

A Note on Diaspora Critical Theory

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Abstract: The 'postmodern' world is marked by hybridity or mix-ups. With the uprooting of colonies from the various parts of the world, the ethnic groups living in diasporic situation launched their campaign against the longstanding prejudices and in-human treatments in order to have parity with local ethnic groups. The belief that the white dialect speaks universality is dismantled; and ignored/marginalized experiences, identities, and culture were explored and renewed. In this paper the author seeks to take stock of almost all necessary components or threads of 'diaspora critical theory'.

Keywords: Diaspora, ethnicity, home, culture, globalization, trauma.

The concept of diaspora in all cases bears the sense of translocation, displacement or deterritorialisation. Diasporics migrate to a 'new world' not only physically and geographically but with their 'cultural artifacts' and native consciousness also. Diaspora studies is primarily a narrative of displacement comprising feelings of homelessness, alienation, memory or remembrances, and romantic longings for eventual return caused either by voluntary displacement or involuntary. According to James Procter, "diaspora" can appear both as naming a geographical phenomenon- the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group- as well as a theoretical concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world"(McLeod 151). The latter part of the definition is more interesting and implies of course the diasporisation of the world. Leela Gandhi writes:

...postcolonialism is generally concerned with the idea of cultural dislocation...While diaspora...is generally invoked as a theoretical device for the interrogation of ethnic identity and cultural nationalism...diasporic thought betrays its poststructuralist origins by contesting all claims to the stability of meaning and identity. In its postcolonial incarnation, such thought reviews the colonial encounter for its disruption of native/domestic space (Gandhi 131-32).

Like any other critical theories, 'diaspora critical theory' too seeks to provide a fair framework for evaluating or examining dispersed communities along with their social, cultural, political, and economic specifics. Diaspora literature more often than not involves a history of displacement, remembrances of the homeland (from where the dispersal occurred), feelings of alienation in the adopted country, and romantic desire for return (which is possibly impossible). Basically, 'diaspora' is a minority community living in exile. Due to social exclusion and marginalization, diasporics retain the country they were once part of in their consciousness as a marker of distinctiveness and difference. Etymologically, the term 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek verb

'speiro' (to sow or scatter) and the Greek preposition 'dia' (over or through). It was first used to designate the dispersal of the Jews in wake of the demolition of the first Temple in around 586 BC, and the imposed exile to Babylonia. Braziel Mannur and Anita Mannur write that the term "diaspora suggests a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries". (Braziel and Mannur 1). In all cases, the term carries the sense of 'displacement', decentering, dispersal, and demythologization. We can do justice to the application of the term 'diaspora', provided we bear in the mind its 'polythetic' nature. Robin Cohen tentatively describes 'disporas as communities of people living together in one country....' Facing difficulty with the term to define, he classified the world-wide daisporas into six kinds in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (1997) alongside their divergent contexts, and histories which the term carries with itself. These are: Victim Diasporas, Labour Diasporas, Imperial Diasporas, Trade Diasporas, Homeland Diasporas, and Cultural Diasporas. He finds a common chord that unifies them is that they (diaspora people) are forced inhabitants from their 'natal (or imagined natal) territories,' and approve that their traditional homelands are reflected in their languages they speak, cultures they practice, and religion they adopt (Cohen ix). Justin D. Edwards does not approve of Cohen's formula, for to the former it seems that to the latter the term "is on the verge of becoming over-determined because it runs the risk of being too inclusive and thus simultaneously meaning everything and nothing" (Edwards 150). Sudesh Mishra in his book *Diaspora Criticism* (2006) divides diasporic moves into two distinct movements: Voluntary (attracted to the hostland for the sake of professional or academic purposes especially in USA., UK., Germany, France, and other European nations); and involuntary (expelled from the homeland due to slavery, indentured labor to Fiji or the Caribbean countries). Sudesh Mishra divided whole diasporic scholarship into three scenes: 'dual territoriality', 'situational laterality', and the last 'archival specificity'.

William Safran, a much quoted critic suggested six major characteristics of diasporics: dispersal from the original homeland of them or their ancestors; retention of collective memory, vision or myth of the original homeland along with its physical location, history and achievements; partial (never complete) absorption in the hostlands and concomitantly to believe that they cannot be fully accepted by their lost homeland and hence they feel alienation and humiliation; romanticized desire to return to original homeland (as true and ideal) when the conditions are viable and suitable; desirable commitment or responsibility to the restoration or maintenance of homeland, its safety and prosperity; and continually renewed linkages whether personally or vicariously with homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran 83-84). The last feature of diaspora, what Vijay Mishra calls 'diasporic imaginary' is more telling and relevant. Sudesh Mishra recognizes Safran and Cohen as exemplars of 'dual territoriality'. It relies

on homeland/hostland binary and stable entities. He criticizes this approach because it cannot do full justice to the shifting nature of identities, and modes of subjectivity, cross-subject alliances determined by class, gender, education, religion, sexual preferences, accent and language. All diasporics are unique, quite diverse and dynamic because they all have come from different backgrounds and for different reasons. And therefore they deserve to be taken into account differently. As Jana Mannur and Anita Mannur argue:

Theorizing diaspora offers critical spaces for thinking about the discordant movements of modernity, the massive migrations that have defined this century- from the late colonial period through the decolonization era to the twenty-first century. Theorizations of diaspora need not, and should not, be divorced from historical and cultural specificity. Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself- religious, ethnic, gendered, national; yet this diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the parameters of specific historical moments are embodied and – as diaspora itself suggests- are scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming (Braziel and Mannur 3).

Paul Gilroy, a British sociologist is solely devoted to African diaspora yet his opinions are quite applicable to all dispersed communities. In his essay “It ain’t where you’re from, it’s where you’re at” (1997), he adeptly debunked Euro-American modernity which makes conditions viable to aspire for authentic natural and stable identity. To Western thinking, the identity is determined by ethnic and cultural particularities not by historical and social determinants (Gilroy 4). Benita Parry who often sides with marginals, claims that “those infatuated by the liberating effects of dispersion do not address the material and existential conditions of the relocated communities which include economic migrants, undocumented immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and victims of ethnic cleansing, and whose mobility, for from being an elective ethical practice, is corrected” (Parry 100). Even Homi K. Bhabha failed to understand ‘the material and existential conditions’ of relocated communities. Actually he focused on “the cosmopolitan artist, writer, intellectual, professional, financier and entrepreneur in the metropolis, rather than the ‘grim prose’ of low-waged workers in Western capitals and other such subaltern figures” (MacLeod 4). In such condition, it seems a little early to celebrate multiculturalism of metropolis, and it cannot bring about social transformation. Actually two strands of diasporic people emerges – privileged and underprivileged. The latter still face various kinds of challenges pertaining to survival and existence. Writing in the diasporic cases nothing more, nothing less is translational. As Richard Stamelman in his essay “Nomadic Writing: The Poetics of Exile” (1985) told that ‘diaspora is the condition of all writings’. Rajeep S. Patke explains the diasporic condition of writing in the following words: ‘all writing is committed to the task of preserving, transmitting and recuperating meanings that are continually threatened by dispersal’ (Patke 111). Migrants living in metropolis ‘take on the more active role of cultural translator. They

encounter other translated restless men and women, and translate their experiences to each other to evolve new languages of desire and affirmation: circuits of activism, circuits of desire' (Young 142). Such cross-fertilisation led to the process of 'creolisation' of language and culture. As Kobena Mercer in his book *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994) wrote:

Across whole range of cultural forms there is a "syncretic" dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and "creolises" them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning. The subversive force of this hybridizing tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where creoles, patois, and black English decentre, destabilize and carnivalise the linguistic domination of "English"- the nation language of the master-discourse- through strategic inflections, re-accentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes (Young 25).

Stuart Hall in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" devaluated traditional notions of culture and identity as something stable and fixed and located in a specific location. The matter of fact is that while crossing over borders, the diasporics translated their cultural identity and artifacts into new cultural terrains. He writes that instead of thinking 'identity' as an "already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 222). In short, identity is not static. It is continually in the process of becoming and evolving. Hall then suggested two principal ways of thinking about cultural identity. The traditional notion of identity is based on 'a shared history and ancestry' and 'cultural codes', 'shared culture' which is 'stable and unchanging'. The second view of identity which Hall favors is in terms of 'becoming' with its 'ruptures and discontinuities'. As he writes:

Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (Hall 225).

Further Hall says that 'diaspora experience' cannot be defined by the notions of 'purity' but by 'the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity'. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. Paul Gilroy, Kobena Mercer, and Stuart Hall, whom Sudesh Mishra calls theorists of 'situational laterality'. Arjun Appadurai formulated his 'disjuncture theory' to feature out the social, economic, and cultural aspects of fast changing modern world. According to him, 'cultural homogenization' and 'cultural heterogenization' are two central forces active in today's world. Financially one rich nation-state seeks to

homogenize another poor nation-state by flowing into it cultural artifacts. As we see the Americanization of the many developing nation-states. This is one kind of threat. Appadurai so writes: 'One man's imagined community is another man's political prison' (Appadurai 295). In effect, rich nation-states firstly having political permission bring about homogenization. And this process is one way to invade another's cultural, social, and economic sovereignty. According to Appadurai, cultural heterogeneity is brought about in and through five dimensions—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes. By 'ethnoscapes', Appadurai means "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree." 'Technoscapes' refer to diffusion of high and low, both mechanical and informational technologies across the world overlooking political boundaries, effected by multinational enterprises which results in the transportation of human resources also. Appadurai argues that 'technoscapes' and 'ethnoscapes' both are closely linked, since the moving actors are capable to manipulate the moving technologies. In other words, 'technoscapes' refer to the flow of technologies into various countries. It is not mindful to the notions of nation, nationalism, and boundary. "Technoscapes" are of course related to 'finanscapes'. The latter refers to the global flow of capital through "currency markets, national stock exchanges, and commodity speculations." "Mediascapes" refer to "the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information" across the world created by these media. "Mediascapes" facilitate 'ideoscapes'. "Ideoscapes", Appadurai defines as "political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it." Appadurai's thesis is important to diaspora studies as it examines the replacement of people along with the flow of culture, economy, capital, technology, ideas, and products. In fact, Appadurai related diaspora studies to the globalisation studies (Appadurai 297-300).

The term diaspora immediately conjures up the image of a journey. But this journey is altogether different one. Diasporic journeys are about settling down and putting roots or 'staying put' elsewhere (Brah 182). Home is central to the thinking of Avtar Brah about diaspora. Brah writes in her *Cartographies of Diaspora*, "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" (Brah 192). This tendency is what she calls 'homing desire'. Brah and Phoenix in an essay "Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality" write of 'diaspora space' (already introduced in *Cartographies of Diaspora*) which according to them, is a unison of 'border', 'home politics', and 'diaspora'. They write:

The intersection of these terms is understood through the concept of 'diaspora space' which covers the entanglements of genealogies

of dispersal with those of 'staying put'. They further argue that "the concept of 'diaspora space' embraces the intersection of 'difference' in its variable forms, placing emphasis upon emotional and psychic dynamics as much as socio-economic, political, and cultural differences (Brah and Phoenix 83).

James Clifford in his essay simply titled *Diasporas* (1994) is mainly concerned with 'experiences of displacement' and imagining process of home being away from original home, and with the question as to how these are addressed in diaspora discourses. The poetics of diaspora, according to him "is increasingly invoked by displaced people who feel (maintain, revive, invent) a connection with a prior home." According to Clifford, diasporics commonly share "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (Clifford 305). According to him, "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension" (Clifford 312). Rajeev S. Patke similarly opines that diasporics combine loss and gain, the elegiac and the recuperation, by depicting the self as the bearer of a legacy which belongs neither to a past that is mourned is the memory nor to a future that is celebrated in augury, but to the acts of mind in which pastness and futurity have their being, negatively shaped by the feelings and experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, and positively through identification with world historical, cultural/political forces, such as Africa or China. Vijay Mishra in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) expresses his unwillingness to call all people moving away from their land of origin as diasporic people. No doubt, around ten million people are mobile but all of them cannot be designated as diaspora. Once in 1980's *The Statesman* claimed that Indians are ubiquitous. It does not mean that all are diasporic. According to Vijay Mishra, only those are diasporic who could not even today forget the hangover (trauma) of the moment of dispersal. Although they are rich enough but they could adjust with their hostland emotionally, and nor could return to their land of origin. Actually Vijay Mishra reserves the term 'diaspora' only for unhappier breed, whose progress and prosperity could not compensate for the pain they once suffered and continue to suffer due to social exclusion and marginalization. They still long for which is no longer existing in real terms. Other than the unhappier breed, they are immigrants, transnationals or global people.

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. Diasporas are both celebrated (by late/postmodernity) and maligned (by early modernity) (Mishra 1). Actually Vijay Mishra is more interested in recovering the

bitter experiences during the horrible, dehumanizing, and life threatening journeys across the 'black atlantic'; slaves and indentured laborers savored, as represented and depicted in various writings on Indian diaspora. The 'diasporic imaginary' is another concept of Vijay Mishra. He defines it as, "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (Mishra 14). The term 'imaginary', he uses in Lacanian sense meaning a desire, wish or image that diasporas prefer to be identified with.

Brij V. Lal and others in *The Encyclopedia of Indian Diaspora* (2006) defines diasporics as to those 'who migrate alongside their cultural artefacts and cultural baggage - ideas and values in terms of religion, artistic endeavor, social norms, political thoughts, ethical suppositions etc' (Lal 18). Indian diaspora is a typical meet of many cultures, histories, and backgrounds. These diasporics evolve continuously 'a version of India' working in their socio-economic, political and cultural institutions basing on their past remembrances. A wish to return and be with their homeland people is typical to Indian diaspora consciousness. They are altogether unmindful to the eventual disappointment and disillusionment. Lal writes: "In subtle and sensitive ways, the writers of Indian diaspora bring to the international literary consciousness the lived experiences of Indian communities scattered across the globe. Once this experience was deemed unworthy of serious literary engagement; now it finds its way into the heart of the former Empire's literary culture. It is literature to which children of the diaspora can relate, and of which they are justly proud" (Lal 12).

In the end of the discussion on diaspora social, cultural, and mental make-up, it can be said that all diasporics are unique and differ with locale and period. But sense or feeling of being uprooted from stays at the heart of whole world diaspora community. They are ever afflicted by the pangs (imagined and material) of exclusion and circumcision in their adopted locale. Diaspora Studies is exclusively devoted to such communities. It seeks to bring fundamental changes in the relations of home and host. Diasporics certainly brought new changes and challenges before global curtain of life. It has more bright future as diasporics are global players of global stage.

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