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"HOMING THE DIASPORA': SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF DISLOCATION,
ACCULTURATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN DIASPORIC FICTIONS"

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ABSTRACT

Expatriates and immigrants perennially suffer a state of indeterminacy, tentativeness, 'in-betweenness' and a host of other emotions associated with migration. Displaced and dislocated from the land of their ancestors, the immigrants become victims of loneliness, alienation and marginalization. Consequently, therefore, they always remain in the hunt for a true home. But that dream for a true home, that complete identification with the host country, that wholeness of living experience remain ever cherished for. In comparison with the first generation expatriates, the later generation expatriates feel that indeterminacy more acutely. In the early days transnational transportation was not very easy. Therefore, they were to some extent forced to adapt themselves to the changed socio-cultural contexts. As they had fewer opportunities to visit their motherland, they were led to identify themselves with their new land. Besides, their relatively better material prosperity compensated for their lost home. But the later generations of expatriates found themselves in a precarious state. As they could easily shuttle in and out of their both 'homes'-the native and the adopted, they failed to form an emotional attachment with the country of their adoption. Caught between home and homelessness, they lived unhappy lives. Their desire for the root was immensely strong, but at the same time they realized the utter futility of undertaking the project because that would be a step backward. That is why they chose the unhappy alternative of leading a life of material success, though they could not discard the feeling of exclusion and alienation. This phenomenon is universal and applies to any diasporic community anywhere in the world. This also points to the fact that there is a huge problem of acculturation caused by geographical and socio-cultural dislocation and that leads to question one's identity, one's sense of belonging, one's affiliation. Two of the ways in which the diasporic writers seek to counter their problem of alienation are- resistance and accommodation. The writers also seek refuge in their imaginary homelands that breaks all the barriers of boundary. Though they know these are mere wistful thoughts, they help fight their alienation and identity crisis. In modern times of complexity the cartography of diaspora has got blurred making the problems of acculturation, dislocation and identity crisis all the more acute. Attempts should be made to 'glocalise' the global and instill greater transnational understanding and mobilization among all the nation states.

Key Words: acculturation, home, diaspora, expatriate, identity crisis

Introduction

The expatriates are like migratory birds; they transported themselves to new lands in the expectation of a fairer weather. The only difference between the birds and the expatriates is that while the migratory birds do not leave any trace whatsoever of the new land behind, the expatriates vacillate between the two poles-one the remembered home and the other the new social envelope. This double affiliation greatly aggravates their tension and they become victims of rootlessness, marginalization and alienation.

The obsessive engagement with the topic 'home' and the clusters of emotions associated with it have been one of the marked features of the writings of V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Vijay Lakshmi, Hanif Quereshi and a host of other writers. The attempts to search one's root, to recover the lost home have been the ontological necessity of the people of the diaspora. This craze for home is not a nostalgic looking back. On the other hand, this determines his future course of action. It should be remembered that the identity crisis that expatriation entails is not an essence. It is rather a construct. It is a product of complex interactions between socio-cultural roots of individuals and their different ideologies, discourses, power-relations that surround them.

As people of different ages take different strategies to cope up with their existential problems, so also different generation of expatriates reveal different attitudes in tackling critical issues pertaining to home and migration. The growing trends of globalization, intercontinental transportation and major ethnic migrations following the break-up of the Empire, infusion of the consumer-based culture has radically changed the mindset of the immigrants. A serious student of diasporic literature could perceive that there is a marked difference between the diasporic literature of say 1970s and the diasporic literature of say 1990s. In the early days expatriates living in different countries felt isolated from his native home and was forced to consider the country he is living in as his own country. But the unprecedented growth of science and technology and transportation has brought the two worlds very close to each other and ,therefore, the immigrants can easily get connected to their 'home' while living in his second 'home' thousands of miles away. This positive development, however, has some unhealthy symptoms. The later generation of people finds it hard to assimilate themselves into their new environment and thus a crisis ensues. Those expatriates have the opportunity to go back to their roots but they realize that that would be a step backward. Thus, they become victims of identity crisis and end their life in doldrums. This is best exemplified in Jhumpa Laheri's "The Namesake" (2003). It tells the story of Gogol Ganguli, the American born son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. The unwelcoming American society takes Gogol as its victim and he tries utmost to break free from the shackles of Indian trends. The clash of cultures results in the submission of loyalty to both India and America. The first generation teaches the second generation about the homeland, but for them the ideas are complicated. Even though Ashoke and Ashima attempt to cling to their roots, for Gogol and a lot of people like him it is very difficult to take a strong decision.

In the novels of both Anita Desai and her Man Booker award winning daughter Kiran Desai we see characters which are forever in the hunt for a home. Anita Desai's diasporic fictions are in a sense existentialist study and point to the fact that the problem of identity is a universal problem and it knows no boundary. People of all ages and all times suffer identity crisis if they fail to acculturate themselves to the socio-cultural needs of the existing society. In "Journey to Ethaca" we see that two lovers Matteo and Sophie, dissatisfied with their bourgeois upbringing, come to India in quest of spiritual fulfillment. While pragmatic Sophie is disillusioned with life of hardships in an ashram in India, Matteo sees only the purity of the ascetic life. Matteo's belief leads him away from Sophie and brings him closer to Mother, a charismatic guru. Ultimately all the three characters come to learn that wisdom lies not in thinking about destination, but in the journey itself. In "Baumgartner's Bombay" Kiran Desai deals with the problems of acculturation of a migrant Jew in India. Desai's "Bye Bye Blackbird" is about migrant Indians in England in the 1960s. It is at bottom a critique on the problem of acculturation. In it Adit lives in London with his English wife Sarah. Dev is a newly arrived migrant from India. Adit has adjusted well with his new adopted country and has allayed his sense of being loneliness by being nonchalant. Dev is critical of Adit's attitude. Dev has more reasons to be lonely. Ultimately Dev's loneliness stops haunting him and he decides to stay in England. Adit starts suffering and decides to return to his home in India with Sarah. In the works of the Asian Britons like Hanif Quereshi, Rabinder Randhawa,

Sunetra Mitra and others we see how the walls of 'home' break down and the narrative enters a symbolic space which is an active and ongoing process of negotiation with the present. The Indian American novelist and short story writer Bharati Mukherjee's works reflect immigrants' concerns. In her novel "Tiger's Daughter" (1972) recounts the befuddled experiences of an Indian woman who fails to make compromise between her Indian and American culture.

Though Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" has allegorical and magic real dimensions, it provides an apt critique on the fate that awaits the migrants. It is a tale that comprises the eventful yet lonely life of Saleem Sinai, born with telepathic power exactly at the same time India got her Independence. Thus Saleem's fate gets entangled with that of India. Saleem's power starts waning when his family starts disintegrating and begins a series of migrations and the subcontinent becomes restless due to wars. Saleem suffers amnesia and enters a quasi-mythological exile in the jungles of Sunderban. Perhaps nowhere in the diasporic fiction we do find so many mutilations of identity of a single character. The experience of geographical dislocation as well as socio-cultural sense of displacement is exquisitely portrayed in V.S.Naipaul's "Half a Life". The protagonist Willie Chandran who arrived in England in the sixties to make a mark in life, suffers identity crisis. His pain is only too evident when we see him saying to Ana: "I can't live your life any more. I want to live my own." (Naipaul. 136)

The same kind of experience is narrated to us by Rushdie in his first novel "Grimus" which deals with the plight of dislocation and alienation. In it the central character Flapping Eagle who arrives in a new land fails in his attempt at assembling himself into the culture of the country. In order to defuse the loneliness and alienation that their fractured identity has thrust upon them some of the people of the diasporic fiction play the 'long distance nationalists'. Benedict Anderson in his article "New Left Review" argued:

While technically a citizen of the state in which he comfortably lives, but to which he may feel little attachment, he finds it tempting to play identity politics by participating (via propaganda, money, weapons, any way but voting) in the conflicts of his imagined Heimat-now only fax time away. But the citizenless participation is inevitably non-responsible- our hero will not have to answer for, or pay the price of, the long-distance politics he undertakes. (Anderson. 3-13)

But after steps taken by the host countries pertaining to the 'securitization' of migration such steps are used with caution by the immigrant parties. The 9/11 War on Terror focussed on the 'home grown terrorists' or immigrant.

Sometimes lies become more necessary than truths. In Maxim Gorki's "Lower Depths", there is a poor Siberian woman who keeps herself always alive by telling that there is a better world awaiting them. If the man is told that there is no such thing as imagined land, the man would commit suicide. Such imagined lands are places that revive the expatriates even if only momentarily. According to Andre Brink, such a land exists in the artist himself. Louis Borges also rejected the reality that he encountered in favour of the one imagined.

Rushdie's "Shame" is the story of an expatriate which also deals with the shamelessness and greed of the ruling elite class. In it Rushdie says:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muted into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably meant that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind. (Rushdie: 10)

Like Rushdie, Vijay Lakshmi as in his "Pomegranate Dreams and Other Stories" often transfers her new home and locates an imaginary land. The narrator of "Distances" exists in such a borderland. After dispatching off the children to their school and her husband to his office, she finally has the house to herself, though this house is not her 'home'. Pointing to the post-war- literary writing, the famous critic Theodore Adorno had once said about the writers of the diaspora thus: "In his text, the writer sets up house....For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live in." (Adorno.08)

Both Lakshmi and Rushdie create imaginary spaces to build their homes in an alien land. Thus in Vijay Lakshmi's fictions mango grounds appear in an island in the U.S.A. In U.K. a jasmine flower blossoms. We see that to counter the problem of home and identity, the writers resolve to a binary solution-resistance or accommodation. Rushdie's fictions emblemize resistance and Lakshmi's accommodation and adaptation.

Francis Fukuyama in his "The End of History"(1992) points out how the Muslim countries have been alienated from the other nation states and how the 9/11 incident has given the Western countries an opportunity to segregate a whole Muslim community deforming them into diasporas. According to Fukuyama what actually propels mankind to act is the desire for 'recognition' and consequently, nations with progressively greater facility has to recognize and give legitimacy making redundant the rivalry that had stoked the conflicts in the past. Though not in the same intensity and degree, the black 'diaspora' in the States, Indian diaspora in Fiji or West Indies or Chinese diaspora in Taiwan have experienced hostility from the majority.

Thus we see that there is a greater need of embracing multiple identities. As the increasing number of migrants maintain tie with his home nation, it has become a necessity to give them legitimacy and allow them a freedom to deal with both the states-the adopted one and the old one. S. Khagram and P. Levitt observed:

The modern nation-state system did not even exist until after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. In the early 1900s, there were barely 130 sovereign states; the remaining 65 percent of the world's political entities were and protectorates. Three-quarters (about 1500 of the countries recognized today came into existence in the last century. Therefore, studying contemporary social life by looking only at relations and processes enacted within or across presumably bound social units, whether they are localities, regions, nation-states or empires, necessarily come up short. (Khagram and Levitt. 34)

Conclusion

With modernization and globalization the world is getting transformed into a village where everyone can mingle and express themselves. Therefore, each and every community is gradually coming out of their narrow mindset and embracing the expatriates as their own brothers and sisters. But instances of attacks on the diasporic communities are also spoiling the attempts of the mingling of diverse cultures. So, greater cross-cultural exchange or transnationalism is the need of the day. Diasporic fictions and short story writers like Caryl Philips, Bharati Mukherjee, Hanif Quereshi, Benjamin Zephaniah, Ana Castillo, Ramesh Gunesequera, Sunetra Mitra et al show how diasporic fictions inscribe hybridity, multiplicity on formerly orthodox statutes of different nations and states and speak for greater transnational understanding. Bill Ashcroft is of the view that transnational is much more than the international. It might more properly be conceived as a relation between states. Ashcroft cogently put forward the view that:

Transnation is the embodiment of transformation: the interpretation of the state as the focus of power, the erasure of simple binaries of power, and the circulation of the struggle between global and local. But most importantly, it is the fluid, while migrating outside of the state begins within the nation. The transnational is an 'in between' space which contains no one day finite people, nation or even community, but is everywhere. (Ashcroft: 04)

The migration experience is as much about migrants as it is about non-migrants because they occupy the same socio-political space. The social fields within which migration takes place are multilayered as well as multi-sited. The horizontal ties between sending and receiving sites need to be understood within the context of the national, regional, global connections within which they arise. A greater transnational understanding is necessary to cope with the problem of alienation and identity crisis. There is a need to acknowledge the identity based not only on options in their home or host countries but on their connections to co-ethnics, co-professionals, co-religionists around the world and multiple pathways towards simultaneous incorporation.

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