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## **Identity and Belonging in Diaspora Fiction: Reimagining ‘Home’ in the Migrant’s Consciousness**

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### **Abstract:**

Diaspora studies warrant a review of the notions of identity and belonging in the process of individuation which seeks to reformulate the attributes of ‘home’ relating it with the lived experience of the immigrant’s consciousness. Home, in this differential dialectics of fictional representations becomes an imagined space for the diasporic authors reactivating in them a ‘homing desire’ which transcends the limits of the established territoriality and temporality once associated with their native lands. The paper attempts to explore these encompassing range of discursive possibilities that triggers in the diaspora an invariable urge to reconstruct their own idea of the homeland and to rebuild a lost home reconfiguring the inner landscape of the mind challenging the strict premise of the essentialist cultural composition.

**Keywords: identity, belonging, diaspora, home, imagination, reconfiguration.**

The idea of home is a key concept in the diaspora studies which over the course of time has assumed new dimensions in fiction written in English by the different diasporas in the world. There is significant scholarly commitment invested in the reassessment of our understanding of the homeland and belonging relocating them in the amorphous topography of mind. Diasporic relocation involves extending solidarity with the local and transnational with a strong ‘homing desire’ to rebuild a lyrical space which transcends the physicality of homeland and problematizes further the objectivist notion of identity and belonging. Thus, the fluidity of identities is reaffirmed through the process of deterritorialization and contextualization that are summarily reoriented through the complexities of interaction, interrogation and negotiation. These pluralities of dwelling resulting from an eternal shifting of locations add new intricacies to the idea of home and belonging.

Home, in the immigrant’s consciousness then becomes a site where one negotiates belonging and unbelonging in relation to the cultural identity which is firmly grounded in one’s homeland. We, in the postmodern world live a semi-nomadic life where the term ‘home’ is no more reducible to a thing in itself but becomes an important emotional determinant in the construction of identity. People, now in a globalized world tend to move ceaselessly between borders creating new temporal homes involving a growing mixture of cultures with which they identify themselves.

The diasporic subjects feel the constant urge to reconstruct their own image of the homeland creating an imaginative space for themselves which is essentially linked up with their history, culture, memory and tradition. It involves the reconfiguring of the inner landscape as the repressed memory of the past is viewed as an underlying condition of the nostalgic drive in the reinvention of an imaginary homeland. According to the critic and literary activist, Susheila Nasta, "diaspora does not only create an unrequited desire for a lost homeland but also a 'homing desire', a desire to reinvent and rewrite home as much as a desire to come to terms with an exile from it" (Nasta 7). The diasporic subjects are continually faced with the problem of recollecting, rewriting and restaging the fragmented shadows of a long-lost past enacting the eternal drama of reinscribing, restructuring and restaging an incommensurable past in the vast spatial dialectics of mind. Thus attempts are made at tracing, retaining, re-examining, replanting and even reconfiguring one's roots in an unreceptive foreign environment. Diasporic fiction in the borderline culture Bhabha writes:

....demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and the present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. (7)

Diasporic identity carries with it an ambiguous condition of ambivalent possessions and belonging resulting in the ideological struggles of these individuals in the structuring and restructuring of their contesting diasporic positions and their imagining of home and homeland as an emotional construct spawned by the threads of memory and desire while subverting the exclusionist ideologies of all homes.

This concept of homelessness finds an echo in the postmodernist notion of simulation-simulacra. Baudrillard's theory that there is no real presence to which a sign refers, rather a sign refers to some other signs in a constellation of signifying referent, is in line with the diasporic spirit of quest for the true homeland beyond pseudo-homelands. Nasta's theory further develops upon the South Asian British diasporic group where Britain had ever remained the "colonial motherland" to the colonized:

The seductive power of "home", both as a force for authority *over* and as a continuing domestic metaphor for maintaining a means of authority *within*, figures most forcefully perhaps in the widely held image of England as colonial "motherland", an illusory haven which both beckoned and betrayed many of Britain's imperial subjects before and after Independence. (1)

It is the sense of separation which makes him write and empowers his world of imagination. Abdulrazak Gurnah's words translate this diasporic desire combining the metaphor of journeys with that of a recollective imagination:

Travelling away from home provides a distance and perspective, and a degree of amplitude and liberation. It intensifies recollection, which is the writer's hinterland.

Distance allows the writer uncluttered communication with this inner self and the result is a freer play of the imagination. (59)

Equally with memory which is faulty and incomplete and subject to distortion and falsification of history, the diasporic writer faces the challenges of restructuring and reinventing a lost consciousness of the past that is left behind. What the diasporic writers in their present land of stay do then is to recreate histories and restage an incommensurable presence in the spatial dialectics of fragmented fictionality which questions the authenticity of these images created by memory when the “imaginative truth is simultaneously honourable and suspect” (Rushdie 10). Wondrously enough, this corresponds well to the essential intrinsic fictionality of all homes. A place doesn’t exist somewhere in the geographical location or relocation, it has to be invented and reconfigured in the emotional reconstitutive terrains of mind. As there is no map to measure the mystical memory, so there is not a singular notion of home which is only a symbolic phase of articulation of identity. Home then becomes an emotional construct and the present paper seeks to demonstrate this significance of diasporic representations which subvert the essentializing properties of all home-making projects in general.

It could be said that writers like Rushdie who experiences this sort of diasporic fragmentation in Britain and many others who follow the suit feel evocatively empowered, precisely by these transactive traditions. Rushdie puts it gracefully reclaiming his own identity as a literary artist who takes to a similar conglomerated tradition which Britain has so prudently nourished throughout its cultural history which critically echoes the Eliotian philosophy of an all-encompassing literary tradition inclusive of not only the pastness of the past but of its presence (Eliot 68), a temporal cosmopolitical perception:

Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Iris, the Jews: the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrants in Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. (Rushdie 20)

We cannot forget in this connection writers like Hanif Kureishi, Ramesh Gunasekera, Vikram Seth, Monica Ali et al, just to mention some of those who have lived in England and already secured literary fames and names in the rich galaxy of diasporic writers in Britain. It is interesting to note that Rushdie’s alluded literary history of performative tradition forebears in the Indian and British traditions alike which is reverberated in the diasporic intellection of another writer belonging to a different diaspora is Caryl Phillips who published his anthology entitled *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of belonging* which addresses the inherent tension of diasporic reformulation in a widely varied authors like Olaudah Equiano, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Romesh Gunasekera, Kazuo Ishiguro, Thackeray, Conrad, Kipling, Whyndham Lewis, Orwell etc. all of whom were born outside Britain and contributed their metamorphic reconstruction of their “imaginary homeland” to English literature. Phillips wants to suggest that Britain has always been the home of numerous immigrant souls where

different diasporas have combined happily into shaping its peculiar diversified identity which defies all forms of homogeneity in diasporic disposition:

Readers will come to accept that as soon as one defines oneself as "British" one is participating in a centuries- old tradition or cultural exchange, of ethnic and linguistic plurality, as one might expect from a proud nation that could once boast she ruled most of the known world. The evidence collected here conforms that one of the fortuitous by-products of this heterogeneous history has been a vigorous and dynamic literature. (Phillips xii)

The authors in such positions are conditioned by experiences of an ever-encompassing, evolving system of knowledge which is discursively formed in a pluralistic culture challenging every efforts at claiming fixed rootedness of diasporic perception which is considered essentially a "variable and complex function of discourse" (Foucault 221).

The deconstructive theorists Jacques Derrida points out that it is the ceaseless process of deferral and difference in texts that makes the production of meaning dynamic. According to him, words as signifiers can never completely represent their original signified which only projects a gap to be filled in by other words in an infinite regress of meaning. So there is no unit, no wholesomeness, no fixed structure that authorizes, guides, and sustains this free play of meaning. This process of differential reconfiguration corresponds the diasporic desires of self-refashioning and home-making practices of the displaced individuals in the quest for meaningfulness of their lost home and identity.

Thus, the idea of difference highlights the aspect of fluidity and fragmentation, the non-fixedness and ambiguous nature of identity which precisely unveils the immense dynamicity of diverse possibilities:

The sign represents the presence in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being present, where the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs we signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. The circulation of sign defers the movement in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. (9)

The idea to 'feel at home' refers to the place where one is familiar with, comforted with protected boundaries but 'not being home' dawns a realization of the self that home is a illusory reference to safety and firmly grounded on the marginalization of specific moments of oppression and resistance in the national histories and is reflective of a conflictual, differential repression within oneself- an unending internal battle that unsettles conventional notions of identities, boundaries and positionalities. Bell Hooks seeks to clarify these complexities of home in his book *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* when she contends that "home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveal more fully where we are, who can become. . ." (148). When the 'homing desire' of the individual is allied with

a deep feeling of loss and sadness and the idea of home is entangled with a sense of irrevocable displacement, home ceases to be a place anymore and becomes an emotion. Home in this sense transcends the physical limits of fixed boundaries and nationalities and is metamorphosed into a non-spatial entity spawned by the silenced memories and unspeakable desires of the past.

Different modalities and complexities related to the idea of 'home' are explored in the writings of the diasporic authors. The different generations of diasporic writers in Britain and America elicit diverse diasporic experiences and shifting transnational connections which impact and shape the notion of home in diaspora that is formed in the mind of the diasporic subjects and their representation in fiction focussing on the concept of identity as hybrid, fluid and fragmentary in the differential problematics of transgenerational intersections. The categorization process in the diasporic generational difference also plays a significant role in the representation of diasporic homes:

Clearly the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, political and cultural realities. (Brah 194)

For example, the first generation of South-Asian immigrants who had moved to Britain found it problematic in adjusting themselves to their new homes than their second generation counterparts. Obsessed and anguished with a sense of nostalgia and trauma, they wish to get back to their land of origin. This experience of the first generation people again differs from one another relating to the temporality of their dislocation. For instance, since the writer Nadeem Aslam from Pakistan whose novels are ceaseless experimentation of cultural hybridity had migrated to Britain at a much earlier age than Ambalavaner Sivanandan of Sri Lankan origin, their experiences are surely coloured by widely different perceptions even if both are labelled as first generation diasporic writers in British cultural set up. However, these generational differences are not absolute and are subject to transgressive infiltration. The immigrants share both commonalities and difference with their descendents and hosts in a complex, overlapping and intersecting condition of diasporic self-actualization. Ironically however, amidst all diasporic longings and nostalgia, there is an urge to resist the fascination for the homeland as they feel a sense of unbelonging to both their past and present location. This impulse diminishes with the second and third generation migrants and reduces their perception of cultural and ethnic identity which Mary Waters in *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* defines as "plasticity of ethnic identities among the third generation and beyond" (qtd. Kivisto 32). Thus, the sense of disruption and unbelongingness propel them to recreate an imaginative space for themselves to perpetuate and renew their lost sense of 'homeliness' in an unreceptive ambience of incompatibility effectuating a reintroduction of cultural permeability.

Stuart Hall in "New Ethnicities" identifies two different yet intersecting phases of Black identity formation in Britain- first, the unifying effect of communal resistance; secondly, the extraordinary diversity of subjective position which effects the

dehomogenization of cultural identities and the notion of race recasting the essentialist notion of 'ethnicity' alongside pluralist poststructuralist formulation of permeable cultural affiliation (441-444). Cultural identities like language are fluid, defined as much by differences within sameness as by superficial similarities whether of colour or any other supposed affiliation (Nasta 179). This temporal dislocation and double consciousness is representative of post-imperialist representation which seeks to bridge the gap between 'margin' and 'frontline' is central to Hanif Kureishi's migrant position that assumes symbolic reflection of a professional mutator, the "everyman of the...century" (*The Buddha* 141). Robert Young in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* claims the notion of hybridity to be an old concept generated in a number of socio-cultural debates in the nineteenth century which is tyrannously focused on colour as an obvious sign of racial difference only to disentangle the positive items of cultural fusion in an exclusionary dialectics of racism associating this negativity with a suppressed colonial desire, miscegenation and reduction of cultural essentialism.

Hybridity... works simultaneously in two ways: 'organically', hegimoning, creating new spaces, structures, scenes, and 'intentionally' diasporizing, intervening as a form of subversion, translation, transformation... Hybridization as creolization involves fusion, the creation of a new form, which can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up. Hybridity as 'raceless' chaos by contrast, produces no stable form but instead a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of forms. (148)

Thus, diaspora defines itself in an ever shifting mode of unfolding its own structure in the erratic patterns of linkage and breakage which incorporate metaphors of inclusion and exclusion resulting in the disruption and bonding of contesting cultural groups in which the 'within' and 'outside' are constantly formed and reformulated in the performative re-enactment of diasporic sensibilities.

Summing up, diaspora with its multiple and conflicting cultural identities defies strict premise and connotation which points out the extraordinary diversity of the diasporic condition in the problematic dialectics of permeable patterns of cultural representation. The diasporic craft of fictional representations are attempts to retrace the mythic quests of diasporas from immigration to acculturation in the contextualizing reposition of the pro-aesthetic valorisation, of contemporaneous cross-cultural translatability. Such ambivalent confluence of permuted cartographies includes and identifies the dominating and powerful metaphors of 'home' and 'belonging' in writers of the diasporas in the contemporary world to demonstrate the ways they effectuate an imaginary construction of the inner-space in their fiction reconfiguring identity through an unreliable, fragmented, intensified memory and recollection which transcends the confines of temporal and territorial essentializing tendencies of diasporic systematization.

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