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Mapping Instability and Diversity of Diaspora: A Theoretical Perspective

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The term 'diaspora' has multiple layers of meaning in academic circles today. From the original meaning of large scale- migration of people due to religious persecution, it has now come to refer to any movement of people from one land to another. In fact, often it is used as synonym for migration or immigration and the diasporic is equated to an expatriate. The Indian diaspora can probably be trace to ancient times when Buddhist monks travelled to remote corners of Asia. However today it is customary to refer to the 19th and 20th centuries as the period of Indian diaspora when Indians in large numbers went to other countries in search of job opportunities- either as skilled and unskilled labourers to West Asia or as professionals and semi-professionals to industrially advanced countries. That this migration is made by personal choice is a fact that has to be borne in mind when the term diaspora is used today.

The word 'diaspora' has been taken from the Greek, meaning "to disperse" which originally referred to the dispersal of Jews as consequence of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem. The Jews were driven from their homeland and their dispersion became a mass migration. They spread across the Mediterranean. They reached Spain and Portugal and even far off Poland and Russia. Wherever they went they distinguished themselves in various fields. After the conquest of Granada and their consequent expulsion from Spain, they embarked on long voyages across the Atlantic and landed in Venice in Holland and on the African cost. History is replete with the horrors of organized violence against this race. Facing persecution unparalleled in history, the Jews not only survived but also preserved their racial and cultural integrity. This is the only case of diasporas returning to their ancient homeland. They also revived their ancient language Hebrew. The Jewish diaspora is therefore the original model for all studies of diaspora. However, the restoration of Israel is an exceptional case of realization of diaspora's dream of a return to their homeland. Generally, the diasporas can never return to their homeland because 'homeland' for them is a series of mental images often highly eulogized. Therefore, when a physical return to the homeland lays bare the chasm between their image and the visible reality, it fails to produce a mental equivalent of their physical return. Their alienation is thus doubled. Hydra-headed questions of ethnicity, nationality, and migrancy only add to its complications. It is impossible to put forward an empirical definition of diaspora. Diasporic space is never one's natural space. It is a space that has to be painfully negotiated between the over whelming contradictions of ethnicity, culture, religion, nationalities and nationalism.

The purpose of the present paper is to look at the unstable, varied and diverse phenomenon of diaspora in the context of Globalisation. Various theorists such as Robin Cohen, William Safran, Khachig Tololyan, Steven Vertovec, and James Clifford have proposed criteria for what constitutes a diaspora, a term that has become increasingly difficult to define. Precisely because of the breadth of its meanings, this paper explores the term 'diaspora'.

Safran notes that "[t]oday, "diaspora" and, more specifically, 'diaspora community' seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people-expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout*

court" (83). No longer does "diaspora" exclusively denote the exiled Jewish community, what Safran calls the "ideal type" (84), but the term now denotes any community that disperses from a single homeland. Some authors have opened up the concept of "diaspora" even further. For example, Walter Conner redefines "diaspora," applying the term to "that segment of a people that lives outside the homeland" (quoted in Tololyan 15). In response to Conner's redefinition, Tololyan writes: "It is easy enough to claim this for the first generation of any group of immigrants, they bear the homeland's and nation's marks in body and speech and soul. But in what sense does the fourth generation of Japanese Americans or tenth generation of African Americans whom we now call a diaspora remain a segment of the people in the homeland?" (29). Tololyan goes on to assert that in order to be recognizable as a segment, it is necessary to exist as a collectivity

... To participate in a community, diasporic individuals must not only have identities that differ from those prescribed by the dominant hostland culture, but also diaspora-specific social identities that are constructed through interaction with the norms, values, discourses and practices of that diaspora's communal institutions ... A diaspora is never merely an accident of birth, a clump of individuals living outside their ancestral homeland, each with a hybrid subjectivity, lacking collective practices that underscore (not just) their difference from others, but also their similarity to each other, and their links to the people on the homeland. (3-7)

Different theorists use the term "diaspora" in different ways. William Safran(1991) argued that the concept of 'diaspora' is linked to those communities that share some or all of the following characteristics:

(a) the original community has spread from a homeland to two or more countries; they are bound from their disparate geographical locations by a common vision, memory or myth about their homelands;(b)they have a belief that they will never be accepted by their host societies and therefore develop their autonomous cultural and social needs;(c)they or their descendants will return to the homeland should the conditions prove favourable;(d)they should continue to maintain support for homeland and therefore the communal consciousness and solidarity enables them to continue these activities (83-4).

The above list, although a useful one, is quite limited and limiting as it clearly revolves around the relationship of the diasporic group with its homeland and therefore plays down other important relationships and linkages that inform the diasporic condition. Other theorists such as Robin Cohen (1997) have used the same prescriptive formula of constructing an ideal type of a 'diaspora' as a vehicle of expanding the definition to include a broader range of phenomena. Cohen thus proposes that perhaps these features need to be adjusted and that four other elements should be added to the list proposed by Safran. According to him, therefore, a definition of 'diaspora' needs to:

(a) be able to include those groups that scatter voluntarily or as a result of fleeing aggression, persecution or extreme hardship;(b)take into account the necessity for a sufficient time period before any community can be described as a diaspora. According to Cohen, there should be indications of a transnational community's strong links to the past that thwart assimilation in the present as well as the future ;(c) recognize more positive aspects of diasporic communities. For instance, the tensions between ethnic, national and transnational identities can lead to creative

formulations;(d)acknowledge that diasporic communities not only form a collective identity in the place of settlement or with their homeland, but also share a common identity with members of the same ethnic communities in other countries.(24)

Cohen has clearly attempted to move the debate forward by not only reemphasizing the transnational character of diasporas but also by pointing out the significance of their ‘transnationality’ in the production of creative tensions and syntheses. His definition allows for wider application to varied situations.

What emerges from such formulations is that the diasporic subjects have homogeneous, collective identities bound together by shared feelings of alienation and having a very strong nostalgic longing for the place of origin. However, as Clifford points out, we must be wary of constructing our working definition by recourse to an “ideal type” because even “pure” forms “are ambivalent, even embattled over basic features” (306). Moreover, discussions of paradigmatic cases obviously allude to the Jewish diaspora. Grounding himself in a “nationalist space”, Makarand Pranjape also takes almost similar position when he suggests that:

the diaspora “ must involve a cross-cultural or cross-civilizational passage. It is the only such a crossing that results in the unique consciousness of the diasporic. In other words, there has to be a source country and a target country, a source culture and a target culture, a source language and a target language, a source religion and a target religion, and so on. Also, the crossing must be forced, not voluntary; otherwise, the passage will only amount to an enactment of desire-fulfilment. Or, even if voluntary, the passage must involve some significant tension between the source and the target cultures.” (6)

The first-generation diaspora gravitate towards the homeland, exhibiting what Steven Vertovec defines as “diaspora consciousness.” He observes:

Particularly in works concerning global diasporas (especially within Cultural Studies), there is considerable discussion surrounding a kind of ‘diaspora consciousness’ marked by dual or multiple identifications. Hence there are depictions of individuals’ awareness of decentred attachments, of being simultaneously ‘home away from home,’ ‘here and there’ or, for instance, British and something else ... [T]he majority seem to maintain several identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation ... Further aspects of diasporic consciousness are explored by Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, who suggest that whatever their form or trajectory, ‘diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and attachment.’ (450-51)

The second generation does not exhibit “diaspora consciousness,” but more of a “transnational consciousness”. “Transnational” is a more accurate descriptor than “diaspora” for the second generation’s consciousness because these characters did not undergo a major dispersion, are not fixated on a lost “homeland,” and feel inclined towards transnational movement. The second generation maintains little attachment to any place, opting for a nomadic rather than stable lifestyle. As Arif Dirlik has put it:

The new diasporas have relocated their Self there and Other here, and consequently borders and boundaries have been confounded. And the flow has become at once homogenizing; some groups share in common global culture regardless of location

while others take refuge in cultural legacies that are far apart from one another as they were at the origin of modernity. (352)

Therefore the words exile, diaspora, migration, dislocation, deracination and displacement are the leading metaphors used to express not only disorientation but also ideological and existential fragmentation.

A survey of the terminological provenance and theoretical genealogies of diaspora studies reveals how the conflicted territories of home-location, nation-postnation, inside-outside, citizen-stranger, pure-hybrid, roots-routes, centre-periphery, sameness-difference, subject-object etcetera intersect and collide at the aporetic intersection where diaspora finds its multi-vocal and multi-referential signification. These binaries bring with them traces of their past configurations also. Their affiliations with poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism add still greater complexity to the already multi-accented term diaspora. This deliriously overflowing complexity to the term diaspora is responsible for its appropriation and recuperation in a variety of disciplines and discourses. This complexity threatens to bring about disintegrating dispersal of diaspora, diasporization of diaspora, so, to say, as Rogers Brubaker points out:

As the term has proliferated, its meaning has stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted. This has resulted in what one might call a “diaspora” diaspora, a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space. (1)

Migration has long been part of human history and has always entailed the creation of multiple affiliations and identities. In an interview with Susheila Nasta, Salman Rusdie refers to the process of migration as ‘the actual condition of change through movement’. The poet Meena Alexander speaks of it as: ‘A harmony that underwrites a poetics of dislocation where multiple places are joined together, the whole lit by desire that recuperates the past, figures forth the future.’

The interaction and comingling of the cultures no doubt leads to further conflicts but it certainly opens new routes and modes of thinking for the individual and group identity of diasporas and guides them to outgrow the stereotyped experiences of uprootedness, displacement and marginalization. Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall and a few other theorists have explored new modes of diasporic identities and belongingness because they feel that the discourses and narratives of nationalism, ethnicity or race (which are modes of belonging and place the individual in the certainty of roots) are not suited any more to the present time where the migrants are thinking in different ways about their relations to the new “place”, “home” and their past. Since there has come a considerable change in the outlook and identities of diaspora with the changed global economic, political and cultural scenario, the identities of diasporic individuals and communities can not be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all want to return or at all cost must return.

Diasporas inhabit liminal, interstitial spaces and their inter-subjective and intercultural experiences constitute them as hyphenated, hybrid subjects. This hybridity is not natural and organic hybridity which fuses and blends and reconciles the codes of culture, race, colour, ethnicity, and gender which inform it; it is self reflexive hybridity and is an outcome of a

conscious negotiation with a contestation between its informing elements. The hyphenated existence of the diasporas draws attention to the fluid identities which are continuously reconfigured in ongoing negotiation with the changing political environment. According to Stuart Hall, the diaspora experience:

is defined, not by essence or purity but by recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity" and diaspora identity "are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."(276)

This indeterminacy of the fluid diasporic identities, in the words of Jacqueline Lo, disrupts neat 'homology between cultural, racial and national identity'. The hyphen also draws attention toward the suppressed histories of cross-cultural and cross-racial relations. This self reflexive hybridity, in Bhabha words, an "insurgent act of cultural translation" (7), is rife with the subversive potential to unsettle hegemonic relations as it focuses on processes of negotiation and contestation between cultures. Hybridity and hyphenation "offer an alternative organizing category for a new politics of representation which is informed by an awareness of diaspora and its contradictory, ambivalent and generative potential"(10). For this reason Bhabha thinks that the in-between(third) space occupied by the diasporic subject is pregnant with creative possibilities: "...[I]t is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence"(7). For Avtar Brah the "diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dislocation as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed..." (208). According to Brah, the 'diaspora space' is a highly contested site.

The lure of eclectic hybridity, however, in its equation with fusion music, fusion of cuisines, fusion of cultures, as it obtains in postmodern pastiche culture does tend to empty the term 'hybridity' of its political content and historical specificity and exposes it to the charge of occluding the pain and grief of living in diaspora. The hyphenated diasporic subject practices and embodies difference relationally and non-hierarchically.

The predicament of the modern man has been to cross-over geographical, national and cultural boundaries. This displacement and dis (location) has assumed a new currency in challenging and contesting traditional essentialist notions of culture as being essentialist and fixed, rooted into one specific cultural location. In crossing over borders, the diasporic subject has carried his identity transnationally and translated it into new cultural terrains therefore his identity is a process of evolving or becoming. Through this journey he conjures up new meanings reflecting his sensory reality which is fragmentary with multiples of histories, nationalities and cultures. 'Diaspora' has traditionally been understood as a yearning for a lost home. Interpretations of migration as loss of home and familiars however are no longer current and instead have given way to ideas of diaspora as communities of simultaneously local and pluralistic identities, ethnic and transnational affiliations and celebrations of cosmopolitanism.

In the context of current diaspora discourse, led by scholars like Bhabha and Vertovec, 'diaspora' can be viewed today as a 'place' which can create multiplicities of cosmopolitanism, produced and reproduced through communities of people, moving physically conceptually between spaces, albeit through a chaotic order. In such a context 'diaspora' may be a socio-

cultural label applied to populations that, intentionally, do not occupy conventional territory. They may thus be considered 'de-territorialized' or 're-territorialized' when they move from an original land to an adopted one and build expatriate or ethnic enclaves in the land of their adoption. Their emotional, social and cultural affiliations transect borders of nation and, indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that they form global communities across geographical, political, social and cultural boundaries.

Vertovec refers to diaspora as 'social form' and a 'type of consciousness' (7). He suggests that diasporic populations retain a collective memory or vision of their original homeland and continue to relate personally or vicariously to that vision. It follows that their conscious identity is importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. Extrapolating on this idea of diaspora as social consciousness, contemporary feminist diasporic scholar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, speaks of 'feminism without borders' in which diaspora is border-crossing. She argues for a trans-cultural, feminist identity that seeks "The simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and the emancipator potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders.'"(2)

To these scholars diaspora does not imply universality but the movements of ideas, images and people, who carry ideas and memories with them. The notion of diaspora as a concept of 'emigration' (a voluntary movement away from an original centre and towards a specific chosen destination, based on the hope for a better life in that destination), rather than 'dispersion' (forced removal from a locus, implying lack of choice and resulting in widespread wandering, as in the dispersion of Jewish peoples, the original Diaspora), has evolved to signify an identity space that words such as 'exile', 'migrant', 'immigrant', 'alien', 'refugee' and 'foreigner' cannot claim. In its contemporary usage, 'diaspora' indicates movement and dynamism, origin and belonging, community and culture, along with loneliness and isolation, collective nostalgia and community memory.

The Indian living in a host country continues to live in a 'sandwich world.' Refusing to give up his cultural roots, he still hopes for assimilation and acculturation in his new land. He does not sever relationships with his homeland. Yet most societies today are multi-cultural societies and the writer living and writing in such a society is affected at multiple levels by both the cultures. Such a writer is constantly in a state of flux. The question of identity and the dynamics of relationship affect the writer. The writer reflects, analyses, criticizes that particular environment and the world around him even when he does not become a part of it. The expatriate writer lacks a shared memory which is often the basis of the writing in one country, one nation. Many writers often disclaim all attempts to be labeled a part of the diaspora- as they want to become an intrinsic part of the land of residence or adoption, probably because the image of a minority is often suspect. The writer may feel no crisis of identity or alienation or depression or frustration especially if one is a second-generation expatriate. Often relations between original inhabitants and the diasporic become complicated. As in an essay "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie wrote:

Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, or to look back, even at the risk of being mutated 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 means 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 homeland, Indias of the mind.” (10)

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