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## Translated Resistance to Seek Empowerment: Theorizing Female Diaspora

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Establishing a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’<sup>i</sup> Walter Benjamin gives voice to the dissident history of the postcolonial migrants who celebrate fragmentation and give a new language to the cultural and political Diaspora, their displacement and search for new centers, new locations. This very process of (re)location is deconstructive as it gives rise to a counter-narrative, challenging the Western ethnocentrism and cultural mono-polarity. The disenfranchised ‘other’ is an emergent translated resistance who seek empowerment by overcoming the trauma of dislocations. And the total process gives rise to a new fable of immigrant’s history men and women alike.

In Mukherjee’s diasporic envisioning the manifestation of self-empowerment is in the hands of the women. Her female protagonists experience the self-realization of their ‘Power,’ either forced through violence like rape as in *Jasmine* and *The Tiger’s Daughter* or the internalized conflicts leading to murdering the symbol of oppression as in *Wife*. Compared to this manifestation of female power, the women of the West lament the status of passivity and powerlessness. In spite of the freedom of expression and liberation of sexual liaisons, their position is that of a second citizen. ‘Now, woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave, the sexes have never shared the world in equality.’<sup>ii</sup> Even then the West is liberating in comparison to the obscurities and vapidness of Indian ethos which discourage woman emancipation.

Over the last few decades there has been a mass exodus of women from India to the West for different reasons. It has resulted in a new expatriate sensibility because of multiple dislocations and expatriate writing has been able to transform the stereotype of the suffering woman to an aggressive or independent one. The migratory female subject gets involved in an act of sustained self removal from her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. She is caught between cultures and this feeling of *in-betweenness* or being juxtaposed poses before her a challenge to maintain a balance between her affiliations. The trauma of displacement and dislocations result in a new narrative of identity and new discourse of female expatriation.

The varied migratory movements attempt to give some indication of the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of immigration. While ‘immigrant’ defines a location, a physical movement and a frontward attitude, ‘exile’ indicates

an unavoidable isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. The word exile evokes multiple meanings covering a variety of relationships with the mother-country such as alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context the migratory movements are governed by the movement of indentured labour and of the trading communities; the same is also governed by the pursuit of higher standard of living, opportunities for work, education and corporate service assignments among others. In the trans-cultural global context a migrant is an important postcolonial subject. Rushdie remarks:

[M]igrant is perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century [...] A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters in an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human.<sup>iii</sup>

The whole process of trans-migration results in multiple homes and diasporic spaces and a migrant, in the process of new ways of being human, suffers dislocations and acquire a non-exclusionary hybridized global identity. Yet, this multiplicity of 'homes' does not bridge the gap between 'home' – the culture of origin; and the 'world' – the culture of adoption. In such precincts of history, the boundaries have an uncanny pattern of persisting in thousand different ways, and are very often conflictual. Homi Bhabha shifts this conflict to a theoretical gain; he transforms the diasporic 'scattering' to 'gathering,'<sup>iv</sup> and thus shifts the focus from nationhood to culture and from historicity to temporality. Such hybridity cannot be contained either in hierarchical or binary structures. Others, like Rushdie turns to India, to mythologize the history. Naipaul transforms his sensibility to a perpetual homelessness, while Bissoondath rejecting the homogenization of ethnicity, projects immigration as essentially about renewal and about change. It is unjust, he points out, to expect – that the communities from which the immigrants emerge be required to stand still in time. To do so is 'to legitimize marginalization: it is to turn ethnic communities into museums of exoticism.'<sup>v</sup>

Abdul Jan Mohammed describes the expatriate's position as being one of either 'the specular border intellectual'<sup>vi</sup> or the 'syncretic border intellectual.'<sup>vii</sup> He seems to say that one finds oneself unable or unwilling to be 'at home in these societies.'<sup>viii</sup> Such intellectuals are engaged in defining other possibilities and in their position and functioning as exiles they are likely to be critical of the new culture. Citing the example of Edward Said, Jan Mohammed comments, 'Quite often his position, which allows a kind of distance from Western literature and discursive practices, permits Said a secular role — that is he is able to provide in his writing a set of mirrors allowing Western cultures to see their own structures and functions.'<sup>ix</sup>

Globalisation has produced a new structure and outline of migration and provoked conflicting structures and responses worldwide. The seemingly homogenizing effect of globalization cannot hide the different responses it has prompted in the different regions within its reach. As Avtar Brah observes, '*Home* is a mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination[...]It is a place of no-return even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of '*origin*.' <sup>x</sup>

Questions of origin and Diaspora come up with particular surface-tensions between internationalism and nationalism; the relationship between place and identity; and the ways cultures and literatures interact. In the process of diasporic cross-over new patterns of mobility are being drawn on the familiar landscape of migration and exilic exclusions. In the context of diaspora there is a process of structuring the shared identities in the making of a new subjectivity. Instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic and polyphonic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self. This is the same kind of assertiveness that is present in Brah's use of the term 'homing desire,'<sup>xi</sup> simultaneously expressing a desire to construct a home in the new diasporic location and leaving the whole concept of 'home' open to analysis and criticism. This process of a 'homing diaspora' does not imply a nostalgic desire for 'roots,' nor 'is it the same as the desire for a 'homeland'; it is realized instead as a construction of '*multi-locationality* within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries.'<sup>xii</sup>

The literature of Diaspora deals with such challenged ethnicity and provides sufficient evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted alone; the margins have also been expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space. This inevitably demands the need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural mechanics as well as the construction of a new culture born out of the transparent translation in a diasporic space. The process results in '[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition [which] are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns.'<sup>xiii</sup>

Diasporic writing is a powerful counter-narrative and is perhaps necessary to create another centre and subjectivity as against the all absorbing design of colonial authority. In the era of globalisation diaspora is a general component of contemporary world. This diasporic identity is often constructed through a negotiation with the politics of the country of settlement as well as a recasting of their relationship to the past. As the exemplary condition of late modernity, Diasporas do not tend to substantiate domination or territoriality as a prerequisite of nationhood. They inhabit and occupy the liminal spaces of the nation where the most creative interaction take place and where essentialist notions of ethnicity and belonging are distanced as against inherent specificities. Diasporic consciousness locates itself squarely in the realm of the hybrid where one can see 'Bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd.'<sup>xiv</sup> It creates a new

space and a new location of culture ‘that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.’<sup>xv</sup> According to Victor J. Ramraj:

The attachment to the ancestral homeland varies considerably among the diasporans and is inversely proportional to the degree individuals and the communities are induced to or are willing to assimilate or integrate with their new environment, or remain wedded to ancestral customs, traditions, languages and religions. Those tending towards assimilation are less concerned with sustaining ancestral ties than with coming to terms with their new environment and acquiring a new identity. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee expect the assimilation to be mutual.<sup>xvi</sup>

The term *diaspora*, first used for the Jewish migration from its homeland, is now applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. It refers to the work of exiles and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential and psychological levels. From the original particular reference to the scattering of Greek, Jewish, and Armenian people, diaspora has become a narrative to signify more metaphorical journeys of people from their initial homes to other places of dwelling and working, resulting in a divisible nature of identity. Said reflects on such cultural map of imperialism:

[I]t is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order[...]their condition articulates the tensions, irresolution, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.<sup>xvii</sup>

Different responses to migration, whether as an essential and inevitable phenomenon of globalization or a transformative consequence of political persecution, ethnic cleansing or natural disasters are articulated in literature produced in places where diasporic communities exist. The interaction between the 'host' and 'immigrant' cultures, complicated by translation, asks new questions of identity politics and the issues involved. It also problematises conventional notions of location and ethnicities, bringing to the fore an urgent need to re-explore the ways in which aesthetics, politics and ethics interconnect, and out of this intersection cultural differences delineate patterns of such intercutting subjectivities. Being an amalgamation of diverse cultural materials, backgrounds, and identities, it nevertheless differs from other types of heterogeneity,

implying at the same time a markedly asymmetrical relationship between the different elements of a given fusion. It also asks new questions of how culture and literature interact, more particularly, how the overlapping of old and new patterns of voluntary and forced migration is re-mapping cultural and identity politics.

Identity politics driven by migration, Diaspora and exile have in turn mapped literary imagination and produced literary writings of distinct characteristics. Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* states: 'Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats.'<sup>xviii</sup> This change of habitat often results in translational representation of Diaspora and displacement, both spatial and psychological. However, their diasporic condition, their sense of exile and alienation, their metaphoric existence and their efforts to seek replenishment by making symbolic returns to their origins bind all this writing into a unity. Rushdie comments that migration 'offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age.'<sup>xix</sup> He adds, 'Migrants-borne-across humans-are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples.'<sup>xx</sup>

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<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.278.

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