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TRANSGRESSING CULTURAL BORDERS, DISPLACEMENTS AND RETRIEVING IDENTITY  
IN NEB'S *THE FLOODED DESERT*

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ABSTRACT

The understanding that human identity is something fixed and transcendental stands decisively contested in the present times. Different perspectives based on Postmodernist and Deconstructionist thought are offered to assert the fluid and transient nature of reality as well as human reality. The present paper traces the identity of a woman taking into account dynamics of displacement, migration and transgressing cultural borders and examines these issues in Prof. N.K. Neb's debut novel *The Flooded Desert*. In the process it explores issues of evolution of identity, how identity is located, displaced and retrieved. Neb explores the journey of struggling woman who breaks fetters of orthodoxy and fight against injustice heaped upon her in the name of tradition and culture and reconstitutes her identity. Neb examines the plight of woman who come from marginalized groups, struggle against patriarchal hegemony, domination and discrimination and tries to forge a new identity. The psychological dilemma of woman is vividly shown who confronts her conventional position, her family responsibilities and her own personal dreams. Neb represents how displacement challenges traditional roles of identity and leads to opportunities where identity acts, reacts and exhibits independent sense of self. Thus identity does not remain fixed but becomes fluid in local-global milieu. Unlike other novelists, Neb has not ended his novel in disaster and death of woman though she deviates from social code and is left alone. In fact he shows emerging identity of a woman with firm conviction, who migrate to new land, encounters different cultures and becomes global.

**Keywords:** Identity, fluidity, migration, displacement

The understanding that human identity is something fixed and transcendental stands decisively contested in the present times. Different perspectives based on postmodernist and Deconstructionist thought are offered to assert the fluid and transient nature of reality as well as human reality. The material factors that point out instability of identity can be traced in cultural transgression and displacement in temporal and spatial terms. In the same way, one's attempts to retrieve earlier

identity reveal elusive nature of identity. The changing aspects of identity are further related to the factors that result in one's displacement, dislocation and ultimate relocation. These aspects of identity have a special significance for women in traditionally patriarchal societies like India. This process has been explained by Ramaswami Mahalingam et al. in these words, "Displacement brings many challenges to the study of women's lives because it not only disrupts families but also

forces displaced women to reconfigure their identities, power relations and resources in a new social milieu.”(Mahalingam, Balan, Molina et al.69). Displacement sometimes results in crossing of social boundaries that leads to struggle and constant strife to transform the imposed to chosen identity. The present paper attempts to study how N.K.Neb has presented in his debut novel *The Flooded Desert* the impact of social displacement in woman’s life and the way she struggles to achieve an autonomous self.

N.K. Neb, an Associate Professor in D.A.V. College Jalandhar, editor of Pragati’s English Journal and the author of a number of books on English poetry, fiction and literary criticism, has also shown his skill in creative writing in the present novel His fictional skills that the novel highlights seem to prove the words on the blurb to be highly appropriate, “ Neb has a passion for creating stories capturing the elusive rhythms of feelings and the power of unbridled emotions mirroring the grey shades of rainbow of relations.” He has brought into picture a very different kind of an image of woman involving the emotional and sexual tangles within the conservative society. The novel delineates story of a middle class traditional Indian woman suffering at the hands of patriarchy projected views about life and man woman relations. Set against the trouble-torn days in the Punjab during 1980s, the novel tries to capture different shades of life in the society against which women like Devika try to have a different identity that promises happiness and freedom. In the case of Devika, the protagonist of the novel, her search for a new identity gets initiated as a result of her displacement caused by the violence stricken atmosphere in Punjab.

Neb represents experiences of two women in various situations in which they act, react and respond for their emancipation and their identities respectively. Anees Jung rightly avers, “Where the two experiences meet lies a revelation, and a story”(Jung 7). Neb draws comparison between Devika, a traditional woman and Anamika, a young modern woman, who is educated, has a broad outlook and courage in trying situations for her better future. Devika is victim of injustice and pursues a conflict between her personal desires and

responsibilities towards her family. Devika’s daughter Anamika is defiant, modern, strong-willed, unmindful of her filial duties fulfills her dream and breaks down restrictions of society. In *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, Meena Shirwadkar rightly claims:

...novels have started to progress from depicting women characters solely as epitomes of suffering, womanly virtue to portraying more complex, real characters. Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Indo-Anglian novel is passing. The image of traditional woman, the Sita Savitri type, was at once, easy and popular. . . . In India, with its strong bent for tradition, woman was expected mainly to live for others than for herself because "others" controlled and moulded the social structure. Even woman in life and literature herself voluntarily surrendered to the ideal of self-sacrifice. . . . Modern woman, in life, has been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. Yet, a woman on way (sic) to liberation, trying to be free from inhibitions, is rarely seen in Indo-Anglian literature.(Shriwadkar 153-154).

Women have struggled in every historical epoch and in every part of the world for equality. Neb questions the selective identities imposed on women, shows resistance to them and awakens women to celebrate their choices. He gives them a clarion call to emerge as a liberated and empowered. Devika is brought up in an orthodox environment where daughter learns to sew clothes, cook delicious dishes and has to marry a boy chosen by her parents. She is tragic victim as the consummation of her marriage fails to take place. Her brother-in-law, Dinesh takes an advantage of the situation, reveals Devika that her in-laws were aware of her husband Suraj’s impotency. She considers herself victim of a conspiracy hatched by her in-laws but shows no protest. The helplessness of woman is succinctly observed by Afro-American feminist theorists Bell Hooks, “A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest,

without collective anger or rage.” (Hooks 1-2). Devika undergoes undeserved torment and raises questions for her declined plight:

All these things are a part of some well-made plan. How could my father-in-law and mother-in-law play such a cruel joke with me? Was it fate conspiring against me? Have I committed some terrible sin? Who is to blame for all this? They have ruined my life for the sake of their son...My father-in-law and mother-in-law have used me as an experimental object.”(Neb 37).

Neb represents the strong under currents of melancholy, trauma and encourages woman to seek justice for themselves within society. Devika sets her journey into new world where woman steps out of conjugal walls to become independent and a whole being. A corner of her heart opens to let Dinesh in. Her desire for consummation makes her emotionally weak, she transgresses social decorum and shares an illicit relation with Dinesh. Suraj’s indulgence in drinking enhances the meetings of Dinesh and Devika. She gets pregnant. In order to save her position in society, she brings poison which is mistakenly taken by Suraj resulting in his death. After few months of his death, Devika gives birth to Anamika.

In patriarchal society, man seizes the available opportunities and control social and economic spheres and relegates woman to inferior position. Dinesh avails opportunities ahead, gets job in bank, marries Nalini, her girlfriend in the city and settles there. He does not think of Devika for once and leaves her alone to suffer. The evident cause of woman’s suffering according to Meena Shirwadkar is “...the incompatibility between her individuality and awareness of herself and the traditional views of her husband and in-laws.”(Shriwadkar 49). Devika suffers because of her illiteracy and surrenders to the sufferings inflicted upon her by patriarchy.

The trouble torn situation in Punjab of 1980s lands Devika in the new world of Jalandhar city along with Leelawati and Bansilal(her in-laws). They sell their property and purchase a new house in city. Time changes for Devika. She watches shows on rights of women on Television. For the first time she demands her share in property and feels herself

liberated. She makes a friend named Lakshmi who brings a revolutionary change in her. Encouraged by Lakshmi she steps out of the four walls of house, goes to the market, beauty parlour, changes her looks as Lakshmi reminds her, “ Cheerful faces are appreciated. The weeping ones have no takers” (Neb 94). She tries to forge a new identity and emerge as ‘the new woman’ who according to Shukla “...within different communities collectively dismissed traditional notions of womanhood and asserted a strong and confident image...has become embodiment of escape, from restrictions within the home and question of marriage and instead resurrects a belief in education allowing women to lead financially independent and fulfilling lives.” (Shukla 163). Thus Devika tries to establish a distinct identity of her own in a male-dominated society.

Devika interacts with different people, encounters new culture and tries to adopt modern ways to reconstitute her identity. She like a liberated woman starts seeking her independent existence. She ignores Leelawati’s resentment and visits parlour regularly. Thus her identity becomes fluid and is not restricted. Stuart Hall defines this process of identity in his article “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” “... as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”(Hall 222). He further explains, “Identity is continuously recreated in a process of “being” and “becoming” (Hall 223)--a process in which identity conditions and is conditioned by the subject. Neb has boldly represented the suppressed desires of a lonely woman which culminates in her dynamic identity. Devika deviates from social norms, transgresses the accepted conventions and enters “the jungle of desires...She would turn weak and succumb to her desires the moment her mind wavered and she found herself lonely and free...The words moral, sin, shame were like the trees that a traveler leaves behind.”( Neb 126). She breaks fetters of tradition and endeavors to attract opposite personality like Devender. He is an acquaintance from village who breaks monotony and brings a sudden change in life of Devika. Devender’s advances are received as vision of smiling, limitless world, “She’s been enjoying with new companion. There must be others

like her...It needs courage only, the courage to face the world, to seek happiness, to defy the norms."(Neb149). But suddenly Anamika's face appeared before her and she suppresses her instincts for the sake of her daughter. Betty Friedan paints image of woman as, 'the New Woman,' "...soaring free, hesitates in midflight, shivers in all that blue sunlight and rushes back to the cozy walls of home."(Friedan 35). Devika's flight to soar high to find her own identity is adjourned due to her responsibilities towards family.

Devika's steps to move ahead in life is influenced by the people she meets in her life like Lakshmi, Lucky and Sharda who are independent and liberated women. Her association with Devender brings a new turn to her quest for identity and self fulfillment. Betty Friedan aptly observes, "the problem of women is not only of sex but it's about identity crisis...for woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment--autonomy, self-realization, independent, individuality, self actualization-- is as important as the sexual need, with a serious consequences when it is thwarted." (Friedan 448). Devika finds a good companion in Devender. She makes her resolve, "I won't behave like a pure woman of the myths and legends. I won't keep anything unoffered to him."(Neb 173). Jasbir Jain rightly opines that, "...feminism is more than a voice of protest or questioning. It is moral self--reflection, a conquering of inner fears and a realization of self-worth...It does not abandon values or relationships, but goes on to create new ones." (Jain 288). Devika has obligations towards her family especially her daughter. If women fails to realize their dreams, they want their daughters to have them. They want their daughters to be more than housewives, to go out in the world that has been denied to them. Devika's daughter Anamika, the third generation Indian woman, educated, migrate to Canada and becomes transnational. Anamika yearns to be like Sharda Aunty who is N.R.I and a good friend of Devika. She is deeply influenced by Sharda's royalty and extravagance. She is encouraged by her friend Harneet who informs her about the liberties and opportunities one gets in other countries:

...there even single mothers are treated with respect and dignity like mothers.

Society there is much advanced...Everyone is free. If you can enjoy a life full of freedom, it is possible in those countries only. (Neb 181).

Her broad outlook on life and aspiration to move to new world rejects any conventional thought and life style. She has no hesitation to adopt an open minded lifestyle for herself. Her determination to go abroad strengthened after listening to the opportunities new lands provide. Anamika desires finds an echo in her husband Gurnek, whose sister lives in Canada, in a hope that she and Gurnek will also shift to Canada. Her hopes are strengthened when Goldy is born. Anamika and Gurnek consult travel agency but are cheated by them. Her individual and independent mind asserts to create a modern life of her own identity. Sharda aunty gives Anamika a novel idea to marry N.R.I for settling in Canada. Anamika does not want to leave any stone unturned in realizing her dream. Without caring for sense of decency and notions of conventionality, she firmly takes decision and marries a Canadian. She does not bother for Gurnek and Goldy. Unlike her mother, she is determined and forges her own identity with a liberated outlook.. Dr Ashu Toor Gill rightly observes, "Novel offers a view of numerous aspects of contemporary life from the oppression that women experience in traditional Indian society, the way new developments have brought a change in their way of thinking...the way life abroad tempts and attracts people and inhuman and unethical ways they adopt and settle abroad." Anamika crosses borders of propriety, fulfills her dream and the "drained brain"(Neb 221) like her, deserts Gurnek and Goldy forever. Anamika's persistence and her revolutionary motives break bondage of marriage and tradition. She rejects the stereotype conceptions of submissive and subdued woman. Her new life offers her a new multicultural and transnational identity she desperately craves for.

Devika is alone after the death of her in-laws but feels satisfied to think about Anamika, "She's done what I myself couldn't do...She acted boldly."(Neb 228). Devender settles in Australia with his son. Devika tries to spend her time in spiritual reawakening. She wants to lift taints of her life. "I'll set on a search for God. I'm to devote rest of my life

to know "What I am." (Neb229). But her faith is shuddered when she watches the worldly Gurus misleading people. She feels betrayed and her desire to enhance and enrich as a human being is shattered. Her life becomes listless. She gets new direction in her life when she is invited by Anamika to Canada. Anamika's invitation opens new avenues of hope and sets her journey into a new world. Sitting in the train while going to airport, she probes and scrutinizes her journey of life, "I suffered like a plant in desert. The soil in which I took roots didn't allow me to grow, to enjoy a life free from fences...But recent rains have flooded the desert. These plants celebrate the floods, unmindful of the effects. Their need was rain, not floods...she uttered these words to herself, "Desert, fertile land, a flooded desert." (Neb 231). These moments of retrospection reveals Devika's struggle for identity which is uprooted from conventional ties to a modern place and re-routed through unanchorable global flows to form a fluid identity.

To conclude Neb has boldly presented the psychological dilemma of Indian women who is marginalized and showed her real position: struggling between tradition and modernism. Neb advocates notion identity which is not fixed and examines the impetus for movement and displacement created by economic and environmental conditions which moulds the female consciousness and cultural identity. Neb shows conflict between the role of a woman in the four walls of house and her individual aspirations and encourages woman to raise questions against the social injustice done to her. He examines the experiences of woman across borders who involves herself in the process of acculturation, forging multiple ideologies to become empowered and reconstitute her identity. Thus identity transgresses conventional notions of gender and position, traverses both national and cultural boundaries and ultimately becomes global.

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