
Negotiating Diaspora: Hybridity, Memory, and Shifting Identities in Contemporary Theory and Indian Writing

Jijo C George

Assistant Professor, Department of English at Ewing Christian College,

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Abstract:

Diasporic Writing, as a theoretical framework, negotiates the interface between space and time on the one hand and memory on the other. What began as a limited body of writing focusing on the theme of displacement has widened its horizon to comprise different trajectories of critical thought regarding diaspora. My paper will focus on these trajectories and deal with the diverse forms that diaspora has taken such as multiculturalism, transnationalism and so on. The paper will also study the concept of hybridity both as a positive and negative condition. In order to do this, the theoretical framework of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha will be studied in order to foreground the presence of “specular border intellectual” and “syncretic border intellectual” (Abdul Jan Mohammed). The specular border intellectual will remain an exile under any condition, whereas the syncretic border intellectual will happily negotiate new spaces and adapt him/herself quickly. The paper will showcase that Edward Said’s writings, as a diasporic writer, will serve as counterhistories which will contest the false constructions of the Islamic world. The paper will also study the theoretical frameworks of R. Parthasarathy and Uma Parameswaran to foreground the significant transition from nostalgia to a happy hybridity in the Indian context. In this context the paper will study the topos of Homeland and hostland and argue that both of them are imaginary or illusory.

Key Words: diaspora, nostalgia and memory, specular border intellectual, syncretic border intellectual, homeland and hostland topos.

Introduction:

Diasporic Writing, as a theoretical framework, negotiates the interface between space and time on the one hand and memory on the other. The term diaspora is connected with seed dispersal and so originally is a botanical phenomenon. Migrants and literary critics who studied the phenomenon of human movement from one place adopted this term to study the living conditions of the migrants and their psychological impact on the people who migrated. Derek Walcott has argued that the migrant often possesses a double consciousness, a left over native one and a First World one” (Nayar 179). Diaspora, then, can mean the

voluntary movement or forced displacement of people from their homeland to new regions. Diasporans have the problem of maintaining a collective identity which is often sustained by reference to the ethnic myth. It is the presence of a common origin, historical experience and some kind of attachment to a geographic location. The term Diaspora, which was originally a homogeneous concept, has become diasporas comprising conceptual frameworks such as multiculturalism and transnationalism. Terms such as multiculturalism and transnationalism constantly aim at a reconciliation between two apparently irreconcilable cultures. Defining diaspora as a social construct Chris Berry says, "...it is a discordant and dynamic conjuncture constituted when different cultures themselves with different histories and different trajectories meet, intersect, overlay, fragment and produce hybrid forms within a certain geographic space" (Paranjape 5).

Diaspora, with regard to temporality can be divided into three distinct historical moments: 1. Classical/ pre-modern - The Jewish and Armenian migration, 2. Early modern indentured labor / people looking for greener pastures, and 3. the post-modern- quest for and questioning identity. Related to this are the three phases of the narrative of ethnicity:

- a. the initial phase during which the immigrants suppress their identity.
- b. the middle phase during which they actively assert their identity.
- c. the final phase when the immigrants seek a hyphenated integration of their ethnicity with the national identity.

Considering the historical causality of such social formations, diaspora, then, represents a meeting point of cultures leading to cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism focuses on a transitional phase in which homogeneous cultures become heterogeneous ones. The United States of America is a good example where by the middle of the twentieth century people from different parts of the world immigrated for a better life and attempted to coexist. This was a result of the widespread reception of the American Dream and the holocaust which forced many exiles and refugees to seek a safer place. The coexistence paved the way for the origin of the idea of cultural pluralism or the melting pot. Diasporic consciousness is marked by dual or multiple identifications giving rise to transnational imagery. Diasporic consciousness can be seen in two forms: a *Dual consciousness* as it enshrines a consciousness rooted in a conflict struggling for an elusive confluence and pluralizes the existence of an individual who straddles between nationality and exile and a *Dual consciousness* which comprises a consciousness that places a greater emphasis on a synergy between two apparently conflicting cultures. Diaspora can, then, be seen as a psychological and emotional state of a person strutting between two cultural sites. This continuum of a perpetual shift between the states of dislocation and relocation makes one question the sustainability of an individual in such a situation.

Gayatri Spivak explains diaspora as a mode of cultural production "the discourse of cultural specificity and difference, packaged for transnational consumption through global technologies, particularly through the medium of 'microelectronic transnationalism' represented by electronic bulletin boards and the internet" (qtd. in Vijay Mishra 28).

Abdul Jan Mohamed has erected a model in which he identifies two kinds of border intellectual: *the specular border intellectual* and *syncretic border intellectual*. The specular border intellectual willy-nilly becomes a fragmented subject and finds her/himself unable or unwilling to be ‘at home’ in the new culture or is likely to be critical of it. The syncretic border intellectual, on the contrary aiming at a unitary consciousness is “more at home in both cultures and reaches out to both simultaneously combining and synthesizing them” (Jan Mohamed 81). Creating a prosthesis from the inside, s/he secures a hybridity which empowers an individual to be at home in a wide variety of cultures. Hybridity is a condition of looking toward both, being both here and there. Jan Mohamed feels that a syncretic border intellectual has a chance of living a meaningful life in a world where identity formation has been problematized by a wide variety of discourses. Homi Bhabha suggests that an energized third space would create a chance to question identity formations, at the same time aim at a multiple one.

Edward Said is a specular intellectual with a difference. In his poetics of exile he identifies the need for a ‘cultural specificity’ which would consciously undermine and weaken the hegemonic structures created by a metacenter. Said deliberately remains a “specular border intellectual” to create counter histories, issuing out of the cultural specificity that he consciously clings to, which would challenge the dominant history of a metacenter. Counter narratives are those of the repressed cultures that are either sustained by or subsumed under the metacenter or at least threatened to. Subsuming looks at the hegemonizing center from the standpoint of a political exile. It is the small identity that is native or national, which has been contaminated or eaten up through a lasting disunited consciousness. There are communities that live in these interstitial spaces whose counter narratives “continually ‘evolve and erase’ the totalizing boundaries of the modern nation state. We must always keep open a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological or dialectical” (Homi Bhabha 93). At the same time Edward Said is against a cultural specificity which would create a parochial identity that would promote a problematic homogeneity.

Diaspora, thus, causes unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels. A person’s mind will have to work with at least two epistemologies. He or she who has lost the center that used to unify contingencies of history has been affected to the extent of dismantling the comforting and stable prospectus. Homi Bhabha, through interstitial perspectives and meaning production, provides an answer to the dangers of cultural binarism, an us vs them syndrome and the fundamentalist urge to seek “pure” cultural forms. . It speaks of the revival of a pre-colonial past like the folk or tribal cultural forms and conventions within nativist or even reactionary movements. It adopts contemporary artistic and social production and provides the reader with the conditions of globalization, multiculturalism and transnationalism.

The exile is dyspeptic which is a kind of disagreeableness that makes him dislike the trappings of accommodation and national wellbeing. An exile in his battle against the

metacenter can use his mini-narratives by being distinctly grounded in cultural- historical center as an armament to liberate. Said points out the manipulative and totalizing danger of this identarian politics. The center generates a strong sense of identity on the part of those in power.

If he rejects the meta-identity of the center he also belittles the small national identity of a battling community. In his view the small identity tends to separate and privilege itself and thereby alienates from the Intercommunity mosaic” (Edward Said 103). Hybridity, on the contrary, is the rejection of a single or unified identity and a preference for multiple cultural locations and identities. The hybridity experienced is not just philosophical it is also local and existential. Said’s exile appears to be moving from hybridity to heteroglossia of the world. Counternarratives dismantle the colonial imperial hegemonizing center. Dismantling leads to intermingled visions. Chinua Achebe said “I should like to see the world universal banned altogether from discussions of African literature until such a time as people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow self-serving parochialism of Europe” (Nayar 180) Diasporic experience to be called diasporic must involve a significant crossing of borders of region or a language but more often are multiple borders such as the loss of homeland would suggest. Home country or homeland is not real but real enough to impede Americanization. William Safran provides us with a model.

- ❖ Dispersal- from original center to at least two peripheral places
- ❖ Collective memory of the homeland
- ❖ Alienation — a belief that they cannot be accepted by the host land
- ❖ Respect and longing for the homeland — a desire to reconnect with the

ancestral home, a place to return to.

- ❖ Belief In the restoration of the homeland
- ❖ Self-definition in terms of this homeland.

Using the Safran Model as a frame of reference the paper will study the prominent diasporans in the context of India such as Raja Rao, R. Parthasarathy, Sujata Bhatt, Uma Parameswaran, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Raja Rao claimed that “I carry India with me wherever I go”. Here India becomes a *darshana* a vision which is there in an unproblematic way. Radhakrishnan observes that “Discovery of an authentic India cannot rule over the reality of multiple perspectives and moreover cannot legislate or hand down authenticity from a position of untested moral or political high ground” (59). Homeland, then, becomes a mythic place in the diasporic imagination. For R. Parthasarathy feeling at home in India is a problem. In his autobiographical poem *Rough Passage* he says.

It’s a tired sea accosts the visitor

Between Fort St. George and San Thome

Here, once, ships bottled the harbor With spices, cinnamon and cloves.

Inland, an old civilization

Hissed in the alleys and wells.

The sun has done its worst:

Skimmed a language, Worn it to a shadow.

The hourglass of the Tamil mind

Is replaced by the exact chronometer of Europe.

R. Parthasarathy brings out the pangs of alienation in these lines. Alluding to the east India Company's commercial interest in India in the first four lines, the poet talks about the conflict between cultures. The "old civilization" refers to the Tamil civilization, which was once a colossal presence. Its voice was vociferous, authentic and persuasive. But after the advent of the British the Tamil civilization's voice has become so feeble that it now "hisses in alleys and wells". The poet also talks about the colonizer's interest in the languages of the colonized. The local languages are skimmed thereby undermining its power. The last two lines suggest the creation of a meta-center when the "exact chronometer of Europe" replaces the "the hour-glass of the Tamil mind". Here we have an individual who finds it difficult to assimilate and accommodate with his own culture as he is alienated due to the presence of a foreign culture. The poet is a specular border intellectual who struggles to negotiate the presence of multiple cultural positions. Uma Parameswaran, on the contrary, is different. Though she writes from Canada, in her poem *Trishanku* she suggests the possibility of a syncretism.

I shall bring Ganga as Bhagiratha did of old to our land

Our Assiniboine

And the flute player

Dark as kaya blossom

Shall dance on the waters of La Salle

She wishes to make Ganga flow in "our Assiniboine" and to make Lord Krishna dance "on the waters" of La Salle in Canada. This poem foregrounds the poet's desire for a meaningful hybridity not a pointless mimicry.

Sujatha Bhatt in her *The Multicultural Poem* poignantly interrogates a diasporan's desire to become multicultural:

Is there a cure

For the numbness within the skull?

The exiled composer's skull –

Listen to the exiled echo –

The echo mixed

with the numbness. The multicultural poem is a creature, a being

whose spirit breathes like an orchid in the sun

still wet from the rain

on a day when the garden tilts slippery, sublime – on a day when the garden dazzles

growing loud with birdsong

It will not settle down.

It will not be your pet. It wants to be read at the border to the person who checks your passport. The multicultural poem does not expect the reader to 'understand' anything.

After all, it is used to being misunderstood.

It speaks of refraction.

It wants more dialogue

Between the retina and the light.

It says, ‘get rid of the squint.’

The poem begins on a negative note when the poet speaks about the numb skull of an exile. Realizing the importance of giving up of the parochial and narrow-minded national identity, the poet clamors for a multicultural consciousness “whose spirit breathes/like an orchid in the sun/ still wet from the rain/on a day when the garden tilts slippery, sublime”. She argues that a multicultural consciousness will be as natural as the landscape described in the poem. To a passport checking officer who looks for specific identities the multicultural poem be deliberately problematic. It will not be a pet to be tamed. Further the poem showcases that a multicultural consciousness which “wants more dialogue/Between the retina and the light” says, “get rid of the squint”. In other words, the unique consciousness called multicultural will aim at a syncretism which transcend pointless binaries and aim at a confluence consciously subverting the myth of conflict between cultures owing to a non-existent myth of the clash of civilizations. So, it is clear through both creative writing and critical discourses that the terrains of diaspora are constantly shifting to accommodate newer visions and perceptions.

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