude of the general Australians who dislike having an Asian neighbour.

This racial conflict between the two cultures is illustrated by Khalid’s experience when he is introduced to Angela and her grandson, Adam. On their first meeting, Adam reacts to seeing Khalid. To Adam, “the other” is a black man and, therefore, he shouts “Black man!” “Black man!” (80) when he first encounters Khalid in his backyard. Here, skin colour plays the role of a “signifying code” for Adam, whose orientalist upbringing provides him with a scope of producing meaning for racial difference through the representation of “black” colour. Thus, in this postcolonial Australian context, Adam’s knowledge can only relegate “the black man” to a scary position. For Adam and Angela, “sets of contrast” are essential in producing meaning. However, we note that Khan goes on to show that Angela’s gradual friendship with Khalid shakes off her prejudice against the Indian Muslim.

Khan’s representation of Khalid as being equipped with proficiency in the colonisers’ language and having a proper aesthetic sense deconstructs such binaries that undermine Asian culture. Angela did not expect Khalid to speak English proficiently. Being the daughter of a civil servant posted in Calcutta in 1947, she used to look down upon the Indian Muslims in terms of their culture and intellect. However, we should know that language, being a cultural artefact, is able to direct the perceptions, views and thinking process of users; it enables the user to respond to the corresponding situations. She becomes happy to find an Indian who speaks English perfectly. As a result, she comes out of her stereotyping tendency and hostility. Khan’s depiction of the two encountering cultures reflects Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space,” where a new productive culture is created through the process of interaction and mutual accommodation.

In the novel, Angela becomes used to hosting Khalid without prior invitation, an uncommon attitude for a Westerner. On the other hand, despite being an Indian Muslim male, Khalid does not mind helping Angela clean the used dining dishes in her kitchen. Like any other Australian, he seems indifferent towards the conversation that takes place between Angela and her daughter, Judy, over their family affairs. Khalid is no more an intruder in Angela’s Australian home. In Khan’s diasporic narrative, both Khalid and Angela’s family display a hybrid nature of culture operating at the mingling juncture over the border line. Acknowledging the discomforts and insecurities of migrant life, Bhabha identifies the “innovative potential” in the migrant self. Therefore, Khalid is accommodating of the Australian family while, despite their initial racial prejudice, the Australian family accepts the Asian as their regular visitor. Therefore, voluntary adjustments from both sides take place.

Such adjustments in the postcolonial era are also found among the diaspora Muslims. The old patriarch, Shahid Sharif, comes to live with Khalid’s family and

makes adjustment in terms of being taken care of by his daughter-in-law. Khalid also accepts seeing his daughter-in-law, Shanaz, in *salwar kameez* instead of a *sari*. He is seen as being tolerant of his grandchildren not receiving any religious education. He does not mind them being critical of their grandfather's religious rituals and the sounds that he makes while walking or using the washroom. Moreover, English turns out to be a comfortable language for those who find their new home in the metropolitan centre. Khalid's granddaughter, Zareen, can only wonder at the Urdu utterances of her grandfather. Interestingly, the gradual decline of the Urdu language in the Calcutta Muslim family is seen within the three generations. Due to the inclination of his Muslim parents, the English-educated Khalid is sent to Khush Manjil to learn Urdu. His son, Javed, makes his home in an English-speaking country and the third generation granddaughter, Zareen, is puzzled to hear the alien verses from her grandfather's mouth.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we can say that the identity of Indian Bengali Muslims, as depicted in Khan's *Solitude of Illusions*, is largely constructed by their religious customs and rituals. The novel also marks the diasporic life of Indians who experience a significant cultural change when living in the "contact zone." Through the portrayal of Khalid's life from his boyhood to maturity, with particular emphasis on the Khush Manjil episode, Khan takes the opportunity to document the luxurious life and political views of many elite Indian Muslims in the pre-independent India. However, Khan's diasporic experience enables him to reconfigure the historical issues and represent the "contact zone" in which negotiation between the two cultures takes place. Despite being eager to retain their religious identity in the face of colonial and postcolonial situations, the Muslims in *Solitude of Illusions* are capable of making voluntary adjustments to their changing socio-political and demographic contexts. In this novel, we find a presentation of five generations as well as their Bengali cultural ethos that experience a significant change in the course of the modernisation process. Khan's life in his Australian home is crucial in determining and evaluating his representation of Indian Bengali Muslim culture as he attempts to portray a parallel presentation of two cultures that meet at the intersection. Despite being born into a Muslim family and having been exposed to linguistic and identity crisis, Khalid is presented as someone who disapproves of religious bigotry. He also condemns the atrocity and ferocity in his documentation of the riots and the *Swadeshi* movement in Colonial Bengal. As such, Khan succeeds in challenging the stereotyped identity and validates the claim of diasporic beings having democratic potentiality.



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