

CULTURE AND CONFLICT: THE PLIGHT OF DIASPORAS

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Abstract

In an ever-growing and changing world, when the idea of a world-family is often floated and quoted, Is it possible to ever actually feel 'at home' in another country? The orient and the occident often meet each other in the form of numerous little 'Diasporas', but can they ever seamlessly merge into each other? The term 'nostalgia' and its constant reflection in numerous post-colonial texts attempts to answer these ideas. Multiple numerous texts try to reflect the plight of displaced communities, and how the displaced feel when they have lost their 'motherland'. With the recent political climate and the numerous controversies that discriminatory attitude sparks, movements such as 'Black lives matter', debates on religious tolerance, the refugee crisis and those who have lost the right to a 'home' are again brought to the fore. This paper attempts to observe certain such texts and tries to understand how humans create mind-shackles for their own selves.

Keywords: Diaspora, Post-colonial, Immigrant, Bio mythography, Nostalgia, Motherhood.

A diaspora can be defined as a small population (even a group of families) who has moved away from the place of their origin to a new geographic locale. Such a movement may be forced- as in the case of slave trade; or voluntary- as in case of natives who go abroad in search of greener pastures. However, Vijay Mishra is of another opinion, he says, "All diasporas are unhappy...", he goes on to describe diasporas as those people who do not feel one with the identities around them. There is a constant feeling of alienation in their immediate surroundings, and a constant yearning for the past.

The idea of colonization has often been linked to the formation of such Diasporas. Colonization sometimes forces the natives to run away from their homeland to another, more peaceful place. This can also happen in case of a military upheaval or a civil war, as in the book 'The Kite Runner' by Khaled Hosseini. The very recent Syrian refugee crisis, the gut wrenching stories of those who choose death over homeland, those trying to escape the atrocities of North –Korean dictatorship, spark the very same image of a ravaged land. In

other cases, the colonizers forcefully take the natives as slaves or captives to make them work as laborers in an alien land. Multiple colored writers often write of this displacement along with a fond memory that their grandparents or parents often were forced to leave behind. In yet another scenario, colonization by religion makes the native feel that their religion is inferior to the 'new' religion and so the native forgets his/her own past and wholeheartedly accepts this new religion and the oppression that comes with it. V.S. Naipaul in his essay 'Our Universal Civilization' says that "no colonization could have been greater than this colonization by faith." He gives an example of the Muslim population in Malaysia, who have imbibed the foreign religion of Islam (Malaysia was not an Arab country). They are such religious fanatics that they wish to wipe their minds blank so that they could hold nothing but their faith.

Another such example of colonization by faith can be found in the post-colonial novel 'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe. Written about the Nigerian way of life, prior to colonization, the novel focuses on the Igbo society. Around the twentieth century, when the British, led by the 'white man's burden' went on to 'civilize' other new-found landmasses, they came across this society. The missionaries used religion as a tool to tear apart the social fabric of this patriarchal and war-centric community. Everything that was weak or 'womanly' was shunned by this culture. The colonizers then separated these weak outcasts and included them as one of their own. One such victim is the protagonist Okonkwo's own son Nwoye. Nwoye goes on to join the new religion and becomes an ardent follower of it. Eventually, more and more people from the Igbo community join the new religion and shun their own values, some men like Okonkwo are deeply disturbed but can do nothing to stop their society from tearing apart. Diana Akers Rhoads in 'Culture in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart' says that apart from portraying the dignity and values of Igbo village culture, Achebe makes it clear that the Igbos had no requirement for the white man to carry them into the modern civilization. Within the Igbo culture changes and progressive ideas were welcome.

In the essay 'Indians in New Worlds: Mauritius and Trinidad', Thomas Hylland Eriksen remarks that the daily encounters that occur amongst people of different ethnic groups make the fundamentals of ethnicity. Trivial encounters between inter-ethnic members of communities can reveal a lot about the workings of a society. He further argues that when we use the term 'ethnicity', we indicate towards someone's demand to be recognized as culturally different. However, it also refers to the need of that person to be similar to others in some aspects. This forms the basis of interaction between two ethnic groups.

It has always been an aspect of social communication between the different ethnicities involved. However, this communication is, more often than not, negative in nature. The prejudice that occurs in a native's mind, usually that of being culturally superior to an immigrant from another place gives rise to racism. It is a xenophobic notion that makes one believe that she/he is of a better race than the other. A twentieth century novel, 'Zami: A new

Spelling of my name' by Audre Lorde shows the racism and psychological disturbance that follows when a native actually moves away from their homeland. A 'biomythography', Zami narrates the story of Audre's childhood. When her family moved to America, they had no idea of the rampant racism that followed the Black community. As a child, following her mother, Audre would often be spitted at by white people. Surprisingly, even her school teachers are biased towards her and treat the white kids better. On a trip to Washington D.C., Audre and her family are not allowed to have ice-cream because of the racist Jim Crow laws. Her mother too is thrown out of her job for being a black woman.

The great psychological impact that such incidences have on Audre's mind is indicated by the fact that Audre tries finding 'Carricacou', her mother's homeland in her atlas. She is unable to find any such land because no such place existed for Americans. She can only find 'Curacao', a Dutch colony. The entire family works hard and constantly dreams of going 'back home'. "This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home." (Zami: 13). This obsession with the idea of home as a place of eventual return is reiterated throughout the story. It also shows that no matter what, the immigrants could never consider this new place as 'home' because it fails to give them the feeling of belonging and protection expected from homeland.

Based on ethnicity, race, gender, language or nationality, people often discriminate to such an extent that the hatred manifests itself in the form of a hate crime. A 'hate crime' then, is an extreme and violent form of racism. The victims are often from minorities or different social groups. This form of crime includes bullying, harassment, abusive behavior, offensive actions, letters or even physical violence. In many countries, hate crimes are punishable by law, still there has been a rise in it. Spurred on by Islamophobia and xenophobia, hate crimes have spiked over 6 % in Trump's presidency.

African-Americans, another minority group, have always been at the receiving end of such hatred since the Civil War. A very recent example can be of the 'Black lives Matter' movement that gained much momentum and was trending on social media to oppose the police brutality against a colored citizen. Several black narratives such as 'Zami' by Lorde, 'Beloved' by Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou's autobiographies and countless more, have first-hand accounts of the inhumane and unimaginable horrors that was meted out to the Black women and to the community in general. In Beloved, the protagonist Sethe kills her two year old daughter to escape the trauma of slavery that would follow. She would rather kill her own children than to allow them to be taken prisoners by the plantation owners.

In addition to the racism that immigrants often face in a distant land, there is the additional trauma of an alienated culture. A culture vastly different, sometimes opposite to, one's own. This leads to 'nostalgia', a deep longing for past and security. Nostalgia was described in the seventeenth century as a medieval condition. The construction from the Greek originated 'Nostos' (home) and 'algos' (pain) implied the discomfort and acute suffering that one experiences in the present which necessitates a recollection of the memories of the past. Nostalgia can turn out to be a disturbing state- a state wherein the individual yearns for the past- a condition including anxiety, anorexia, weeping and smothering sensations. In 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', Svetlana Boyn says that among the first victims of nostalgia were people displaced in the seventeenth century- students from republic of Berne, domestic servants and slaves working in Germany and France etc. She also believes that nostalgia may appear to be the yearning for a different time- the time of childhood and a protected secure environment.

Nostalgia according to her is the rebellion against time and progress. The great psychological dangers of nostalgia manifest themselves when a person confuses the actual home with the imaginary one. In extreme cases, a phantom homeland creates itself in the mind of the victim, which may cost him/her, their sanity. Unrestrained nostalgia can create monsters. Boyn also argues that nostalgia is not specific to any discipline; it has baffled psychologists, theorists, philosophers, sociologists and literary scholars alike. Apart from nostalgia, a feeling of loneliness, confusion and psychological disorders follow the native. Cultural conflict and a feeling of alienation dominate such a person. For many people, such a dramatic change is not a welcome one, especially for old people, who are deeply rooted in their culture. One such example can be found in Khaled Hosseini's novel 'The Kite Runner'. In the story, the protagonist Amir and his father are forced to move away from their homeland Afghanistan in a military upheaval. They move to America, although his father has no knowledge of the English language because he thinks that it would be better for his son's future. Once in America, the father, a righteous man, refuses to accept welfare fund or free food. Once a very rich man, he now worked at a gas pump station and washed windshields. His father is unable to adjust to this new lifestyle and becomes very aggressive when asked for an I.D. card by a shopkeeper Mr. Nguyen. Amir explains the reason for his father's behavior. In Afghanistan, they would break the branch of a tree and that would serve as a credit card. For every loaf of 'naan' (a type of bread) that Amir would buy, the bread maker would carve a notch on the tree branch. At the end of the month, his father would pay the bread maker for the number of notches carved. They never had any use for an I.D.

Yet another example of displacement that brings psychological disturbance with itself can be found in Gurdial Singh's short story, 'A Season of No Return'. The protagonist, Kauri is taken away from her ancestral home, a village in Punjab, to a city to help her son and daughter-in-law. Having all sorts of comfort that one expects, Kauri is still not at ease. She is

neurotic and has fits and occasional anxiety attacks. She becomes 'restive' towards all the material comfort that is being given to her and also becomes immune to her daughter-in-law's sweet words. She dreams of Punjab and its smell, the cattle and the farms. Eventually she descends into a state of neurosis and the only cure that occurs to her is going back home. But the question is, will this cure work? Boyn writes that, "By the end of the eighteenth century, doctors discovered that a return home did not always treat the symptoms. In fact, once at home, the patients often died. The object of longing migrated to faraway lands beyond the confines of motherland." The overwhelming sense of nostalgia works at so deep a level that the motherland illusion takes over the sanity and eventually the life of the individual. Ironically, it reminds one of the tale of Laila-Majnu, the iconic couple who were separated. Majnu, who yearned for Laila, could not recognize her on seeing her after a long time, for him, she has become an unattainable dream, almost like a homeland that one can only dream of, but never return to. This homeland now exists only in the psychology of the individual and can never be attained.

The constant reiteration of the occident being a lucrative, attractive place, full of opportunities also promotes migration. The orient becomes the margin, a place with no room for growth or individual talent. The occident on the other hand is the dream land, a place where talent is harbored. Edward Said in his book 'Orientalism', says that the orient has often been portrayed as vicious, naïve, childlike, dependent, immoral, perverted and incapable of self-rule. He argues that the binary between the progressive occident and the oppressive orient has been propagated to control the orient. This gulf has grown so huge, especially in the minds of people, that there is no cure for it. V.S. Naipaul in his essay, gives the example of a journalist from Teheran, who was much opposed to western culture, but wanted both his sons to settle in the United States. Naipaul himself is a victim of this mindset because he talks about a universal civilization but fails to include the non-Arab Muslim countries as a part of it. For him, their religious centric ideas hinder their growth. He talks about Iranians, who have no sense of greatness of their own past. He himself moved away from Trinidad to London because, Trinidad for him was the periphery and London, the center. In 'The Kite Runner' too, Amir's father was much happier in Peshawar, but chose to settle in America because he thought it would be better for his son's future.

Essentialism is promoted and hybridity denied to gloss over the social anxiety that Diasporas bring with themselves. Denying an identity to the social misfits and promoting homogeneity works in favor of a fundamental remaking of a national and political identity. Such an idea can be very useful for politicians and is often used. However, it is one of the major causes of social unrest that is spread world over. The refusal to give an identity to the 'other' not only brings acrimony but also promotes hostility and intolerance.

Chinua Achebe once said, "Art has a social purpose and can influence things." Art then can be one of the many mediums used to bridge the gap that exists between the native's

mind and culture, and that of the new geology that one is becoming a part of. People like Salman Rushdie and Aravind Adiga, some of the famous post-colonial writers help in such a process. Their works can serve as memoirs and cultural guides, written by a native informant, someone who can tell the outsider about their ways. Multiple movies and web –series now attempt to include the ‘outsiders’ as one with the nation they are living in. Such an attempt to put the writer-director in the position of the native-informant is an appreciable effort towards familiarizing and sensitizing the ‘others’ to one’s expectations and needs.

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