

Materializing Cultural Identity through 'Traumascapes' in Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel: My Life*

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Abstract: This paper is propelled by the significance of the discourse of space in trauma theory and is an attempt to explore the construction of traumascapes as a means of negotiating identity in the new cultural spaces inhabited by the migrants. Though the migrants belong to a new geographical space, they attempt to construct their old space through the medium of cultural space. This cultural space is fabricated through the continuance of religious and social ideologies which function in linking the homeland to the migrated land, that is to say, the past with the present. As elaborated by Maria Tumarkin, 'traumascapes' are an attempt to commemorate traumatic events in their home land. In contrast, through the work *Infidel*, I would attempt to show how commemoration is carried out through a very novel means- creation of similar traumascapes in the host or migrated land.

Key words: cultural space, migration, cultural identity, traumascapes, commemoration.

The two major defining concepts of the past half a century have been trauma and migration. These two notions have reverberated in almost all the grand narratives and counter narratives of diverse disciplines including humanities, literature, sociology, political science, geography and cultural studies. As pointed out by Shoshana Felman, trauma has been the founding feature of the twentieth century and after. The events that shook the world in the 20th century have been swotted through the lens of psychological and cultural trauma and attempts are still continuing to assess the magnitude and meaning of these events. In this process, new meanings are being assigned and the cultural and social equations of power and identity are being transformed in indispensable ways. Within the theoretical framework of trauma theory, the essence and existence of human beings and the relations of humans with socio-political and cultural events have been redefined in such a manner that human beings have come to occupy the centre stage of all social and cultural reckonings.

One of the most significant variables of the human equations in the 20th century has been migration, which has been a recurring aspect since the dawn of post-isms, especially postcolonialism and post modernism. The state of being displaced is not a novel circumstance. Though human migration has a long history, it is only in the twentieth century that the issue became politicized and internationalized. The rise of modernism combined with the end of colonial empires, marked the rise of diasporic communities all over the world. The two world wars, in the first half of the 20th century and the innumerable small and big wars that followed to the contemporary period, further aggravated the migration of communities seeking refuge from continuous wars and terror. Migration has a reciprocal relationship with trauma. There is a complementary cause and effect relation between the two, from which have stemmed a number of discourses focussing on the human subject in its diverse manifestations-geographical, political, social and cultural. Within the discourse of trauma, migration has donned a cultural hue apart from the usual concept of geographical displacement that was the major concern in postcolonial studies. The concept of traumascapes, introduced by Maria Tumarkin (2005) goes a long way in the understanding of the cultural and geographical spaces marked by trauma.

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with the present. As elaborated by Maria Tumarkin, ‘traumascape’ are an attempt to commemorate traumatic events in their home land. In contrast, through the work *Infidel*, I would attempt to show how commemoration is carried out through a very novel means- creation of similar traumascape in the host or migrated land. This paper is propelled by the significance of the discourse of space in trauma theory and is an attempt to explore the construction of traumascape as a means of negotiating identity in the new cultural spaces inhabited by the migrants. My attempt in this paper is to explore the cultural disposition of traumascape and to divulge how these cultural traumascape provide a link between the past and present or to be more precise, the home and host land of the migrants.

Memory constitutes the most significant component of trauma theory and from a socio-cultural perspective, it plays a decisive role in establishing individual and social connections. Taking cue from Halbwachs' words, “[...] it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38), it needs to be asserted that it is through the medium of memories that individual and collective identities are negotiated. Halbwachs (1992) develops on Durkheim’s notion of ‘social consciousness’ and ‘historical continuity’ to point out the inevitability of collectively shared views in the construction of the past. When a group is traumatized, it inexorably results in a change in their identities. This has been discussed by the most prominent cultural trauma theorist Jeffrey C Alexander in his work *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* as:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (1)

Identity is very closely linked to culture making it extremely important to assess and study the multiple ways in which different cultures cope with trauma.

Commemoration is the most significant and customary way practised by most cultures in their attempts to cope with and overcome trauma. It is usually carried out in two distinct phases :

- 1) Commemoration of a traumatic event through the conventional means of erecting monuments and building memorials and museums.
- 2) Commemoration by the process of carrying forward the traumatic event as a part of culture in such a way that it influences our present and future lives.

This second type of commemoration is what I will build upon henceforth in this paper. Halbwachs has talked about ‘framework of memories’ that serve as a ‘landmark’ when referring to the past (183). These frameworks, which I call the cultural traumascape, form a significant part of the life of the migrants who flee from their homeland in search of refuge and peace. For the migrants who had to flee not on their own accord, trauma becomes a part of their culture and identity which they seek to cache as homeland memories. Thus, commemoration becomes a tool of coping with cultural trauma and thereby negotiating the individual and cultural identity.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s autobiography *Infidel* traces her journey from her homeland Somalia to Saudi Arabia to Kenya and then to Netherlands, followed by The United States where she is settled now. This cannot be seen as the journey of an individual but is in a wider sense, the journey of certain displaced muslim communities across the world. As a female writer, Ayaan attempts to portray the actual trauma of being a woman in orthodox conventional muslim communities. In her discussion of female circumcision, denial of education and forced marriages among other socio-political issues, she openly talks of the trauma inflicted on women as a part of culture. In an interview, Ayaan openly questions the irrational trauma inflicted on muslim women as a part of the rigid traditional muslim culture. She asks:

Where are the Muslim voices raised over the terrible injustice of incidents like these? How many Muslims are willing to stand up and say... that this manner of justice is appalling, brutal, and bigoted- and that no matter who said it was the right thing to do, and how long ago it was said, this should no longer be done?

Ayaan is one among those rare women who could rise above the cultural and social restraints imposed by conventional societies and go on to lead a life free from the burden and trauma of the past. But for most of the common women, this kind of trauma is a part of their culture which becomes a central feature in defining their identities. So, even the culture of trauma becomes a part of identity which is carried forward wherever they go.

The trauma inflicted on such conventional communities when they migrate to western lands is huge, as they find the cultural clash to be even more traumatic than what they had to face as part of culture in their homeland. It is in such a context that traumascapes become relevant as a means of coping with external trauma and negotiating their identities in the host land. A very interesting feature of diaspora existence is that they struggle to transcend any change in their cultural identity and on the contrary hold on to their past with a never before zeal, by which they believe that they are doing justice to the homeland which they have left behind in search of a better life and prospects. As a result, vast differences exist within various factions of diasporic communities belonging to the same home nation. The historian Tumarkin (2005) uses the word 'traumascape' for a landscape marked by the need of people to build memorials at sites where massive deaths happened. She regards traumascapes not simply as locations of tragedies and trauma, but also as mediators between the living and the dead. She writes, "...the past is never quite over. Years, decades after the event, the past is still unfinished business". She goes on to note that "because trauma is not contained in an event as such but in the way this event is experienced, traumascapes become much more than physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time". As she contends, "It is through these places that the past, whether buried or laid bare for all to see, continues to inhabit and refashion the present" (12).

These places where the past is re-experienced are the cultural traumascapes, whose construction is influenced by various factors. Ayaan's work *Infidel* presents the cultural traumascape of western host lands as spaces where the negotiation of the past and the present takes place. The work is an attempt to negotiate the Muslim world's diasporic relationship with the west from a geographical and cultural perspective. Ayaan presents the intensely culture specific way of gender trauma that is re-experienced in the refugee camps of the western world, which becomes the specific cultural traumascape of connectivity between the past and their present lives. It is not unusual for immigrants or refugees living in Western societies to adopt a stricter set of beliefs and practices than they had practiced in their home countries as a way of insulating members of their community from what they see as the negative effects of Westernization and as simulation, including crime, drugs, and declining moral values. Certain traumas have become a part of life and culture. Such trauma is recreated through cultural traumascapes in an effort to link with the past.

Wulf Kansteiner, in his influential work, *The Politics of Memory in Post-war Europe* (2006) talks about the socio-cultural politics of commemoration as a consequence of which, traumascapes are conceived as the outcome of the confluence of an embodied site, past trauma, larger socio-cultural setting conducive to commemoration, the activities of memory agents and makers to engage with events at a trauma site and commemorate their victims. The traumascapes are recreated so as to resemble the past and the present is linked with this memory of the past so as to enable a cultural continuity even in the lands to which the refugees migrate. In *Infidel*, Ayaan talks about the life of the Somali and Moroccan refugees in Holland who "accepted welfare money and then turned on the society that gave it to them" (225). If racism is the trauma that they had to fight against in their homeland, they are not ready to let go of it in the new land too because they believe that, "If you tell a Dutch person that it's racist, he will give you whatever you want" (224). It is this strategic way of making claim to racism that results in the creation of cultural traumascapes in the host land. Ayaan further talks of a character, Naima, who is physically abused by her husband everyday but considers it as a part of her life and culture from which she should not break away. "She said her husband beat her; she was totally matter-of-fact about it...Naima felt she simply couldn't just break away. She never complained about the violence and humiliation she suffered at home, only about Dutch racism...it was really a comfort mechanism, to keep people from feeling personally inadequate and to externalize the causes of their unhappiness" (231-232). The trauma that these women had to face in their homeland is used as a kind of insulation against the western canons of modernity and assimilation. The insularity against westernization is thus preserved by the fabrication of cultural traumascapes.

To conclude, traumascapes are sites of commemoration that act as a link between the past and present. Similarly the fabrication of cultural traumascapes as sites of cultural insularity in a migrated land provides the link to the home land which most of them had to flee without consent. It is the ambiance of homeliness and security that the refugees achieve through the establishment of cultural traumascapes in a culturally socially and politically different land to which they have migrated. The creation of cultural traumascapes thus acts as a means of negotiating identity in the new cultural spaces inhabited by the migrants.

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