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Ethnic Identity a Root Cause of Alienation Reflected Through *Black Madonna*

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Abstract

F. G. Paci, an Italian-Canadian novelist is recognized for his contribution in creation of Italian-Canadian Literature phenomenon. Through his novels he has presented and described Italian immigrant families in Canada. His novels talk about struggle of Italian immigrant families in Canada. The character of Assunta in F. G. Paci's *Black Madonna* reflects the same feeling of insecurity out of which she feels alienated in a new country as well as from her family. Her obstinacy to remain an Italian and follow ethnic culture makes her feel alienated in the family and society.

Keywords- *Ethnic Culture and Identity, Italian Immigrants, Identity Struggles, Alienation*

Introduction

F. G. Paci, an Italian-Canadian novelist is recognized for his contribution in creation of Italian-Canadian Literature phenomenon. Through his novels he has presented and described Italian immigrant families in Canada. His novels talk about struggle of Italian immigrant families in Canada. Through his characters he reflects problems of Italian immigrants and their families. When a person immigrates to a new country leaving behind ancestral country, s/he sacrifices so many things that we cannot describe into words. In order to get settled in a 'new country' immigrants have to undergo many adjustments. In his novels also we see that the characters also have to undergo the process of cultural uprooting from ancestral homeland (Italy) and cultural adoption after arriving at new country (Canada). This process is obvious and necessary in order to get settled in new country. But while going through this process many complications can also occur. Once in a 'new country' it is expected that the immigrants should acquire national identity of new country that encompasses new culture and values. In a new country, immigrants observe new society. They come to the new country to have a better life in the first place. But sometimes the same country that offers a comfortable life; appears

threatening to immigrants. A Feeling of insecurity results out of such threatening and thus immigrants cling to their ethnicity more tightly than ever.

Ethnicity plays a crucial role in the lives of immigrants. Immigrants, though leave ancestral homeland never cease to be what they are at their core. Their ethnicity, ethnic culture and its values are always cherished by them. It is something like bedrock for them on which they can fall back in a 'new country'. Ethnicity is broadly defined as a state that gives the feeling of belongingness towards a social group with common national and cultural tradition. Ethnicity is something that is learnt and acquired from the birth. Every single individual is shaped into a personality by its ethnicity. Thus ethnicity is a part of an individual identity (Lott,2010). While in a new country, immigrants do not find this feeling of belongingness that as the country does not share their national and cultural traditions. They feel alone and alienated. In such situations immigrants fall back to their respective ethnic tradition where they feel comfortable. It further makes their integration difficult and sometimes impossible. They remain with the feeling of 'alienated' one and thus they also start alienating new country.

The character of Assunta in F. G. Paci's *Black Madonna* reflects the same feeling of insecurity out of which she feels alienated in a new country as well as from her family. Her children are Canadian more than Italian as they are born and brought up in Canada. Children have acquired Canadian culture, Canadian identity and its values which Assunta has completely failed to acquire. Assunta fails to get integrated to Canadian society and thus remains 'Italian immigrant' till the end of her life. We see that she is sent to Canada from Italy to get married to Adamo just like a 'mail-ordered bride'. But after her arrival in Canada she does not accept and inculcate Canadian culture and Canadian values. Her inability to learn English language reflects the same. Her children find her difficult to deal with. They cannot communicate with her as she does not understand English and children do not understand Italian language being Canadians. This is how she remains away from her children.

Joey looked at his mother. It had been a long time since she had stepped off that train with her dowry trunk. And in all that times she had never ceased to puzzle him. He didn't know whether she had purposely refused to adapt to the new ways or if she was incapable of doing so. She was certainly stubborn. She had strange old-country customs that she insisted on maintaining even though they were primitive and embarrassing. Her drastic fluctuating moods were beyond him too. She was capable of laughing heartily one minute and lashing out in anger the next, as if she acted on pure impulse. He found it incredible that she still hadn't learned English. Thirty odd years here and all she had was the occasional word for telephone callers and

tradesmen. Although she seemed to understand him and Marie well enough at times. It seemed she had gone from one Italian village in Marche to another one in Northern Ontario- the West End. (11)

This description through Joey makes clear that how Assunta is influenced by ethnic culture. She stubbornly follows ethnic culture in a new country. She is reluctant to adopt Canadian culture. It is her ethnic culture because of which she appears completely different to her children and thus they alienate her. Marie is the first one to face her behavioral difference that is resulted from cultural difference. Marie, who is born and brought up in Canada, is a Canadian. She does not have connection or bonding with ethnic culture. Furthermore, communication gap in between mother and daughter makes things worst. Assunta cannot make Marie understand ethnic culture and its values, while Marie being a Canadian child fails to understand the same. Besides, because of the communication gap Marie also cannot make her mother understand Canadian culture and its values. Their relation is nothing but an unending quarrel. Mother and daughter never come to share common base. Both appose each other, try to impose their respective cultures on each other and at the end, parts from each other with resentment. It is Assunta who is expected to acquire Canadian culture, its values and language but on the contrary, she tries to impose it on her children. She wants her daughter to be an ideal Italian wife. So she tries to shape her daughter in the same way. But Marie wants to study and become something important. For Marie, marriage is not important. Marie understands that she needs to prove her abilities in Canada in order to get accepted by the society. But she cannot make her mother understand this as they cannot communicate with each other. An author's description here about Assunta's treatment to Marie clears it.

Always being treated like a kid. Close to sixteen and almost a senior at collegiate, but treated like a kid, pure and simple, who existed merely to do the housework and learn all the female chores. As if she were being groomed to be another devoted Italian wife. (25)

Through this description we can understand how Assunta wants her daughter to be an Italian even though now they are a part of Canadian society. Marie cannot get such things and thus she always quarrels with her mother.

"There's more in the world, Ma, than cooking and keeping house for a man. You don't understand. A girl has to make a life for herself. There are no dowry trunks here. You still live in the old country. You don't understand anything about this place." (73)

Marie earnestly wants her mother to understand her wishes. She wants her mother to be happy for her as Marie is selected by university for further education. But her mother is furious as Marie's

selection means leaving of Marie's home. Assunta, who still follow old-country customs, cannot understand how a girl can leave a house all alone and that is also for education. Assunta, from where she has come, life is different. Daughters help their mother at work instead of having education and then get married and devote their life for the family. Marie is different as she is a follower of Canadian culture. Thus, unable to stay with her mother any longer she wishes to quit home on the pretext of education. Marie is happy that she will not be staying in 'Italian house'. Her leaving home is not accepted by Assunta.

Marie, out of her rebellious attitude towards her mother who represents Italian culture, does everything that is not liked and accepted by Assunta. Marie loses her weight tremendously with a diet, she chooses to leave home for education, gets married to an English man, Richard. All these things are act of rebelliousness on the part of Marie. Because of all such things Assunta feels betrayed by her daughter. Marie deliberately does the things that would heart her mother. It makes Assunta feel alienated. But Assunta fails to understand that the alienation has come to her because of an Italian influence on her. It is because of Assunta's stubbornness towards ethnicity blinds her conscience. It is against Assunta's ethnic values that Marie rebels, not her mother. In fact, Marie wants her mother to understand Marie and be proud of her. Even after years, Assunta remains unchanged and thus Marie does not come back to her.

After the death of Adamo, Joey comes to confront Assunta. Assunta is disappointed by Joey also. For Joey Assunta appears something different. After the death of his father, it is more difficult to deal with Assunta as she starts behaving differently and that scares Joey. He does not understand how to handle her mother. Even after days of his father's death she is mourning. But this mourning is unusual.

"I've seen this happen before," the widow said. "One of my friends from the old country. Was married 40 years. Didn't know what to do when her husband died. Just sat around like a *melanzana* for weeks."

"But what can I do?" Joey pleaded.

"There's nothing anyone can do," she shrugged. "Be patient with her. Let her come out of it herself. It's still early yet. Maybe this is an old custom from her village. You don't know. Some of the old Italian women, what they do when their husbands pass away!" (55)

The conversation in between Joey and Angelina, an Italian widow, Assunta's friend focuses on old country customs that are followed by Assunta. She behaves in strange way that baffles Joey. Throughout the day she sits on sofa, does not bother to clean the room. Joey looks after all house hold chorus. Whole day she confines herself at home without moving from sofa. She only attends seven

o'clock Mass every morning. With passing of the time, she stops going to attend it altogether. Her behavior starts frustrating Joey. "What was he going to do with her? It was as if she had ceased to function." (93)

With such confusion Joey then starts avoiding her mother and spend his time either playing hockey or with Christine. Her mother, on the contrary grows more and more sullen. She is already estranged by her daughter and now by her son. Her children unaware of old-country customs fail to understand her mourning for their father's death. Out of feeling of alienation and betrayal by her children, Assunta demands Joey to send her back to Italy.

She looked evenly at him. "You send me back to Italia. I want to die in Italia. "

"Don't talk nonsense," he said dismissively. But her voice sounded too cold. "yes," she said in a low resigned tone, "your father, he sent for me when I was young. Now you can send me back when I am old.".....

With a deadpan voice, as if speaking to herself, she said, "My own children have forsaken me. What reason is there to stay? I have never belonged here."

"Mamma, don't be crazy!"

Fiercely, her eyes blazing, she shouted, "I have never belonged here! It's true." (95-96)

This conversation between Joey and Assunta shows how much Assunata feels betrayed by her children. Joey, in frustration hits her mother. Assunta is broken down to her soul. She never has felt belongingness to Canadian society. She always remained Italian. After the society, it is her children that have estranged her and thus out of feeling of alienation from her own family wants to be sent back to Italy.

Even after 30 years in Canada, she does feel to be the part of it. She never felt herself to be a Canadian but always remained and practiced ethnic culture. She is the one in the family who does never bother to cross West End, an Italian neighborhood. For Assunta, the West End is the only world. She stubbornly keeps herself away from outside society of the West End. Her all friends belong to West End and are Italians. She does not bother to develop any contact with other people than Italian. And when Joey declares that they are going to move outside the West End as he has decided to sell the house to a contractor, she takes it as an end of everything. She, for whom the West End is the only world now, cannot think of leaving it. It shows that Joey does not seem to understand Assunta and what the home in the West End means to her. Out of utter disappointment from her own life Assunta attempts suicide. She ends her life pathetically.

She is the one who is influenced and controlled by ethnic identity. She does not only practice Italian heritage but wants to mould her family to Italian values. By shaping her children into Italian

values she wants to prove her identity to herself. But she comes to realize that she cannot assert her culture and identity to her children. She sees that her children have forsaken her. She feels quite alone in the new country. She is an Italian and stubbornly remains Italian throughout her life. She resists becoming Canadian. She always belongs to Italy. Canada was never her home and thus she remains far away from developing Canadian identity. After spending thirty years in Canada, she cannot speak English language. This is the proof enough that how she takes herself. She wishes always to remain Italian. Furthermore, wants her children to be Italian. This expectation is impractical as they are now a part of Canadian society. Besides, children have grown Canadian and thus do not understand Italian culture. Their identity clashes are the result of cultural differences and thus her ethnic culture is the root cause of her feeling of alienation.

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