

Like a Lost Route in a No-Man's Land: Dilruba Z. Ara's Journey into the Psyche of the Expatriate

Pratiti Shirin

Abstract

Dilruba Z. Ara is an internationally acclaimed Bangladeshi author based in Sweden. Ara's collection of short stories in *Detached Belonging*—which contains other stories along with the one titled 'Detached Belonging'—brings out the anguish and agony of protagonists of mainly Bangladeshi cultures living in Sweden. This article explores the ways in which these protagonists negotiate their identities while living in what Ara herself calls a 'no-man's land' (Ara 10) in one of her stories. At the same time, the stories also depict scenarios of confronting one's own cultural norms which is a consequence of hybridisation (Bhaba) and cultural alienation. This article also aims at exploring how and for what purpose the Bangladeshi variety of English used sometimes by the writer, blends in effortlessly with the standard variety and how the loss of verbal language altogether contributes to playing a key factor in the breakdown of communication which further contributes to the cultural alienation. Language and silences in this collection of short stories is a means of re-claiming one's identity as well as a tool for negotiating between different cultures.

Keywords: cross-cultural negotiation, post-human society, mode of becoming, reterritorialisation, alienation.

Introduction:

Dilruba Ara is a poignant Bangladeshi writer who lives in Sweden. Based in the Swedish society, her stories included in her book *Detached Belonging* bring out the trauma, isolation and emotional detachment of the expatriate whose psyche—as a result of having lived abroad for so long—simultaneously is not completely based any more in their native countries either.

Detached Belonging is Ara's first collection of short stories which was published before in various places and one of her stories in this collection called 'Window' was even dramatised by Granslos Theatre in Sweden in 2015 (Ara xv). The book was published only in 2016. In fact, Ara has a long writing history and the earliest written story of *Detached Belonging* titled 'The Theft' was published in 1975 (Ara xv). All of Ara's stories from her book were used, some even in the manuscript form, in the Masters in Comparative Literature course taught at the Lund University (Ara xv). 'Detached Belonging' has been on the syllabus of the English Department of Soedertorn University, Stockholm since 2007 as well as part of the World literature course at Sharjah University, UAE.

The stories in *Detached Belonging* reveal with an astounding depth subtle issues which any expatriate faces in a society upon their arrival there but also surprises that keep on hitting someone even when one thinks one has settled comfortably in that culture. More often than not, these experiences alienate the protagonists from others as well as their deepest selves. The cultural shock forces the protagonists to expand or reterritorialise (Deleuze and Guattari 383) their known boundaries of identity which is in a constant mode of becoming (Colebrook 79). In many stories if not all, language—or rather its breakdown—as well as silences play a key role in contributing to the distancing that the protagonists are facing in an already alienating culture. Sometimes, a Bangladeshi variety of English is used by the writer along with Standard English as a means of expression of a hybridised self. This article explores the ways in which the various cultural negotiations contribute towards the alienation

of the protagonists but also towards their inner growth, resulting in the formation of new identities. This article also shows how the use of language and silence is used to negotiate cross-cultural barriers but also certain barriers that one faces in one's homeland. Language and its non-use then becomes a tool for gaining certain breakthroughs in how the protagonists perceive their society, themselves and at times, language is used as a means of achieving relief from anguish that results from cultural dislocation.

Breakdown of Communication and Alienation

In 'Detached Belonging', the protagonist is a Muslim woman from Bangladesh and of an aristocratic descent. The story depicts her struggle with a complicated pregnancy as a consequence of which she has to fight a silent—and lonesome—battle with the midwife who gives her the impression 'How could this woman from a third world country know what is good for her?' (Ara 4). She also has to confront her doctor who convinces her to trust 'on the high standards of Swedish hospitals...' (Ara 2). At any rate, the author points out the 'non-verbal assaults' (Ara 1)—like the invisible shadow lines, mentioned by Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* (1978)—to which the protagonist has had to adjust herself during her seven-year-long stay in Sweden. This hints at the breakdown of verbal communication as a result of which she retreats into nostalgia and '... alienated her mind from herself by diving deep down into her past' (Ara 1). Alienation is a key concept of post-colonial theory. Although Sweden was never a colonial power, post-colonial theory may be relevant here to understand how alienation contributes to the process of identity formation. Identities are never complete; rather cultural and historical factors result in the 'production' of identity formation (Hall 234, 237) which is always dynamic and unstable. Alienation is caused by cultural and geographical displacement. A key feature of post-colonialism is it is usually associated with issues of voice, agency or control. Spivak (271-313) argues in her complex essay that

marginalised groups such as women, the poorest classes and ethnic minorities or what she calls subalterns (a concept taken from the work of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci), cannot speak for the reason that subalterns do not hold the positions of power and authority which construct the dominant, nationalistic discourses. This is related to issues of knowledge production; who controls and distributes knowledge; what kind of knowledge is produced and why. Gramsci in *Selections* (1971) talks of cultural hegemony which means that the elite of a society dominates and manipulates the knowledge structures of that society in order to establish a certain kind of knowledge as the only valid or legitimate form of knowledge. This is done with a purpose of controlling the masses and in order to prevent resistance—or what post-colonial discourse terms as subversion—from the masses. If we take the concept of equality and fairness operating in Swedish society to which the narrators of different stories in this collection keep on referring to from time to time as given, we probably cannot talk of a ruling class subverting the ruled, but there is a point to consider as the protagonist is a woman and a minority—a cultural as well as a religious one—in an immigrant context. So, what our protagonist cannot say out loudly, she has to confront through her feelings. Hence, we can talk of a breakdown of verbal communication which however becomes clear not only towards the latter part of ‘Detached Belonging’ but also in some other stories of this collection which also will be discussed in this article.

In fact, the non-verbal assault or breakdown of verbal communication is a key theme resonating through the entire story. The loss of language denotes a loss of power (see Ashcroft et al.37). From the silent confrontations she has with the midwife who constantly undermines her ability to determine what is good for her baby and therefore, ignores her suspicions that something is going wrong in her pregnancy, to the doctor whom she has to convince in order to see the corpse of her post-mortised baby when the pregnancy goes horribly wrong, a silent battle remains in the foreground.

As opposed to the midwife, the silent confrontation she has to undertake to see her dead baby, is after all not so silent and she has to convince the doctor telling him that she had to observe a baby whose skull was crushed on the streets of Dhaka in 1970 (Ara 8). Therefore, she delights in having been able to convince the doctor to see her baby and considers this a victory because ‘Now she didn’t have to reach out for her forgotten ego to feel good about herself’ (Ara 8).

However, the ultimate non-verbal confrontation the protagonist faces does not come from the outside but from the inside, in the form of a peculiar cultural shock. On top of the horror of seeing her hastily sewn-together child, she finds the Bible placed on top of the head of the baby. As a Muslim, this is one culture shock that is too much for her to digest. ‘She wanted to cry out. But instead she closed her eyes, reciting verses from the Quran. Silently’ (Ara 9).

On top of the visual horror—the depiction of anything else would not have brought out the naked cultural clash of the two worlds in which the protagonist finds herself being trapped—she was now burdened with the additional question of where to find an Islamic burial ground for her child. She asks the doctor to release her in order to make the funeral arrangements although the doctor thinks she is not ready yet. The story ends with the utter sense of loss and alienation that set the starting tone of this poignant short story. It explains the source of her alienation. On top of having lived in a foreign land where she has lived due to love for her Swedish husband, he ironically is also the reason for making her an outsider to her community. The intercultural marriage resulted in an inner struggle in her to retain her own identity that resulted in this lonesome wrestle and the breakdown of verbal communication as she points out that ‘She hadn’t only left her country, she also left her language’ (Ara 10).

Cultural Displacement

Cultural Clash Caused by Complex Family Structures

'Outsider' deals with issues which involve more than the loss of verbal language. This story deals with the non-verbal abuses and the subtle tension that is evident especially when one has to contest for affection and love in a foreign country. However, the story is also about bonds forged among strangers in a foreign country. At the beginning of this story, we get a glimpse of a complex western family structure based on love. We get to know about David and Lilly, the childless couple and the story starts with the crisis of Lilly's death which leaves David in utter grief. Lilly has a son from another man but he grew up in a foster home. This son called Ben is the main source of discomfort which resonates throughout the story.

The story deals with how the protagonist found parental love shortly after her arrival in Sweden in her early twenties, in David and Lilly. Although the protagonist had to move away from where the couple lived, over the years, they kept in touch over the phone. Lilly had been suffering from bone cancer and during the three months Lilly was hospitalised, the protagonist visited her thrice, 'braving the onerous journey of six hours by train and bus, ignoring the harsh winter' (Ara 40). And when she made the journey, there was an awkward confrontation between herself and Ben. Lilly's memory was diminishing leaving Rina to feel twice as much as a trespasser partly because she didn't recognise her and because of the presence of Ben. It was as if there was a silent contest between the two—'the non-verbal assaults' (Ara 1) that the protagonist of 'Detached Belonging' was referring to—for the gain of Lilly's affection. It was not only Rina but also David himself who felt like an outsider in the presence of Ben—perhaps the true claimant to Lilly's love—due to the sole reason that the former came out of Lilly's womb.

Cultural Clash between the Public and Private Spheres

After Lilly's death, David becomes Rina's concern. She is concerned as to how the former will survive without his companion of 40 years, a concern for which the Swedes don't have any definite answer. 'It seemed that the moment a person expired, the medical service was very quick to sever all connection with the deceased's family' (Ara 38). The Swedes had no appreciation that 'taking care of a grieving soul is as important as taking care of an ailing body' (Ara 38). Homi Bhaba talks of the cultural clash which might arise due to a realignment of the customary boundaries between the private and the public. These boundaries might 'challenge normative expectations of development and progress' (2). This could be the case of the Swedish society as well.

For the Swedes, there is a strict separation between the private and the public sphere as opposed to Asian cultures like the one the protagonist hails from where there is often an intermingling of these two spaces. In 'Outsider' death is a matter of public sphere in the sense that it takes place in a hospital but how a relative mourns the death, belongs to the realm of the private home and the public authorities of the hospital are not responsible for the relatives of the deceased. But this is a source of cultural displacement (Bhaba) in the protagonist. And since Rina was not David's biological daughter, she thought that David would consider himself a burden to her (Ara 38) if she offered him her own help. The days pass by and David and Rina plan Lilly's funeral whose manner of execution is another source of bewilderment to her as she does not understand why David has to serve a meal to hundreds of guests in the memorial service (Ara 38).

On the day before the funeral service, Rina gets a shattering call from Ben telling her there would be no funeral service that day. What Rina was fearing and the reason why she was pleading so desperately with the hospital authorities to take care of David, had come

true: the loss of his 40-year-long companion was too much for him to bear and he had committed suicide. In this way, Ara makes the readers ask certain questions that are unsettling, for example, if the Swedish society had a system of taking care of the deceased's relative, would David have been still alive? Rina was planning to extend her stay in David's home once she was there for the funeral and she had hoped that he would somehow get through that time, but he simply had not. Who was responsible for the tragedy that had occurred here?

Confronting a Post-Human Society

A hospital in all cultures is an impersonal space where there is a loss of self and subjectivity. All people lose their individuality in the hospital and they come under the generic category of the 'patient'. Hospitals therefore, have a tendency to display necrophilosophical attributes (see McCormack 115-137). 'Perceived as benevolent or malevolent necrophilosophy focuses on what is lost' (McCormack 115). The Swedish society is no exception. What happens to the relative who survives the deceased in 'Outsider', goes into the realm of the subjective self for handling which the Swedes have no mechanism. In this sense, the Swedish society is also a post-human society. As a starting point, post-humanism argues that the categories of the natural and the cultural have been largely outdated and blurred by technological and scientific advancements (Braidotti 30). Tracing the origin of humanism back to Renaissance and Enlightenment which in turn can be traced back to classical antiquity (Braidotti 13) originating in Europe, Braidotti rejects humanism as a colonial venture (15). In 'Outsider' or in 'Detached Belonging', we see a scientifically advanced society where technological advancement blurs the distinction between the subjective self and the non-subjective machinery. It will not be an exaggeration to say that in such a society, even human beings are

encouraged to behave like cyborgs and bury human feelings like grief the eruption of which could result in catastrophic consequences like suicide which David of 'Outsider' commits.

The sense of estrangement that Rina is made to feel is built up as a result of these customs centered around death that are so different in the Swedish and in the protagonist's own culture. As if Lilly's death is not enough, Ben does not allow Rina to see David's dead body because it is not customary in Sweden. Rina pleads with him that she is not Swedish (Ara 42) but Ben has no understanding for her feelings. This is an interesting situation because while David and Lilly were alive, Ben played a minimal role in the couple's lives and it was Rina whom they regarded as their child. But with the couple's death, the situation is reversed: despite David's dislike for Ben, it is the latter who now takes decisions regarding who can see his step-father and that includes shutting Rina out. It is clear that not Rina but Ben is the true Outsider of this story. Rina might have come from a different culture with different customs but that was never reason enough for the former to be shut out from Lilly and David's love. On the contrary, it was Ben who made it very clear to Rina that not only did she not have the right perhaps to the couple's affection but as a non-Swedish she would never fully understand the nuances of the Swedish culture: the reason he not only not allows her to see David's corpse but does not even send her a picture of the couple that Rina has requested him to give her but which never arrives. So the non-verbal conflict between Rina and Ben for the contestation of Lilly and David's love comes to a climax through this last act of kindness that Ben chooses to deny to Rina. Therefore, unlike in 'Detached Belonging', where non-verbal communication results in subtle confrontations between the hospital authorities and the protagonist, the non-verbal communication results in a not-so-subtle conflict between Rina and Ben in 'Outsider'.

Negotiating In-Betweenness and the Anguish of Hybridity

The theme of death and being an outsider continues to play the most dominant role in Ara's 'The Mosque-Yard Imam'. In this story, the protagonist lives in Sweden but is on a brief visit to Bangladesh. She is, for various reasons, made to feel like an outsider not only in Sweden but in her own country. The narrator says that although she speaks perfect Swedish, her skin colour gives her away (Ara 11). But gradually, there is a reconciliation by the narrator to accept her in-betweenness which are 'spaces [that] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation ...' (Bhaba 1-2). She says that: '...as time went by, I began to accept my status as a foreigner, and at the same time to realise the value of having a country with which I could identify: a country of my own' (Ara 11).

Bhaba (3) also talks of a kind of fluidity between identities. So, years after having lived in Sweden, the narrator's mind has been hybridised, accustoming itself to Swedish customs like following the law; setting up three alarm clocks so as not to miss any appointment; writing down daily agendas in notebooks and trimming one's garden in the summer (Ara 12). But her Swedish values go deeper than the outward duties she performs as a responsible Swede: she no longer believes that well-off people deserve more respect than unfortunate ones (Ara 11)—a notion that is perhaps typical to the Bangladeshi society in which she was born because this society is 'a society that is not even fairly unfair' (Ara 12). Concepts of equality, justice etc. are not overtly practised in this society even if they are not unknown.

However, hybridity causes cultural displacement. Therefore, the narrator cannot feel comfortable anymore after having spent a few days in Bangladesh. She might imitate or mimic (see Bhaba 85-92) a good Swedish citizen but the ambivalence of mimicry fixes the

mimicker only as an incomplete or partial presence. She feels: ‘Blinded by my own colour, deafened by the fluency of my tongue, I neither hear nor see the alien mind that both generates my words and lives under my native skin’ (Ara 12).

It is as if the hybridised self—that self which took birth when the narrator started living in Sweden—and her ‘pure’ self are at war with each other to the point that the narrator even tries to deny that alien self that is nonetheless part and parcel of her essence.

‘The Mosque-Yard Imam’ is about negotiating identities in one’s native culture. Ara subtly brings out the conflict which anyone could face in their daily lives in their homelands by stepping into the unfamiliar or facing the unknown. The story centers around the conflict that the protagonist is propelled into when she tries to paint the cane walls around her father’s grave and as a consequence, has to face the local Imam. In Islam, it is unorthodox—if not forbidden—that women go to paint their father’s grave. The protagonist too, regards it as an act of transgression (Ara 13). Some ‘deep-rooted Bengali instinct’ (Ara 15) tells her that even if she can manage to buy the paint, she would not be able to go to the graveyard and paint it in the absence of a man. Therefore, she makes her chauffeur Babul her accomplice in her overstepping ventures. The latter only agreed to her proposal after the protagonist threatened him to take out the car herself in ‘Dhaka’s mad traffic’ (Ara 15) and that it would be his fault if something happened to her. Here, the use of ‘driver’ (Ara 13) instead of the standard word ‘chaffeur’ by Ara to describe Babul’s occupation is remarkable and attention-drawing. This usage of the word could hint at a specific variety of Bangladeshi English (see Banu) and makes it clear that although Ara is writing in Sweden, she has not forgotten about her Bangladeshi reader among whom it is standard usage to refer to their chauffeur as driver. The usage of this specific word and another, ‘abba’ (Ara 13), to refer to her father, establishes a feeling of coziness for the Bangladeshi reader. ‘Abba’ is a standard term for addressing one’s father in Bengali although the origin of the word is Aramaic which has passed into European

languages via Greek, Latin and Middle English (Merriam-Webster). Ashcroft et al. note that in post-colonial literature, ‘Language is adopted as a tool and utilized in various ways to express in various ways widely differing cultural experiences’ (38). They also explain the concepts of abrogation and appropriation. Abrogation is the process of denying the usage of the language of the coloniser and in this story, what would be regarded as “‘standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage’” (Ashcroft et al. 37). Appropriation of language is the process: “... by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience, or, as Raja Rao puts it, to ‘convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own’” (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 38).

Abrogation is not complete without appropriation of the coloniser’s language and the latter is a means of re-claiming language: something that the protagonist of ‘The Mosque-Yard Imam’ does here. Unlike the protagonist of ‘Detached Belonging’ who does not appropriate language and therefore is alienated in a foreign culture, the protagonist of ‘The Mosque-Yard Imam’ feels quite at home in adopting language to suit the spirit of what she wants to convey.

The conflict that the protagonist describes in this story is rather of a peculiar kind: she comes day after day to paint the cane walls in white with the Imam observing her with his disciples. She is not sure what he is up to. She feels a ‘collective scawl’ (Ara 16) at her back but is unsure whether she has angered the Imam or not. It is not that there is anything about the protagonist’s appearance to anger him: she is dressed very traditionally but when the protagonist appears for the second day, she wonders: ‘I can’t help feeling that his mindset is the product of what he has seen and heard since his birth, a mindset so different from that of the West’ (Ara 18).

Through the above lines, the protagonist fails to see the irony of how she becomes a voice of the West herself by measuring the Imam's behaviour against western behavioural standards. But the Imam is not western. Why shall he behave like one? The protagonist's further saying: 'I wish the Imam behaved as properly as a priest in a graveyard in the West'(Ara 19), makes it clear that a (western) priest representing Christianity is her gold standard against whom she is measuring the Imam representing Islam (and her own religion) in her own country. This makes the protagonist assume a 'neocolonial' authority—a menacing presence—who acts as well as thinks outlandishly in her own native land by mimicking the voice of the coloniser or in this context, the white in whose country she lives. Like a coloniser who judges the 'natives' and a foreign society, the writer is judging her own society: 'Suddenly he reminds me of those elements of Bengali society which will always embarrass me on behalf of my fellow countrymen' (Ara 18).

The same silent war between the Imam and the writer remains for a few days with the Imam doing nothing other than observing her; either with a few others or alone until the narrator comes down with a fever after which the ordeal is restarted. She is bound to leave for Sweden and is resolved to terminate her unfinished task of carrying out filial duty. But this time, she notices a change of attitude in the Imam when she returns to the graveyard. The Imam opens the gate and stands aside in a welcoming gesture. As a sign of recognition, the narrator gives him a nod to return which he puts his right palm on his chest and nods. This is quite a non-Bangladeshi gesture. The narrator is not unfamiliar with such gestures as well-bred Muslim men have greeted her in this way before and this is the first time she feels shaky in front of him. Her feeling of superiority melts away. After she is done with her final coat of paint, the Imam comes back with a book and stands in front of the grave. The narrator initially mistakes it for the Holy Quran but is shocked to find it to be a book of poetry by the renowned Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976). His voice is lovely as he recites a

poem passionately in honour of her late father who was a writer himself. She becomes frozen, unable to either move or say anything and waits for him to come to her and talk. He does not and then she asks for his forgiveness for any offence she has caused him. In reply, he recites a very famous line, also from Nazrul: 'There is a father sleeping in the mind of every child' (Ara 20). By saying this, he formally approves of the narrator's act as it becomes clear that the Imam appreciates a daughter's love for her father.

In this story, like in 'Outsider', non-verbal language and gesture is firstly interpreted as a sign of a threat. However, unlike in the latter story, the same non-verbal language in the form of a nod later on, results in the mitigation of the previously built-up tension and therefore, reconciliation between the protagonists until there is a final spoken approval of the narrator's action.

This story is essentially about breaking the stereotypes and prejudices which dominate one's mindscape regarding one's own country due to unfamiliarity with other sections of society. The narrator's initial impression of the Imam is nothing short of an 'oriental' (Said) brute but only his body language conveys a sign of well-mannerism to her after which she is able to revise that initial impression through which she was generalising the Imam as an uneducated and uncouth man. Not only does he prove himself to be well-bred but also sophisticated and someone familiar with the poems of the national poet of Bangladesh. Moreover, he knows how to pay homage to a writer. This short but extremely revealing story gives a glimpse inside the secular nature that characterises the majority of population of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Ara's stories in *Detached Belonging* deal with the theme of cultural displacement, angst and anguish of settling down in a foreign country but also with the dislocation which results in the alienation of one's self in one's own country. This article has shown how cross-cultural negotiations result in renewed perceptions of the protagonists with regard to their selves—be they positive or negative. This article has also pinpointed how language and silences are used in the stories to either hinder or facilitate those negotiations of cultural identity. Despite Ara writing for an international readership, the use of Bangladeshi English has played a special role in creating a specific coziness for the audience of Bangladesh where the writer hails from. Identity is not something static or stable but unstable and it is always in a mode of becoming. Hybridisation for most of the characters, is not a complete possibility which results for example, in the breakdown of verbal as well as non-verbal communication in 'Detached Belonging' or in feelings of estrangement as in 'Outsider'. In many stories, non-verbal communication plays a special role in the life of the expatriate protagonist. In 'Outsider' or 'Detached Belonging', non-verbal communication adds surplus tension to the linguistic and cultural barrier that the protagonists face. In 'The Mosque-Yard Imam', non-verbal communication results in a peculiar type of alienation in the protagonist's home country due to the protagonist's attempt to cross gender as well as certain cultural norms. Therefore, in Ara's stories, cultural clash and non-verbal communication is mostly a source of anguish, fear and the anxiety of confronting the unknown.

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About the Author

Pratiti Shirin is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She completed a Masters in Education and International Development from the UCL Institute of Education, London, UK, in 2015 under the Commonwealth Shared Scholarship Scheme. Her publications include ‘The Position of Women in Kautilya’s *Arthashastra*’ published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 2009. In 2016, she published her London based memoir *Under European Skies*. She writes articles for national newspapers. Her areas of interests include ELT, post-colonial literature, feminism and gender studies. She may be contacted at pratshirin85@du.ac.bd.