

The gestalt of diasporic consciousness in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*.

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Abstract: Indian diaspora is a generic name given to the people who migrated from India for varied reasons: professional aspiration and economic ambition or political crisis at home. The former is the topic of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and the latter is the reason for the migration of Meena's family in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*.

The truth behind the success stories of the Indian diaspora in particular from academia, IT and medicine is far from a fairy tale experience. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* brings forth the story of alienation, displacement, disorientation and reorientation of Ashok and Ashima and the difference in the psychological make of their son Gogol, the second generation diasporic entity. In spite of Meena's and Gogol's vociferous attempts to belong to the host culture, the call of their roots creates a constant state of inner disquietude and discomfort in the acquired land. The search for a new haven by the first generation diaspora culminates in the divided sensibilities of their American and English born children. Their past and their cultural roots haunt them indispensably and incessantly. Diasporic condition is one of struggle, identity crisis and psychological angst of a people hung in the 'trishankhu' state between two worlds, one partially lost, and the other difficult to assimilate in absolute terms. The mean position would be that of adaptation to and creation of a happy state in the host country. This would entail the creation of a happy hybrid, content with losing his roots and happy with adopting the foreign culture with all its positives and negatives. But isn't the contour of this happiness defined by a splintered consolatory satisfaction in the face of helplessness and existential angst central to their identity and identity-crisis.

Key-words: alienation, displacement, disorientation and reorientation, assimilation, roots, psychological angst, identity crisis, imaginary homelands.

Indian diaspora is a term given to the people who migrated from India for varied reasons, predominantly professional aspiration and economic ambition or political crisis at home. The former is the topic of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and the latter is the reason for the migration of Daljeet's family in Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Indian parents. Her parents moved to the U.S. when she was three years old. The double displacement of the parents from the homeland and Lahiri's double displacement from her roots has significant implications for the writer of the Indian diaspora. Having receded from their past and their roots, their conceptualization, contextualization and interpretation of the past and the homeland is always under interrogation; its verisimilitude remains under a shadow of doubt. That is where Rushdie's comment gains pertinence:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles, or emigrants, or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutilated into pillars of salt. But when we do look back, we must do 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 homelands, Indias of the mind.ⁱ

True, chronotopically distanced from the homeland, the actual topical, historical and cultural facets of the homeland present themselves as enmeshed in an ever-receding, elusive, evanescent arena. The past eludes and deludes, fascinates and invites with a persistent danger of falling into an idealistic re-creation of a not so ideal past. The point finds apt elucidation and substantiation in the term “diasporic imaginary”ⁱⁱ as employed by Vijay Mishra a distanced past, receding into that liminal space between the real verses the surreal, the immediate and the palpable vs the imagined and the recession into the half-recovered, half-remembered, partially formulated past, re-inventing it perpetually through remembrance and exercise of imagination and a concomitant act of wish-fulfillment.

The point is about the construction of an imaginary homeland, so that the spatio-temporal distancing from the land of emigration invests it with special qualities. For instance, what Suketu Mehta calls “an urban, affluent, glossy India, the India they imagine they grew up in and wish they could live in now, an India projected by Bollywood”.ⁱⁱⁱ A live example is the 1990s film DDLJ , the projection of an idealized rural setting of Punjab and its culture, the cultivated fields, the land of ‘Makki ki roti’ and ‘sarson ka saag’, the elaborate marriage rituals and extended family bonhomie. The point is that “diasporas construct themselves in ways that are very different from the way in which homeland peoples construct themselves.”^{iv}

Like Jhumpa Lahiri’s mother, Gogol’s mother, Ashima, in *The Namesake*, wants to be grounded in Bengali heritage and fondly visits her relatives in Calcutta. But their children, Gogol and Sonia, display obverse reactions to the impending visit to what they understand as their parents’ homeland:

[Gogol] dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends.^v

Reaching Calcutta, we are told how Ashima automatically becomes Monu and Ashoke is addressed as Mithu. Gogol and Sonia know these people, but they do not feel any sense of affinity with them.

The first generation diaspora carries the baggage of the moral and behavioral ethos of the homeland, which is deeply entrenched in their psychological make. They require time to transcend those moralistic codes of conduct and to adjust to the new codes defining the host country. Gogol and Sonia’s mother, Ashima, dreads the Americanization of their children:

Ashima lives in fear that Sonia will color a streak of her hair blond, as Sonia threatened on more than one occasion to do, and that she will have additional holes pierced in her ear-lobes at the mall. They argue violently about such things, Ashima crying, Sonia slamming doors.^{vi}

On a similar note, Gogol's maturity into a young man is not acknowledged by the parents. In spite of his insistence, 'I am already eighteen', with a mind-set which goes back to their own conventional upbringing, Ashoke and Ashima vehemently announce, "You're too young to get involved in this way"^{vii}, when they come to know about Gogol's girl-friend, Ruth.

In the course of the novel, Ashima, Gogol's mother, turns out to be the epitome of acculturation. Though jostled between two cultures, Ashima transforms from a frail, protected wife, highly dependent on her husband, Ashoke, restricted to addressing him with the Indian interrogative, "Are you listening to me?", happily ensconced in her Murshidabad silk saree to a woman who loses her husband in a foreign land, lives independently, works in a library and articulates her new identity: "This is my home, this land where I lost my husband." However, In spite of this declaration, Ashima chooses to return to Calcutta at the end of the novel.

This is a literature of struggle, identity crisis and psychological angst of a people hung in a *trishankhu* state between two worlds, one half lost, other partially gained. The memories of the lost paradise are besmirched with pain and suffering, the quest for a new paradise is beleaguered by the struggle for assimilation, adaptation and acquisition of a sense of belongingness to the host country.

As per the world statistical data released by the UN, 17.5 million of the Indian population is diasporic, inhabiting different parts of the world. And yet, despite all discussions of culture shock, alienation, longing for the homeland, and adherence to their religious beliefs, the flagrant truth of the diaspora is that ninety-nine per cent of this displaced population does not want to return to their homeland. Such a step would mean taking a U-turn and muffling all their efforts for a better future to a naught. Further, the reason for minimalism in the possibility of the return of the diaspora to the homeland is that prolonged stay turns them into hybrids.

True, Gogol's girl-friend, Ruth, turns out to be absolutely ruthless when she exhibits signs of absolute nonchalance at the death of Gogol's father so that Gogol gets alienated from his American girl-friend. However, his acceptance of Maushmi, the Bengali wife, is itself undermined as a no-better choice. Maushmi gets involved in an extra-marital affair apart from her many pre-marital affairs. The concept of the quintessential Bengali heritage and the immaculate and pure image of an idealistic territory called 'homeland' and everything connected with it is, hence, dismantled. The reason for her behavior as mustered by her own confessional account is the excessive sexual repression of the girl as a part of her Bengali upbringing. The second generation diaspora, Ashoke and Ashima's American born children, do not feel drawn towards their virtuous Bengali heritage. It turns out to be nothing but prudish repression. The excessive anxiety of parents translates into the child's repulsion of the culture and everything connected with the homeland:

When she was only five years old, she was asked by her relatives whether she planned to get married in a red saree or a white gown. Though she had refused to indulge them, she knew, even then, what the correct response was. By the time she was twelve she had made a pact, with the other Bengali girls she knew, never to marry a Bengali man.^{viii}

Further, the second generation diaspora disdains being called uncomfortable and confused about their condition in the land adopted by their parents. People like Gogol and Meena, as American and British citizens, despise being singled out as ‘ABCDs’. Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. The momentous aspects of the incident are (i) Gogol is not interested in attending, yet feels obliged to attend because of the involvement of the word ‘Indian’ and his parental connection with that word; (ii) one of the panelists is Gogol’s distant cousin from Bombay, but Gogol is not interested in meeting him; (iii) Gogol finds the panelists and their thinking very reductive and boring and he cannot see any connection between their discussion and himself as an ‘ABCD’:

Gogol is bored by the panelists, who keep referring to something called “marginality”, as if it were some sort of medical condition. For most of the hour, he sketches portraits of panelists, who sit hunched over their papers... “Teleologically speaking ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘where are you from?’” the sociologist on the panel declares.^{ix}

Gogol has never heard of the term ‘ABCD’. Little later he realizes that it means ‘American born confused Deshi’, “In other words him”. Gogol knew that Deshi was connected with ‘desh’, but for Gogol India never meant ‘desh’:

He thinks of it as Americans do, as India.^x

The entire conceptualization of the binary between the home and the world falls apart in the delineation of the psycho-scape of Gogol. The land of migration has become home for Gogol, to Gogol’s understanding. Karthiyani Devarajoo in “Transforming Diaspora: Familiarity with Alien Terrains” aptly writes:

Hybridity is the catalytic element that supports the transformation of an individual or community from being a diaspora to being the citizen of the host country and to finally being a world citizen.

True! yet, what about the ghosts of the past? Relinquishing one’s roots and one’s inheritance, deeply entrenched within the collective unconscious of a race, is easy said than done.

Vijay Mishra calls diaspora “a complex social formation marked by antipodes of progressivity and reactionary streaks in them”^{xi}. In the former, the old becomes part of the new through prolonged separation and through re-migrations. Gogol’s fiancée Maushmi, chosen for Gogol as the right match by his parents, daughter of Ashoke’s and Ashima’s Bengali friends, is an exemplary figure of the hybrid who lives with the progressive American ethos. In the reactionary stance of the diaspora, there is a pre-dominance of the trauma and the disquietude and the commotion preserved in the collective memory of those who have experienced the alienation and the separation from their roots, their homeland. The trauma of displacement and uprooted psychology is experienced by the first generation diaspora

first-hand and heard by the second generation overtly or over-heard in hushed voices as narratives by the first generation:

I knew something about the Partition, about the English dividing up India into India and Pakistan...I had fallen upon this information inadvertently, during one of papa's musical evenings. ^{xii}

Meena, the child-narrator in *Anita and Me*, hears the narratives of trauma and genocide executed at the chronotopic juncture of the 1947 partition of India from her elders during one of those get-togethers ('mehfils'), when these Indian Punjabi migrants attempt to re-live their Punjabi heritage transmogrified into present moments of co-mutuality, camaraderie and happiness:

Papa's mehfiles were legendary, evenings where our usual crowd plus a few dozen extra families would squeeze themselves into our house to hear papa and selected Uncles sing their favourite Urdu ghazals and Punjabi folk songs. ^{xiii}

The 'mehfiles' are attempts to re-configure, recuperate and re-instate the sense of lost paradise, that lost harmony which was natural to them in their homeland. Having lost the connection with their home and hearth, they attempt to create a new home away from home. And yet, it is during one of these 'mehfiles' and an attempt to create a salubrious environment that there emerges a sudden surge of emotion and reminiscence of that ghastly past, where Hindus and Muslims both lost their kinsmen:

There was a murmur of consensus, subdued, fearful maybe because of all the wounds being reopened. 'We were on the wrong side of the border also when the news came, none of us knew until that moment if we would be going or staying. My whole family, we walked from Sialcote across the border...we may be passed your family going the other way. The bodies, piled high...the trains pulling into stations full of dead families...*Hai Ram*. What we have seen...' ^{xiv}

This is followed by Auntie Shaila's heart-rending reminiscence of her sister being carried away by Muslims, "mad men, mad eyes, sticks with red tips... They just took her. She was too beautiful. They took her. Where is she? *Hai mera dil*...where is she now?" ^{xv} These events recounted in a sudden flow of emotion are imbibed by the child's consciousness so that she has a disturbed sleep that night. The specific narrative of the recollection of trauma as part of the catharsis, pity at oneself and purgation of feelings, give vent to psychological trauma as a part of inner cure, yet can never be adequately mourned and got over with. Those memories remain, reverberate, echo and repeat themselves. ^{xvi}

Meena slips into the 'heavy Indian rajai' but something else happens:

My sleep that night was full of blood red trains screaming through empty stations, scattering severed limbs as it whistled past, of beautiful sisters in churning rivers, and old men's heads in flowerbeds...I realized that the past was not a sentimental journey for my parents, like the song told its English listeners.^{xvii}

Here is an example of the trajectory charting the collective unconscious of a race, where a group of people align themselves in shared experiences and knowledge systems which remain a part of their emotional and psychological make and come to the fore-front any time in the same manner in which atavism in genetics brings forth those hidden genetic traits in us which remain embedded in the genetic constitution of our fore-fathers. The essentialism voiced by Meena when she creates exclusively separate psychological teleology for the experiences of Indians and the English people may not go very far, yet Meena's acknowledgement of this difference brings her closer to her own cultural past and distances her from the English Wolverhampton cultural ethos to which she always wanted to belong.

Hence, the diasporic experience is marked by enchantment, often repulsion, with the host culture; acceptance of the 'other-ness' of the other, a desire to assimilate into the host culture, to become one of them, often turning into an impulse of repudiating one's past/roots due to abhorrence of the homeland as inferior, undesirable, uncomely and unclean. The second generation diaspora may feel a lack of connection with the homeland which in a way was never theirs. And yet, there is a crevice, a fissure, a rupture in this stand because there arise intermittent gaps where even the gen-next feels perplexed and out of joint with the socio-culture matrix of the host country. Whether it is the existential question, "Who am I?" or it is that profound moment of disillusionment with the ethos of the host culture, there arrives a moment in their lives which makes them wallow to a quest, an intriguing riddle whose answer remains beleaguered in the ever-receding, elusive, delusive, liminal space between the home and the world, the fascination with the host country and a construction of the diasporic imaginary.

ⁱ Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. Web. 15 January, 2020. <<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/>>

ⁱⁱ Vijay Mishra. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p 18

^{iv} Ibid., p 18

^v Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Great Britain: Harper Collins, 2003. Print. p 79

^{vi} Ibid., p 107

^{vii} Ibid.,p 117

^{viii} Ibid., p 213

^{ix} Ibid., p 118

^x Jhumpa Lahiri.p 11

^{xi} Vijay Mishra. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. New York: Routledge, 2007., p 1.

^{xii} Syal, Meera. *Anita and Me*. Great Britain: Harper Collins, 1996. Print. p 71

^{xiii} Ibid. , p 71

^{xiv} Ibid., p 73

^{xv} Ibid.,p 174

^{xvi} ^{xvi} Dominick La Capra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001):

Trauma's aporia, its incompleteness, its undecidability, its free play of difference, 'disarticulate relations, confuse self and other', and leave 'belated effects' that are difficult to control and are never fully mastered. The trauma is very real. Yet in its reminiscence and re-telling, the reaction of the listeners and of the self vary due to distancing from the traumatic past.

For instance, Meena, attempting to understand the gravity of that shared past, notices her mother: "The whole room seemed to be sighing, I could make out mama's soft weeping, it was muffled. She must have been negotiating the complicated geography of Auntie Shaila's cleavage". (Syal 74) Hence, the somber and the facetious, the pain and the pleasure of recounting that past in moments of shared harmony and re-living that past in a bid to overcome it, all intersect in the moments of reiteration of a lost past, half-desired half abhorred.

^{xvii} Syal, p 75