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Locating Folk Cultural Elements in Diasporic Memories

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Abstract:

The word ‘diaspora’ comes from the Greek word ‘diasperien’; ‘dia’ meaning ‘across’ and ‘sperien’ is ‘to sow or scatter seeds’. So a diasporic individual is bound to scatter seeds across some area. But what do these ‘seeds’ mean? A displaced person will scatter seeds of what? Is it seeds of folk culture? I presume ‘seeds’ bear a metaphorical significance that encompasses the idea of ‘cultural heritage’ that is retained in the memories of diasporas. Moreover, literally seeds signify a vegetative image indicating the initial stage/primary step in the growth of plants. It contains within it life forms, that is, plants will develop from it. ‘Cultural heritage’ is akin to these seeds in many ways. For example, it contains the life form of a diasporic individual. By ‘life form’, I mean to say, the breathing space that is evoked by the practising of folk cultural elements in the lives of scattered individuals. Diasporic memories do contain the essence of indigenous culture which becomes the source of life in an alien land that gives oxygen for survival in an otherwise claustrophobic environment.

Therefore, my paper tries to locate how the relationship can be established between elements of folk culture and the diasporic memories of displaced people and what role does the former play in reshaping up of the hyphenated identities of these people.

Keywords: folk culture, diaspora, diasporic memories, cultural heritage, hyphenated identities

The title of my paper refers to two key concepts, that are, ‘folk’ and ‘diaspora’ which need to be defined at first. According to Alan Dundes’ essay ‘Who are the Folk?’, “The term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is— it could be a common occupation, language or religion— but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own.”¹Dundes’ use of the word ‘traditions’ may refer to the whole idea of folk culture and cultural heritage. He somehow broadens the range of people that can be classified under the umbrella of folk group. However, his view is in sharp contrast to the earlier restricted notions of what constitutes the ‘folk’. Dundes comments that previous

versions of the term 'folk' was limited to the people of the lower stratum, the uncivilized element of a civilized society and rural people. Therefore, the concept of 'folk' has evolved with time. Similarly, the concept of 'diaspora' has also evolved and expanded to include more types of people within its scope. For earlier the concept of 'diaspora' was confined to the study of the Jewish experience: the original meaning of diaspora was limited specifically to "the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion."² But today the term has been extended "to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people— expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities . . ."³ Therefore by the establishment of the fact that both the concepts of 'folk' and 'diaspora' have expanded with time we can mark this as the beginning of the connection between the two. From the etymology of the word 'diaspora' we come across to know that a diasporic individual will scatter seeds of his/her own cultural heritage in an alien land. Moreover, Asa Briggs in the essay 'Culture' finds a relationship between culture and agriculture:

The concept of culture has an agricultural origin: it first referred to the tending or "cultivation" of crops. In the later stages of its history the concept has retained within it the sense of process.⁴

Therefore it is interesting to note how the etymological meaning of the term diaspora, that is, to sow or scatter seeds, bears similarity with the original concept of culture. The common factor binding them is 'seeds' that on the one hand signifies seeds of folk culture and on the other seeds needed for the cultivation of crops. In addition with the establishment of the connection between folk and diaspora and culture and diaspora, my aim is to find how the cultural heritage of a diaspora can be linked with the folk cultural elements in many ways. This paper tries to locate the various ways in which this connection can be made. The folk cultural elements that will act as the connectors are quest motif, oral culture, beliefs, customs and rituals.

Quest motif

Lorena Stookey under the title 'The Quest' in her book writes "The quest motif is central to countless tales of heroic action, and therefore stories of perilous journeys undertaken in pursuit of an important goal recur throughout myth and folklore traditions. The objective of the quest can be either symbolic or actual, but in either case a hero's strength, courage, and spirit are all put to the test during the course of a series of ordeals."⁵ In the same way diasporic individuals' journey through memories— memories of their lost homeland gets manifested in their cultural practices.

Stookey further states "In the accounts of mythic quests, where heroes also often seek a person, an answer, or an object, the journey undertaken is characteristically both an arduous venture and a spiritual voyage that leads to wisdom, self-knowledge, or the hero's redemption."⁶ Similarly a diasporic individual is confronted with several questions like 'where is home' and then he/she begins the mythic quest for that original lost homeland. In the process he/she begins the search for self-identity and gains knowledge about his/her

fragmented status. Robin Cohen quotes Brah in order to explain how home becomes a 'homing desire' and a 'placeless place':

Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense 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'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations.⁷

The quest motif is also central to some of the diasporic novels like Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*⁸ and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*⁹. In *The Lonely Londoners* Moses, the narrator of the novel apart from the third person omniscient narrator narrates the lives of poor immigrants who are in search for work in London. Rather their quest for survival in an alien space is portrayed in the novel. In the story, there is a West Indian immigrant called Captain who tries to have white girlfriends. He stays with a French girlfriend at night and when she is out in the day he goes out in search of other girls. The character Moses is reminiscent of Moses of the Old Testament. He acts as guide and indoctrinates the new migrants in the ways of the city. The characters journey to "the streets of London paved with gold" (Selvon, 87) with the hope of finding work but are eventually disillusioned in their quest. Moses illustrates the real condition of the immigrants:

'. . . Looking at things in general life really hard for the boys in London. This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn't get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell. Here is not like home where you have friends all about. In the beginning you would think that is a good thing, that nobody minding your business, but after a while you want to get in company, you want to go to somebody house and eat a meal, you want to go on excursion to the sea, you want to go and play football and cricket. Nobody in London does really accept you. . . .' (Selvon, 114)

In *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim's journey from the suburbs to central London is part of an attempt to define a new gentleman. Karim is of mixed race. His engagement with the city of London is part of the new England. He wants to avoid the stagnacity of Suburbia. For him, Suburbia is like a 'leaving place'. London provides him with the hope for freedom, everything that he cherishes. He starts a love-affair with a rich white girl Eleanor but that does not stop him from exploring more women. Lastly he realizes that it is he who has been exploited because for other she is the exotic young Indian. Therefore London dream is shattered at the end. The journey to London is like an odyssey or pilgrimage for him. London seems to be the setting for the protagonists' "often painful growth towards maturity through a range of conflicts and dilemmas, social, sexual and political".¹⁰

Folktales/Oral Culture

Jack Goody states “In oral cultures all is stored in the heads of adults, so the one who has seen most and lived longest remains a major source of knowledge. The elders have to be respected for this reason alone; they are irreplaceable storehouses of information about the past, that is, about the culture and traditions of the community.”¹¹ In *The Lonely Londoners*, the character of Moses here serves as the major source of knowledge about London to the newly arrived immigrants. Moses’ house also becomes the meeting place for them where they reminisce about their past and present lives in the Caribbean and in England respectively:

Nearly every Sunday morning, like if they going to church, the boys liming in Moses room, coming together for a old talk, to find out the latest gen, what happening, when is the next fete, Bart asking if anybody see his girl anywhere, Cap recounting a episode he had with a woman by the tube station the night before, Big City want to know why the arse he can’t win a pool, Galahad recounting a clash with the colour problem in a restaurant in Piccadilly, Harris saying he hope the weather turns, Five saying he have to drive a truck to Glasgow tomorrow. (Selvon, 122)

The immigrants refer to each other as ‘spades’ sometimes, and in their spare time they can be found ‘liming’ which refers to the Caribbean pastime of hanging around with friends along with talking, eating and drinking. Their conversations would include some ‘old talk’, that is, reminiscences of their past lives in the West Indies and the exchange of news from home.

Beliefs, Customs and Rituals

According to Raju Barthakar, Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*¹² “is a narrative which assesses the nuances of American societal life and the attempts by the migrants to place the same at par with their native or ‘root’ culture.”¹³ It chronicles the way in which beliefs and customs make Gogol, the American born son of first generation Bengali immigrants Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, discover his self-identity. This revelation is brought forth through his cross-cultural experiences and his exploration of his Indian heritage. Since Gogol is born in America he becomes disinterested with his own cultural background. At first he is resentful of his native customs and traditions and therefore a sort of communication gap grows between him and his parents. According to Werner Menski it is found that “in diaspora, ‘tradition’ appears to become more traditional.”¹⁴ Therefore Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli have that anxiety of following tradition more. Gogol being a second generation migrant does not have that sense of anxiety.

Shirley Firth comments “In the diaspora, beliefs and practices may be thrown into confusion by new circumstances, raising questions about individual and group identity, religious traditions, and the function and purpose of ritual.”¹⁵ Taking cue from this we might say Gogol’s belief in Indian cultural practices has been thrown into confusion raising questions about his hybrid identity. But his confusions and questions get answered when he gets to know the purpose of any ritual. For example we find in *The Namesake*¹⁶ (film), the turning point in Gogol’s life comes after his father’s death. This is in sync with Shirley Firth’s comment about death in a diaspora:

Death is a traumatic event for a family and social group, drawing the members together, and highlighting their social, cultural and religious norms and values. It touches on familial and social roles, and inevitably, gender issues, such as who the heirs are and who has to perform or facilitate the death rituals. Beliefs about life after death and the relevant rituals help to make sense of death.¹⁷

Therefore for Gogol the death of his father makes him follow cultural customs more closely. He begins to appreciate his native Indian culture after going through his father's funeral rites on the banks of the Ganges.

Gogol's birth misses the process of traditional naming ritual. In their family it is the custom that new born babies are named by one of the elder members of the family. The letter sent by Ashima's grandmother from India never arrives and the father, Ashoke gives the pet-name 'Gogol' to his child after the famous Russian author, Nikolai Gogol. Due to some circumstances, this becomes the child's official name. As Gogol grows up he develops a kind of hatred for his unusual name and changes his name to Nikhil. He does not understand the value that the name attaches to the feelings of his parents. Perhaps this lack of communication may be attributed to the fact that the traditional naming ritual has not taken place. This can be best supported by Roy A. Rappaport's view that ritual is "one that has made other sorts of human communications possible, particularly those resting on language."¹⁸

When Gogol learns the true significance of his name from his father he sort of regrets changing it. According to Asim Ranjan Parhi, "In India, a name carries a cultural assertion, religious affiliation and poses to be a strength by which a personality is created."¹⁹ The knowledge of the importance of his name perhaps becomes the strength for Gogol that helps him cope with his father's death and his own fragmented identity. The split in him that is caused due to his Indian-American heritage perhaps gets sort out when Gogol finally accepts his name.

Therefore from the above discussion we can get an idea how the folk cultural elements are intrinsically related to the lives of the displaced people. Moreover Uma Parameswaran focuses on the liminal position occupied by a displaced person:

People who move away from their native countries occupy (not only inherit but also bequeath to subsequent generations, actually) a liminality, an uneasy pull between two cultures. I call this pull Trishanku's curse, after the mortal king in Hindu lore who was disowned by both heaven and earth, and, as a face-saving device, was given his own constellation.²⁰

Accordingly in the tension created by the pull between native and foreign culture, what emerge in the process are the hyphenated identities of migrants. In order to shorten or delete this hyphen between identities, people take refuge in folk cultural elements that in a way provides them with the necessary oxygen for survival. In simple terms, actually when people leave their homeland they carry within them the memories associated with that lost homeland. The present lives of these people get constantly confronted with the memories of

their past. These memories do search for an outlet to express themselves and so they get manifested through native or folk cultural practices. Therefore we can assume the significance of the role that the elements of folk culture play in reshaping up of the hyphenated identities of diasporic characters like Moses and the Caribbean immigrants in *The Lonely Londoners*, Karim in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Gogol and his parents in *The Namesake*.

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5. Stookey, Lorena. *Thematic Guide to World Mythology*. London, Greenwood Press, 2004, p. 147.
6. Ibid.
7. Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. second ed., London, Routledge, 2008, p. 10.
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15. Firth, Shirley. "Death and Bereavement in South Asian Diasporic Communities." *Religious Reconstruction in the South Asian Diasporas: From One Generation to Another*. edited by John R. Hinnells, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 93.
16. *The Namesake* is a 2006 Indian-American drama film directed by Mira Nair and is based upon the novel of the same name by Jhumpa Lahiri.
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19. Parhi, Asim Ranjan. "Metaphor of the Exile: Identity and Culture in Jhumpa Lahiri." *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri*. edited by Nigamananda Das, New Delhi, Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2010, p. 134.
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