
 Article

A Different Ethnic Cleansing as Portrayed in Sujatha Bhatt's 'A Different History'

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Abstract

The world has a renowned history of witnessing thousands and thousands of people being killed to establish the superiority of race and ethnicity. There have also been battles to establish superiority over geographical boundaries. The repercussions these battles have brought are humongous. They have partially or completely altered the traditions and customs of the defeated sect. This kind of a forced transformation is happening from time immemorial. The major change in one's culture and tradition is brought because of ethnic cleansing. The poem A Different History by Sujatha Bhatt high-lights a different history that was created without any reinforcement or threat or to be precise, it did not happen through the conventional ways. How could such a mammothian change be brought in a vast country like India? The article tries to explore it with Bhatt's poem as a reference.

Key Words: Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Cleansing, Sujatha Bhatt, A Different History, Self –made ethnic cleansing.

History teaches that men and nation behave wisely when they have exhausted all other alternatives- Abba Eban. Ethnicity refers to the shared social, cultural and historical experiences stemming from common regional or national backgrounds that makes sub-group of a population different from one another. Similarly, the sense of identity many people gain in an ethnic group is important for both good and bad. One of the most important functions of these groups is the sense of belonging they give. Ethnic identities can give individuals recognition and the importance that is placed on this recognition makes people feel superior if not inferior.

The downside of ethnicity and ethnic group membership is the conflict they create among people of different ethnic groups. History and current practices indicates that it is easy to become prejudiced against people with different ethnicities. In major parts of the contemporary world, ethnic conflict continues to rear its ugly head. The 1990's and 2000's were filled with ethnic cleansing and pitched battles among ethnic groups in various continents.

Ethnic cleansing refers to the systematic and forced removal of ethnic groups from a given territory by a more powerful ethnic group. It is usually accompanied with efforts to remove physical and cultural evidence of the targeted group in the territory through the destruction of

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homes, social centers, farms and infrastructures and by the desecration of monuments, cemeteries and places of worship.

One could witness a different type of ethnic cleansing as portrayed in the poem of Sujatha Bhatt. The poem laments in a very casual manner the loss of language and culture after Indian independence. The author explores the idea of history, culture and language throughout the poem.

Sujatha Bhatt's renowned poem "A Different History" does not speak about the conventional ethnic cleansing. The author does not depict the aspects of how the colonizers have tortured our bodies and souls. The poem renders that even after agonizing affliction, our ethnic groups have started to love the culture and language of the colonizer. This paradigm shift in the perspective leans towards a different ethnic cleansing more of a self- created one.

In the scenario portrayed in the poem, there is no direct, cruel dominant thrust, by the colonizer but the willing suspension of the colonized to leave behind their cultural identity. This article briefly explores how race and ethnic identity have become a part of our culture and consciousness and argues that whether we must act wise as said by Abba Eban and disconnects from our ethnic identity completely and accepts the pseudo –belongingness which we have developed for the western culture. To comprehend the title better the article strives to trace the root cause for this self- ethnic cleansing and discuss how Bhatt's poem stands tall as an example for a different ethnic cleansing.

The poem begins with the lines "Great Pan is not dead, he simply immigrated to India". Great Pan was not seized to exist but simply moved to India. The god moves fiercely disguised as monkeys and snakes. It depicts the acceptance of the new religion and cultures in India. This exhibits the mentality of Indians who allowed foreign religion to enter and roam freely in our country.

At a time when the foreign Gods are allowed to roam freely in our country the people are not spared to get away from leaving aside the beliefs of the soil. The repetition of the word 'sin' depicts how one should treat the books. It reinforces the negative commentary and infests the critical tone of the poem. Bhatt uses book as an example to show people that the cultures must be appreciated and treated carefully by mentioning the tradition and custom of India. It could be clearly seen in the line 'you must learn to turn the pages gently without disturbing saraswathi'.

Saraswathi is a Goddess of knowledge and art who Indians believe to be lying on the book. Bhatt is asking the Indians that they should treat the books with dignity as the way they treat the goddess of knowledge. But the more interesting part is when the poet says "without offending the tree/from whose wood the paper is made" personifies that the non-human object is acknowledged for the significant role it plays in the nation's culture. The personification also emphasizes anyone of a different nationality, that as an individual, the tree should be seen with a sense of humanity- a sense which anyone from any culture could accomplish. It also depicts the emancipation of freedom on valuing one's culture but not liberating oneself with selfishness.

The tone in the second part attains a different momentum where it turns more hostile and aggressive. This change is supported by the oppressors' tongue, 'which language truly meant to murder someone? This creates a sense of uncertainty and infuriation which the author felt about colonization. Further, sense of torment is created in 'how does it happen that after the torture, after the soul has been cropped with a scythe swooping out of the conqueror's face'. Soul symbolizes the self-esteem of Indians for being able to speak Indian and follow Indian culture. Scythe is a tool used to harvest crops by hand which obviously takes much longer time than machine. Scythe in this phrase represents the colonization and injustice. It depicts that colonization has cut out the soul of Indians by forbidding their culture and language. This also reveals Indians also suffered a long time during colonization.

Bhatt describes her depression as she realizes that there is neither the oppressor nor the oppressed. No one means to be any of those. No one can be blamed. In addition, the repetition of which language enhances the sense of criticism and uncertainty in her expression. The repetition and rhetorical question lead the readers to feel the darker side of human history. The final tone of the poem is made in the last two lines 'the unborn grandchildren grow to love the strange language'. a sense of uncertainty and sadness are enhanced as it describes Bhatt's realization of cultural consequences such as the colonization does not ruin history but when a new era begins where a new generation grow to love the strange language- the inevitability of cultural change.

Sujatha Bhatt explores the theme of cultural consequence and the loss of language and culture throughout the poem by describing the poem as an anecdote of her lost mother tongue and culture. This poem makes the reader think about their history either with joy or sorrow. The poem though written half a century back holds currency even today as the last line stands tall in depicting the scenario of the present. The grand and the great grandchildren of the freedom fighters have started not only to accept the tremendous shift in cultural practices but a major portion of them have begun to shrug the identity of their native soil.

Today we have landed ourselves in a state where anything local or native is projected to be considered inferior to the forced and acquired western pseudo identity. An ethnic cleansing has been made without weapons or shedding a drop of blood. Through a well selected series of language and literary terms, Bhatt achieves to produce poem which discusses the mistake made after the collision of very different cultures and then explains the truth and proper customs which have been lost. The narrator, in the process of this discussion also resolved the intense emotions they once had, by accepting that cross- cultural consequences such as colonialism do not ruin a history, but creates a different one.

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