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From Diaspora to Transnationalism

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Abstract

We live in an age where transnational immigration, border crossings, and global media are proliferating at an increasing rate. Discussions about the self -- which are further intensified by issues of gender, class, race, and nationality -- challenge the grand narratives of the bounded Cartesian self. Acquiring knowledge about issues of self and identity becomes all the more critical in the face of sweeping demographic changes in the United States and Europe where

encounters with diverse histories, languages, religions, and ethnicities have emerged as central to the daily lives in many urban, metropolitan cultural spaces.

Keywords: Diaspora, Transnationalism, Postcolonialism

Diaspora is an old concept whose uses and meanings have undergone dramatic change. Originally, the concept referred only to the historic experience of particular groups, specifically Jews and Armenians. Later, it was extended to religious minorities in Europe. Since the late 1970s, 'diaspora' has experienced a veritable inflation of applications and interpretations. Most definitions can be summed up by three characteristics. Each of these can be subdivided into older and newer usages. The first characteristic relates to the causes of migration and dispersal. Older notions refer to forced dispersal and this is rooted in the experience of Jews, but also – more recently – of Palestinians. Newer notions of diaspora often refer simply to any kind of dispersal, thus including trade diasporas such as that of Chinese, or labour migration diasporas such as those of the Turkish, and the Mexicans (Cohen 2008). The second characteristic links cross-border experiences of homeland with destination. Older notions clearly imply a return to an (imaginary) homeland: an example is homeland oriented projects meant to shape a country's future by influencing it from abroad or by encouraging return there. By contrast, newer uses often replace return with dense and continuous linkages across borders, as in the migration development nexus. Such newer meanings do not remain bound in the imaginary of origin and destination but include countries of onward migration, and thus emphasise lateral ties. The third characteristic concerns the incorporation or integration of migrants and/or minorities into the countries of settlement. Older notions of diaspora implied that its members do not fully integrate

socially – that is, politically, economically, culturally – into the country of settlement, making and maintaining boundaries vis-à-vis the majority group(s). The notion of diaspora is also often associated with boundary maintenance by a dominant majority through discrimination against diaspora groups. Newer notions of diaspora emphasise cultural hybridity in the wake of 'dissemi-nation' (Bhabha, 1994).

The continuing proliferation of the meaning of the term despite attempts at limiting its circulation suggests not the futility of definitional exercises, but the powerful desire for diaspora in contemporary criticism. Despite verging on capriciousness and falling wholly into a dangerous plasticity, diaspora is undeniably here to stay. The turn to diaspora in contemporary criticism is more than just a faddish adoption of a new critical language for the sake of newness. The turn to diaspora signals a demand for finding a way to speak about the complexities of connections between communities of the un-redressed griefs and disarticulated longings from which collectivities emerge. Diaspora brings together communities which are not quite nation, not quite race, not quite religion, not quite homesickness, yet they still have something to do with nation, race, religion, longings for homes which may not exist. The complexities of living in the wake of colonialism mark not the failures of the decolonization movements of the mid-20th century, but the urgency of recognizing the persistence of colonislism's intersections with questions of immigration and citizenship.

Diaspora responds to this urgency. It offers one powerful way of thinking through the displacements engendered by colonialism. It allows a way of understanding the role of uprooting vast communities in the service of Empire as a mode of connection. Thus, African transatlantic slavery, for example, engenders movements as diverse as the Haitian Revolution of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the black British cultural

resistances in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. Similarly, Asian workers on the plantations of Hawaii, Chinese guano pit diggers in South America and South Asian labourers on the plantations of the British West Indies.

One way of introducing the postcolonial diasporas is to accept, if only momentarily, the relatively common claim that postcolonialism, though a profoundly heterogenous body of debate nevertheless exhibits an original investment in the nation as the ground or master trope of resistance, a claim that might find complicated backing from such different texts as *The Wretched of the Earth, Imagined Communities* and *The Empire Writes Back*. The appearances of the postcolonial diasporas would then mark a new disenchantment with nation-based articulations of postcolonialism, a disenchantment which we might ascribe to at least three discursive factors. The first of these three factors is a renewed awareness, born largely of the vital interventions of the Feminist, Marxist and Queer postcolonialisms, of the patriarchal, classist, ethnocentric and homophobic aspects of many Third World or ethnic articulations of nationhood. The second factor is the profound impact of First World ethnic studies' commentary in the establishment of postcolonial studies, commentary which often reflects both spatial and psychic distance from Third World nationalisms, as well as a strong impulse to critique First World nationalisms. The third factor is the emergence of either the reality or the discourse of globalization, in which nation states are (or else presumed to be) fatally eroded by the circulations of global capital and the rise of new communicative technology. Already, this inventory presents certain logical slippages and inconsistencies – for instance, is the nation now a dangerous category to be challenged or a defunct category to be ignored? Nevertheless, we may provisionally assume that what remains fundamental to articulations of the postcolonial diasporas is an impulse to worry the nation.

This impulse is clearly evident in Paul Gilroy's work, *The Black Atlantic*, perhaps one of the most influential sources of postcolonial diasporic discourse. Gilroy's argument is that cultural nationalisms of all sorts too easily devolve into fascism or 'ethnic absolutism' and, in contrast, cultural diasporas, such as *The Black Atlantic*, inspire us to recognize cultural hybridity and endorse social plurality and inclusiveness. What is also significant about *The Black Atlantic* is that its turn to diaspora as that which might inspire better cultural politics is, simultaneously, a turn to race, or at least a specially strategic understanding of racialized culture.

All of this is to suggest that we cannot afford to conceptualize the postcolonial diasporas in any simple relationship either to the nation or to globalization. James Clifford makes this point splendidly in his survey of contemporary invocations of diaspora. At the beginning of his essay, he argues that "contemporary diasporic practices cannot be reduced to epiphenomena of the nation-state or of global capitalism. While defined and constrained by these structures, they also exceed and criticize them: old and new diasporas offer resources for emergent postclonialisms." Clifford elaborates upon this near the end of his essay:

> "In diaspora discourses…, both loss and survival are prefigurative. Of what? We lack a description and are reduced to a merely reactive, stopgap language of posts. The term postcolonial…makes sense only in an emergent, or utopian, context. There are no postcolonial cultures or places: only moments, tactics, discourses. Post- is always shadowed by new-. Yet postcolonial does describe real, if incomplete, ruptures with past structures of domination, sites of current struggle and imagined futures,,, Viewed in this perspective, the diaspora discourse and history currently in the air would be about recovering non-Western, or not-only-Western, models for cosmopolitan life, non-aligned

transnationalities struggling within and against nation-states, global technologies, and markets-resources for a fraught coexistence."

Here, the postcolonial diasporas are not viewed as straightforward reactions to Western political formations, but as 'moments, tactics, discourses', as the confluence of recovered models, political realities, and 'imagined futures' as an agile and complex cultural politics.

The problem lies in equating the diaspora with every form of migration or with every perception of powerlessness. True, those who migrate, say, from villages to cities or those who are excluded from the structures of power do indeed experience something akin to the sense of diasporic displacement. On the other hand, there is nothing alienating or dispossessing about a South Asian's sudden burst of stupendous success in Silicon Valley, where he/she has relocated to better his/her prospects. Such a person's success is celebrated the world over and not invoked to illustrate the misfortunes of forced, cross-continental traffic in human beings. Diasporic experience, as Makarand Paranjape puts it, 'must involve a significant crossing of borders. These may be borders of a region or a language, but more often are multiple borders such as the loss of homeland would suggest."

Thus, the construction of homelands by the diaspora discourses seems to be done in accordance to their own needs and compulsions. In the case of the older diaspora, we see a certain break with the motherland. This break was not voluntary, but enforced by the distances between the motherland and the diasporic settlement, the older, much slower modes of travel, and above all, the lack of economic means to make frequent journeys. In other words, the distance, both physical, but more so psychological, was so vast that the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of

memory and imagination. On the contrary, the manner in which the new diaspora imagines the homeland is to be understood in terms of the logic of the dominant culture, of which it is an ambivalent or unwilling part. While the old diaspora was cut off from the motherland, the new diaspora has unprecedented access to it by virtue of the extensive use of information and communication technologies. What we see, then, is a narrative logic of continuous incorporation and appropriation which reinforces the self-validating logic of the new diaspora. Not forced to leave the motherland, these writers have chosen to relocate themselves in the metropolitan centres for economic gains.

The texts of the new diaspora not only describe the motherland but also justify why it has to be left behind; as Rushdie puts it, "Literature is self-validating." The narratives of the new diaspora, then, are elaborate and eloquent leave-takings, often elegiac in tone. Like Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, which construct the motherland as not only an area of darkness, confusion, violence, but a hopeless and doomed country that must be rejected.

Diasporic writing follows its own rules and themes - as such it constitutes a peculiar subgenre of its own within the wider field of Indian fiction in English. The culture of the Indian diaspora, as Amitav Ghosh points out in his prose piece, The Diaspora in Indian Culture", 2002, is increasingly a factor within the culture of the Indian subcontinent. He elaborates that one of the "interesting features of the cultural representations of space in India is that India has always been constituted as much by the notion of the periphery as it has by the notion of the centre". He finds that this notion of the periphery has now expanded to include the diaspora which he describes as "that part of itself which which is both hostage and representative in the world outside-it is the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself"(250).

In *Jasmine* (1989) Mukherjee tries to unravel the complicated layers of cross-cultural confrontations through a series of adventures which the protagonist undertakes during her odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Jasmine the title character and narrator was born in a rural Indian village called Hasanpur in Punjab. She tells her story

as a twenty four year old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemayer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recent developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that span the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Throughout the course of the novel the title character's identity, along with her name changes and changes again from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jane. The narrative shuffles between past and present, between India of her early life and America of her present one. The past is Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Punjab, her marriage to Prakash who gave her the name Jasmine. The present is her life as Jane in Iowa, where she is a live-in-companion to Bud Ripplemayer a small town banker.

Thus caught between the two cultures of the east and the west, the past and the present, Jasmine constantly shuffles in search of a concrete identity.She debates whether to act according to the desire for freedom which the American life offers her or to be dutiful. The Indian consciousness in which she was raised, embodied by Dida, her grandmother, supports duty. The western consciousness embodied by her Manhattan employers Taylor and Wylie Hayes encourages desire. Jasmine's first encounter with America is a kind of regeneration through violence. She is raped by an ugly monster called Half Face in a remote Florida motel. Being robbed of her chastity, she tries to kill herself. But at this very juncture she discovers her inner urge to live. She cuts her tongue and blood oozes out of it. Now she is a perfect vengeful image

of Goddess Kali, up to kill the monster. She stabs him. After this first act of self-assertion she moves further to New York and lives with Taylor and Wylie Hayes as caregiver to their adopted daughter Duff. She confronts the reality of American society where nothing lasts. As she narrates: "We arrive so eager to learn, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate" (163). As a matter of fact, we should be able to understand what the term diaspora means to an expatriate writer. A review by Brinda Bose on *India Today* assessing *Unaccustomed Earth*, the recent collection of short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri, may give us a few clues to the question. It speaks of Bengali-American fiction and emphasizes the 'cheerless' atmosphere deployed in these stories, whose characters seems to be unhappily, or even tragically, entrapped in-between two disjointed words.

Hyphens are dangerous agencies, ones which split and divide instead of connecting or uniting. Cheerless Lahiri stands high as a valuable case in point. We cannot locate her too easily – given that she is a diasporic writer, is her Bengali identity the most seminal feature in her writing? Which intimations of shared regional backgrounds may be found between her stories and those of Bharati Mukherjee? Perhaps both of them have tried, or are still trying, very hard to grow out of hyphens, in a way that would imply a cosmopolitan stance. Maybe Bharati Mukherjee found her "brave" new land in the States, after rejecting Canada, whereas Jhumpa Lahiri seems to need a neutral ground, neither India nor America.

Her move towards the stark boredom of a migrant's life without acceptable landmarks, either intellectual or emotional, loads anew the notion of diaspora. It transcends economical or social needs (that is, the need to survive or to improve one's status), such as embodied for instance in the novel *Jasmine* (189) by Bharati Mukherjee, whose heroine discards 'anugamana'

in favour of clean toilets and more glamorous ways of life. In the concluding story '*Hema and Kaushik*' of her latest collection, Jhumpa Lahiri seems to discover, together with her characters, not a new (re)location, but the beauties of nomadism, the joy of being rootless, best in Rome.

The transition here is from the prisonhouse of dharmic gender (such as understood by Bharati Mukherjee) to the inner diaspora (a sort of postmodern Grand Tour) in search of a lost balance. This pursuit from the elsewhere of migration to the anywhere of a random pilgrimage reaching an 'accustomed' land moves away from the diasporic (un)settler out of an actual nowhere, be it England, Canada or the United States. Jhumpa Lahiri does not play anyhow the solitary reaper within the diasporic field. Her Indo-British counterparts have gone or are just going the same way. I would quote foremost *Tourism* (2006) by Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal, a young Punjabi migrant of second generation, one who looks at India through the scorching eyes of S.V. Naipaul and who westernizes his script by means of alienation and excessive sex.

His searching novel *Tourism* updates *The Foreigner* by Camus and helps us to introduce the notion of aimless wandering instead of a disaporic view. *Tourism* indicates an estranging frame of mind, a staggering condition of unbelonging which is metaphysical, rather than ethnical. Another young 'British novelist' that is Hari Kunzru in his novel *Transmission* traces a part of the lives of three diverse characters Leela Zahir, an actress, Arjun Mehta, a computer expert, and Guy Swift, a marketing executive – traversing through Bollywood, the Silicon Valley, and London. In this novel he overstates as it were the ethnic side of his narration, so as to turn the existential pains connected with the diaspora to an excessive figuration of reactive invisibility. Informatics becomes the key to terrorism and maps simultaneously a no-land which should be viewed as the parodic counterpart, in terms of the ethnic picaresque, of the 'unaccustomed geography' postulated by Jhumpa Lahiri.

The main problem all these diasporic writers have apparently to cope with seems to regard regressive behavior on the part of the migrant. This undeclared fear is undoubtedly behind the cheerless pathos in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories. Her truncated lives are strongly reminiscent of the failed idylls we may find in Bengali films: *Bariwali* or even *Chokher Bali* both by Rituparno Ghosh. Solitude and decline, transitions in manners and mutinous attitudes define the concealed link which inter-connects the dreary perspective inherent in the Bengali-American stories by Jhumpa Lahiri and the chronicles of defeat contrived by Rituparno Ghosh. Both of them illustrate a society split within its value and past its prime. With a difference, however, in so much as Jhumpa Lahiri dramatizes her script by means of external catastrophic occurrences, instead of deepening the inner frame of mind of her characters. When she tries to do that, in as '*Hema and Kaushik*', to express the unfulfilled feeling of love that eventually leads to the doomed separation of the two lovers, she does not know better than having one of them killed in the tsunami, according to perfect Bollywood style.

Classic definitions of diaspora and also their subsequent refinement and deconstruction tend to portray a rather static entity: a historical process of spreading and scattering to produce a particular 'ethnic' population distribution and a 'state of being' or 'diasporic consciousness' that likewise does not stress further movement, except perhaps in terms of a 'floating' liminality and hybridity. Even if the (often mythical) return to the diasporic hearth is written into the aetiology of diaspora à la Safran, few scholars have paid much attention to this final phase, in which the diaspora is 'unmade'. It is almost as though the very definition of diaspora assumes that diasporic populations aspire to but cannot return. This may indeed have been the case in the past, and may still be so in some diasporas for whom the point of origin no longer exists or cannot be identified. Increasingly, however, a combination of the maintenance of the diaspora's ethnic (or

other) identity and improved means of long-distance travel enables a return to the land of parents and ancestors to become a reality.

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