

Diaspora: Extended Home and Memory

Prashant Kumar*

M.A., NET, Patna University

Abstract – Academic and analogous intellectual output by different postcolonial critics and thinkers has led to the reformulation of the conventional and time-honoured notions about culture. This renewed interest in cultural and ethnological matters has served to redeem the discourse on diaspora from the confines of nation-state and place it within the larger global, hybrid, multicultural and multinational space. The term diaspora is pertinent in both historical and current context, as it invokes as much to the dispersal of Jews under the ire of Nebuchadnezzar as to the flight of Rohingyas from the military offences in Rakhine state. Any act of migration whether forced or voluntary, conjures diaspora sentiments. An examination of diaspora position involves the awareness of existential challenges like adaptations and modifications according to the demands of new locale, where epistemological violence might be exacted upon the subject and a new world-view developed by him/her consequently. In substance, diaspora literature addresses the complexities that transpire in tandem with the simultaneous act of geographical uprooting from one place, and installation into other, faced either by any individual or group. It also provides us an insight into the transformations that any culture meets in the process of transition. Culture is then inextricably latched onto the identity of the migrant. Therefore any variation in the geographical space disturbs the cultural coordination and finally results into a mutilated identity. Formulated against this background, theorization of diaspora customarily has its extension in three dimensions. The first hypothesis deposes the identity of the migrant in the relationship which he/she has with the members of such communities that are formed by migrated subjects. The second conjecture is a further continuation of this relationship and it includes a sense of empathy, fostered not only for the diasporic members who are living in the same nation-state, but also for those living beyond the boundaries. The third postulation directs its interest towards homeland, and attempts to figure out the impact of its lateral connection. While closely reading into these dimensions and others, this research work intends to locate the crux of diaspora sentiment as well to display the prevailing contradictions.

Keywords: Postcolonial, diaspora, hybrid, multicultural, migration, epistemology, transition, identity, nation-state.

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Works related to diaspora witnessed a decisive groundswell during 1990s and the following years. The communities falling under the caption of diaspora grew rapidly in number and have been growing consistently ever since. The discipline gets further diversified when heterogeneous practices like queer theory, where sexuality becomes a tool to test the belief of belonging; or economic networking theory, which looks into economic output and entrepreneurial networks; get assimilated within the rubric of diaspora. Etymologically the word 'Diaspora' refers to the dispersal of seeds but the incident that impregnated this term with widespread significance was the exile of the Jews from the city of Jerusalem to the city of Babylon and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem in 6th century BCE. The exile of the Jews is thus the prototype of diasporic struggles. The involvement of a chimera of land that was later made reality by political interventions led to claim of association between people of assorted nationalities. The prototypical model of diaspora then involves involuntary migration,

sense of sacrifice and the improbability of reclamation of the roots. Craving for the attainable yet distant space, constitutes the core area of attention in this model.

Robin Cohen has designated a set of attributes as imperative for classifying a piece of work as diaspora—dispersal and scattering (from a homeland); collective trauma (while in the homeland); cultural flowering (while away); a troubled relationship with the majority (while away); a sense of community transcending national frontiers (home and away); and promoting a return movement (away to home). In addition to this Cohen also identifies five types of diasporic communities—victim (African and Armenian); labour (Indian); trade (Chinese and Lebanese); imperial (British); and cultural (Caribbean). Such a typology pretends to present a metanarrative accommodating all types of migrations and habitations. Such a scheme is reductionist—limiting Indian diaspora to labour experiences; and exclusive—

overlooking numerous other aspects that collectively constitute diaspora narrative. Steven Vertovec provides with another frame of reference to apprehend the dimension of diaspora. He speaks of three types—diaspora as social form; diaspora as a type of consciousness; and diaspora as a mode of cultural production (278). Such a classification hinges upon triumvirate factors—international sphere for upkeep of transnational identity; the place of relocation; and the state from where the immigrant has come.

All of these categories are underpinned by different theorists as the prime impetus behind diaspora writing in particular, and diaspora sensibilities in general. While homeland orientation has been considered to be the crux of diaspora by critics like William Safran; James Clifford is of the opinion, that lateral connections between different groups constitute the main body of diaspora. Apart from these two views, there is another aspect advocated by theorists like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy who primarily foreground the element of hybridity in the diaspora communities. Such an abundant diversity prompts towards the basic poser that what could be the one most substantial force behind the diaspora sentiment and how could we identify it? Paying a close heed to all these dimensions, this research work intends to discern the root cause while reading into the contradictions of the other ideas.

Replication of territory-centric cultural practices in the new land obliquely overrides the probability of nation-bound diasporic identity and unsettles any concept built on the rationale of homeland as located within a fixed cartographical boundary. Once relocated, the immigrant is no longer a subject to a single nationality/Identity. Leela Gandhi, in her book, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* writes, “. . . in the face of the economic and electronic homogenization of the globe, national boundaries are redundant or—at least—no longer sustainable in the contemporary world” (125).

Any category wise bifurcation of diasporic community involves the problem of overlapping. Sociologically any identity could be integrated with a community only when a common code of culture is shared by its members. But within diaspora communities any association based one metacultural belonging is absent. A metacultural belonging of the diasporic community is more of a hypothetical concept because it does not breed out of the customs practiced within a community but from the voices given by the “split-space” diaspora writings, which Bhabha calls ‘inscription’:

...The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*... the *in-between* space- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture... And by exploring this Third

Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves. (38-39)

The homeland theory's evasive insinuations, regarding diaspora, as a stable and constant phenomenon is in itself invalid because, the act of migration does not come to an end with the accomplishment of a single relocation but continues with an ongoing dispersal. And so progresses a never-ending act of affiliations and enlightenment, which Arjun Appadurai terms as “*ideoscapes*” (296). While endorsing James Clifford's argument, Robert Dixon in his article, ‘Travelling in the West: The Writing of Amitav Ghosh’ writes:

...Diaspora cultures are not oriented towards lost origins or homelands, but are produced by ongoing histories of migrations and transnational cultural flows. Once we begin to focus on these inter-cultural processes, the notion of separate discreet cultures evaporates; we become aware that all cultures have long histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations. (11)

But this Dixonian approach is restrictive as he theorizes diaspora considering it merely as an act of changing one's locality, and denies any emotional implications attached to it. What has gone missing in going overboard in selecting one ‘The’ formula behind diaspora has been aptly captured by Rogers Brubaker, who subsumes dispersion, homeland orientation and boundary maintenance as the core of the issue. Robin Cohen further qualifies this stance and while granting dispersion historical importance, considers homeland orientation as the most diverse force behind diaspora. Homeland orientation is further inextricably attached to memories. Memory operates as a binding force that collaborates the past with present. If the idea of home is taken into account with respect to location it predominantly brings into scene a self, which is indistinguishably attached to community identity. Once shifted out of its locale, this community identity faces two basic challenges; the first of being “deteritorialized” and the other of synchronizing oneself with cross-border phenomenon such as nationality, ethnicity, race and citizenship. It is even more confusing for the generations that are born of migrant parents in a migrated land. This generation too has memories of the homeland; but this sense of homeland is either a utopia or otherwise, and their memories are either inherited fairytales or live practices of weirdness. Jhumpa Lahiri has been particularly successful in capturing such types of complexities that are born out of conflicting endowments: “...her {Lahiri's} novels are haunted by protagonists struggling to make peace with their complicated and, often conflicting legacies” (Ghoshal, 12). But the first generation of diasporic individuals treat homeland in completely different fashion. For them it is safely locked in their memories, which they often revisit, although sometimes as mere courtesy. As Rushdie in his *Step Across This Line* says:

You ask me about that country whose details
 now escape me,

I don't remember its geography, nothing of its
 history.

And should I visit it in memory,

It would be as I would a past lover,

After years, for a night, no longer restless with
 passion,

With no fear of regret.

I have reached that age when one visits the
 heart merely as a courtesy. (372)

The identity of the majority of diasporic individuals is often dwindling between present 'here' and past 'there', between the countries they have left, and the country they have arrived to. This predicament of belonging is succinctly voiced out in Rushdie's *East, West*:

I, too, have ropes around my neck. I have them to this day, pulling me this way and that, East and West, the nooses tightening, commanding, choose, choose. I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoos, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Doyou hear? I refuse to choose. (211)

At the same time nostalgia for homeland is also constitutive of the identity politics of diaspora; as Avtar Brah emphasizes while distinguishing a 'homing desire' and wanting to return to a specific geographical location and condition. The distinction that she draws between 'homing desire' and the 'desire of homeland' is reflective of the variance between the desire to return home and a more subliminal desire for homeland. This dichotomy is further accentuated in the very lifestyle of these diasporic individuals who demonstrate a queer mélange of materialistic preferences of the migrated land and an emotional connection with the homeland. Rushdie concisely captures this disposition in *Imaginary Homelands*:

The effect of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than in places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves- because they are so defined by others-by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having expected several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier. (124-125)

From this view of Rushdie, it becomes clear that he lays premium on the experience of dispersal and associates it with a rare kind of epistemological gain, rendering a deeper, enriching and complex view of the wider world. But there is another opinion expressed by Theodor Adorno which incorporates home, alienation and morality. Adorno says in *Minima Moralia*, "it is also a part of morality not to be at home in one's own home". What is being aimed in this view is that alienation from homeland has a twofold result, the first being a deeper orientation towards homeland, and the latter is skepticism towards normalization. The deeper chord which Adorno's statement touches is that, if it is a morality not to be at home in one's own home then it is equally not required to be an immigrant to feel the creative heat. It is then crucial that, as the diasporic individuals do not have a very clear cut demarcation of homeland and it exists only in their memory they must find out a substitute of it, a role carried out by their writing. Adorno says, "For a man who no longer has a homeland writing becomes a place to live" (87).

In this way a writer creates a country for himself and a homeland for refuge. This homeland has its features according to the wish and imagination of the author, who also happens to be a diasporic individual. Rushdie speaks of his India in *Imaginary Homelands* while describing his novel *Midnight's Children*, "What I was actually doing was a novel of memory, so that my India was just that: 'my' India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions"(10).

Again this 'writerly' belonging is not available to all and even if it is, there are times when it refuses any calm to the anxiety of non-belonging, and then the need to peep back into the past becomes even more crucial, "it reminds me that it's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 9).

Although there have been considerable differences in the opinions of thinkers with regards to the applicability of the term diaspora to diverse works and communities, notwithstanding the minute discrepancies among these communities and their representative works, the entire notion of diaspora can be referred to a society identified by the migration from the endemic location; cherishing the memories of old days, politico-historical affiliation to the origin and consistent craving to return to homeland.

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Corresponding Author

Prashant Kumar*

M.A., NET, Patna University

E-Mail – prashantsharan133@gmail.com