

Vol. 6, Issue-1
February 2015

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English



6th Year of Open Access

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Home and Away: The Dialectics of Diasporic Identity

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What is a diaspora? Obviously, given the ambivalent positions that the diasporas hold straddling two worlds with an experience of dislocation common to them whatever be the nature of their movement from the home country, it is not an easy job to arrive at a definition which could suitably sum up their situation. The application of the word is no longer limited to the classic case of the Jews. Now it has acquired the status of a protean term or an umbrella concept encompassing various forms of dislocations which were previously explained under different heads as migrants, expatriates, exiles, refugees etc. But this would be an oversimplification to huddle them together under one category and not to explore the finer shades of variance within diaspora.

The question of identity and home is central to diaspora. As diaspora is characterised with a history of dislocation, displacement and relocation, there always emerges a question of belongingness and longing for home. The notion of home or homeland itself becomes quite problematic here. What are the things which constitute a home or an identity which could be established only in relation to home? Is there a home at all or an identity which is stable and fixed? How far the idea of a home away from home can provide a sense of belonging or spoil the process of making a home in a foreign land? The answers to these questions are, of course, not as easy as they seem to be. The present paper will try to problematise the diasporic identity in the light of two seminal essays- Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands" and Vijay Mishra's "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian diaspora."

The idea of a home exists in the minds of diasporas constructed by the memories of the homeland before the time of migration and mostly it is a psychological construction produced by the question -where does one actually belong? A sense of displacement always haunts people who have moved to a place where they struggle to create a space for themselves. In their homeland they occupy a space which they call home. Home is not just a place-it is a space which allows them to enjoy freedom, safety, warmth, and recognition. They can easily share a common history and a common past with the community to which they belong. Their departure from this comfort zone is marked with a painful experience of rupture from many associations that home or the idea of home has created and has always satisfied their sense of belonging. A passport or a citizenship may provide official and legal rights to enter a foreign land and even settle there with equal rights along with its native inhabitants but acculturation is something hard to attain. The history of a shared past and its memories cannot be erased on the one hand and on the other the host country will not let the willing aspirants to easily merge and get assimilated with its culture so as to lose all distinctions and differences. In this globalised world it has become all the more difficult as the technology has virtually turned the whole world into something where space and time have been reduced to their minimum limits, even if it is in digital form. Community portals and social networking on internet thanks to the World Wide Web have contracted space to the computer or mobile screen and time to its smallest units. With such points of access and interaction available at the fingertips diasporas tend to create or reconstruct the virtual home away from home as if they were never separated from it and the focus has shifted from integration into the host culture to a strategically double dealing business where they can

externally observe the larger principles of the hostland and its policy matters so as to fit into the pattern of life there but internally they can preserve or retain their distinct cultural identity through language, rituals and other social practices in their private groups.

Rushdie in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands' writes from the vantage point of a writer and tries to emphasise the point that having left the homeland and spent a considerable length of time in a foreign country, he finds himself incapable of having a "total recall" (11) of home. In the process to recall much is lost or altered or not fully recaptured, though the urge is very much there to reclaim. The alienation from the homeland results in its gradual disappearance from the landscape of mind and in such a situation recollection is in bits and pieces, in fragments, not whole. But because they are remains, one holds them all the more precious and invaluable (12). This argument helps us understand the dilemmas and confusions that surround the precarious positions of diasporas. But Rushdie does not approve of this looking back on homeland with a wistful eye and wrapping oneself up with nostalgic cover so as to enhance the feeling of alienation further. The practice of ghettoization and making private associations among diasporas leads to further complications regarding the question of their identity. This domain that they create, blocks many avenues of healthy negotiations with the culture of the host country. The tendency to safeguard their ethnic identity which diasporas consider as essential, true and fixed, jeopardises the prospects of the assimilative process through which they could actually participate in the social practices of the hostland without a sense of bafflement or discomfiture:

[O]f all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the 'homeland'. (19)

But we need to give a second thought to the ideas put forward by Rushdie and his warning against the formation of associations and private ethnic groups among diasporas. The question that arises here is- What leads to this 'ghetto mentality'? The obvious reply to this would, of course, be that it is the unwillingness or rather the refusal of the host country to grant the diasporas the cultural recognition and acceptance as part of the cultural fabric that can weave them together as citizens of the same country. Culture shock is one of the many experiences of the dispersed people but their gradual assimilation into the pattern of life in the hostland is what can provide them with a support system or a feel of home away from home. The dilemma of dwelling could be resolved only if the policies of the hostland for the diaspora encourage the immigrants to attain a comfort level with the native culture. The conflicts arising out of the cultural confrontations can be put to rest through a model of adoption and adaption in which the hostland needs to adopt its diaspora in the true sense of the term and the diaspora need to adapt to the cultural texture of the country. This is what Rushdie seems to imply when he says:

What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concessions to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices and turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?

I do not propose to offer, prescriptively, any answers to these questions; only to state that these are some of the issues with which each of us will have to come to terms. (17-18)

Rushdie leaves us with no remedy. He wishes to see the dilemmas, doubts, uncertainties and bafflements pertaining to the question of diasporic identity by simplifying their complexity and reducing them to one general idea of an existentialist question. However, the real challenge lies in striking a balance between the cultures of the hostland and the homeland. But it would be a tight rope-walk to embark on such an enterprise with challenges and threats looming large which diasporas have to deal with. The collective memory of a shared history is something which cannot be erased completely and any sort of displacement, voluntary or forced carries with it some sense of loss which cannot be compensated. In case of the Indian diaspora, finding a home away from home becomes all the more challenging owing to the texture of the community ethos that is a typical characteristic of their cultural life as opposed to the European countries with a lifestyle governed by individualistic approach. The cultural ambience that has instilled in them a strong community sense, never allows them to be at ease in an environment where this notion of togetherness is threatened. Added to this, there is the attitude of the host land with its idea of nation which considers the natives as the real recipients of its privileges and original partakers in its story of achievement and glory excluding the outsiders. One can say that 'due to this exclusivist fantasy of what the nation is, or ought to be, a painful exclusion of the diasporic or minority subject from the host-national collectivity becomes a part of the existing socio-political order' leading 'diasporas to preserve their own regressive myths of "imaginary homelands" uncontaminated by colonial modernity'(Giri 246). Thus the diasporas stand on a shaky ground finding it really hard to maintain a balance between the shared memory of their history which they cannot push into oblivion and the distance at which the host country would keep them when it comes to the question of national glory which the people of the nation think is purely shaped by them.

Vijay Mishra in his essay "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian diaspora" looks closely at the migratory movements that formed the Indian diaspora beginning with the history of the Indian migrants who served as indentured labourers in various colonies of the British Empire to the 'new Indian diaspora' in developed countries like USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and UK. The socio-political conditions which governed the Indian indentured labourers working in South-East Asia (Malaysia, Singapore and Myanmar), in Fiji or in the West Indies create a history of exploitation with no prospects for their upward socio-economic mobility. The trauma which he associates with the diaspora is traced back to these Indian indentured labourer with an experience of severance and rupture from the homeland and the concomitant lasting sense of loss which could be, to some extent, compensated through "narratives of homeland" which are "constructed against the reality of the homelands themselves" (*Diasporic* 423). On the contrary the new diaspora armed with education and professional skills negotiates a healthy relationship between the host land and the homeland. But it does not make them free from a feeling of unease and discomfiture over being not fully able to enjoy the 'Nation Thing' along with the people of the hostland. While theoretically engaging with the question of the Indian diaspora Mishra uses the term 'imaginary' both in its Lacanian sense and Zizekian sense which is the idea of homeland as 'fantasy' and as 'Nation Thing' to form his theory of the diasporic homeland. The tendency to fall back on the idea of nation as something remembered in the image of the way one desire it to be like is what constitutes homeland for the diasporas and their absence or exclusion from the glorious past of the host country is what necessitates it:

To address real diasporas does not mean that the discourses which have been part of diaspora mythology (homeland, ancient past, return and so on) will disappear overnight. Under a gaze that threatens their already precarious sense of the 'familiar temporariness', diasporas lose their enlightened ethos and retreat into discourses of ethnic purity that are always the 'imaginary' underside of their own constructions of homeland. (*Diasporic* 426)

Rushdie's idea of 'imaginary homelands' and Mishra's theory of 'diasporic imaginary' are two positions that could be argued in relation to each other to carry this debate further. The two of them use the term 'imaginary' in the context of the idea of a home and a group of people living in displacement respectively. While Rushdie disapproves of the practice of ghettoization or group formation by diasporas as a means to preserve their ethnic identity, which he thinks leads to a continued feeling of isolation and alienation, Mishra, in order to come up with a sound theoretical position from which he could locate the Indian diaspora, considers it necessary to trace the history of dislocation of the Indian diaspora and to explore the links between the old diaspora of the early modernity and the new diaspora of the late modernity on the common ground of trauma and its heritage. He would like to consider the question in its totality and look at it also from the perspectives of the subaltern experience to have a holistic view of the real picture:

The Afghan refugee to Australia or the Fiji-Indian who is illegally ensconced in Vancouver is neither global nor (hyper) mobile. Her condition, unlike those of the upwardly mobile professionals in Silicon Valley, is not unlike those of people under indenture, for she has to work in sweatshops during graveyard shifts or, as in the case of the illegal, cannot leave Vancouver as she has no access to a passport. It is this complex diaspora story that I would want to tell with some of the privileges of the critical and self-reflexive native informant. (*Literature* 4)

While one tries to constitute the diasporic identity, one cannot leave out certain subjects from the discourse and present an idea which uncovers half the picture and keeps much of it out of view. Even if the construction of homeland will be imaginary shaped by some "homing desire" (Brah 177), which is never ever a wish to return, the doubts and uncertainties will always be there in the diasporic subjects for the very reason that they are part of a history of displacement and that they previously had a home. In case of the new generation of diaspora, one finds that the new mediums of connectivity and speedy interactions available in the modern world have only served to re-enforce the community sense and strengthened the formation of "ethnic enclave[s]" (*Literature* 14) which become a space to explore their identities:

Even as the hypermobility of postmodern capital makes borders porous and ideas get immediately disseminated via websites and search engines, diasporic subjects have shown a remarkably anti-modern capacity for ethnic absolutism. In part this is because diasporas can now re-create their own fantasy structures of homeland even as they live elsewhere. (*Literature* 17)

The recent theories tend to discuss diaspora in the celebratory spirits where the diasporic subjects are considered an ideal social formation doubly blessed and located at the "border zones where the most vibrant kind of interactions take place" (*Literature* 1). But this cannot be generally applicable to all displaced people qualified with the label 'diaspora'. The diaspora narratives traced back to the history of the displaced Indian Indentured servants reveal wounds which continue inflicting people in movements as they have been passed from

generation to generation spiritually, if not physically. Not all are fortunate enough to secure lucrative positions in the host land and even if they have been, a sense of displacement, a feeling of severance from the homeland will haunt them. At the theoretical level one could promote the idea of diaspora being the ideal democratic situation enjoying the utmost freedom to exist without boundaries or territories, but one witnesses its “irreducible complexity at the level of lived social and political expression” (*Literature* 2). The multicultural approach may help to an extent but as long as the host country keeps asking the disturbing question as Mishra informs us: “What shall we do with them?” (*Literature* 7), the urge to reclaim a lost home, even if it does not exist any longer will persist in diasporas. To conclude in the words of Makarand Paranjape:

Though mobile, even affluent, the diaporic subject can neither return to the motherland nor fully belong to the adopted country. Indeed, Mishra tends to be somewhat sceptical of the label “diaspora” being applied to anyone who considers their dislocation in happier terms. Call them immigrants, transnationals, or global people, he seems to suggest, but not diasporic. That last term is reserved for an unhappier breed, whose growing fortunes cannot really compensate for the pain they continue to suffer, the never-ending shock of severance from their object of love, an object which no longer exists in reality and can therefore never be regained. (184)

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