

DIASPORA IDENTITIES

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Abstract

Diasporic literature is a contested topic which has commanded growing interest in literary studies. Diasporas are defined as people who have left their homes to settle in strange countries. As migrants they seek refuge and protection while projecting their culture and communicating positively to the host culture. This paper examines the term diaspora, with respect to identity and the postcolonial discomforts of the marginalized, sense of alienation, cultural, social, and personal. Identity crises or search for identity has received great impetus in postcolonial culture. Identity formation and identity consciousness is influenced by the family, society, and religious beliefs of a person. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference. Identity crises experienced by characters from Sunetra Gupta's novels "Memories of Rain" and "A Sin of Color" are presented here.

Key words:

Diaspora Identities - Identity formation - Patriarchal domestic space - individual identity - Diasporic identity - Identity formation of Moni - identity formation of Neerupama, Reba, and Niharika.

Introduction

Every diasporic movement claims a historical significance, as it carries within itself the kernel of the nation's history. Diaspora is a journey towards self-realization, self-recognition, self-knowledge and self-definition. In postcolonial society the rediscovery of identity is often the object of passionate research. According to Joss Elson (1987), identity can be considered a means to "preserving the continuity of the self, linking the past, and the present". Identity formation, also known as individuation, is the development of the distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity (known as personal continuity) in a particular stage of life in which individual characteristics are possessed and by which a person is recognized or known (such as the establishment of a reputation). This process defines individuals to others and themselves. Pieces of the person's actual identity include a sense of continuity, a sense of uniqueness from others, and a sense of affiliation. Identity formation leads to a number of issues of personal identity and an identity where the individual has some sort of comprehension of themselves as a discrete and separate entity. This may be

through individuation whereby the undifferentiated individual tends to become unique, or undergoes stages through which differentiated facets of a person's life, tend toward becoming a more indivisible whole. Identity is often described as finite and consisting of separate and distinct parts (family, cultural, personal, professional, etc.), yet according to Parker J. Palmer, it is an ever-evolving core within where our genetics (biology), culture, loved ones, those we cared for, people who have harmed us and people we have harmed, the deeds done (good and ill) to self and others, experiences lived, and choices made come together to form who we are at this moment (en. wikipedia.org/wiki/identity_formation).

Identity formation

The identity of a person is shaped by the perception of the world surrounding one. It is based on religion, race, class, economic, and social status of family, cultural, and religious beliefs shared by the society in which the individual lives. When a person migrated from the society of one's birth and bearing, most of these beliefs follow the migrant to the country of migration which sociologist *N Jeyaram* referred as 'the socio cultural baggage carried by the migrant'.

In the first generation of immigrants, migration causes alienation, nostalgia for the past, and rootlessness as they still cling to the cultural beliefs, practices, and norms of the homeland. There is resistance in making a transition. The first generation Diaspora clings to food, clothes, and language as the most obvious markers of Indianness. This sets them apart and highlights their difference. The displacement or dislocation creates a position of live in between, or living on the border. This displacement gives rise to the concept of double consciousness and unhomeliness. *Lois Tyson* analyses this concept 'as the two features of postcolonial diaspora.' Double consciousness or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration. In the diaspora, the feeling of being caught between two cultures, belonging to none comes from the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Baba and others as unhomeliness. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home, not at home in yourself. The cultural identity has made you a psychological refugee.

In the second generation, children born of the immigrants, country of their origin is not similar to the country of their birth. They are tossed between two different cultures and societies, host culture, and home culture. They develop a sense of in-betweenness which result either in the loss of identity and alienation, or result in hybrid identity. This develops tension between the desire for affiliation and the need for ethnic identity in the younger generations. It creates conflict between parents who hold on to cultural ethnicity and children who want to be like the children of the host country. In the postcolonial notion of Diaspora, negotiates hybridity as a natural phenomenon with its slogan "think globally and live locally. Diasporic identity can be defined as an identity of an immigrant living in a diasporic condition. A

number of diasporic writers like Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Raja Rao and Anurag Mathur have been dealing with the issue of diasporic identity in their works.

The character Moni in *Memories of Rain* by Sunetra Gupta, gets married to Antony the English man. In the beginning of their married life physical passion is so significant for her. After arriving in England Antony begins his affairs with Anna his mistress. Initially Moni tolerated it in grace, later it became a tender sorrow which she silently bore, and finally turned into deep despair and misery in her life. She knew that he will not abandon her but she cannot carry on. The shocked Moni realizes that her female body is not the source of her identity. She cannot attain her individuality only through the fulfillment of her sexual desires. She should seek for something higher. Her dream land of England and her husband Antony cannot provide her with this and she does not want to rely on these. After re-examining her life, she rejects the identities of wife, mother, sister, and daughter imposed upon her by Anthony her husband, and her family members. She had accepted these roles as fixed and permanent, and even had glorified them to a certain degree; her diasporic experiences in London enables her to re-examine her life and finally reject these fixed social identities and replace it with a more dynamic identity.

Moni's identity is connected with Calcutta, her original home, and since her individuality has been fragmented by the experience of diaspora, she must return to Calcutta. The consummation of her relationship with darkness signifies Moni's return and her acceptance of the parts of her identity which is linked with her homeland and it cannot be abandoned in preference for a life lived elsewhere. The memories of Calcutta and the painful life in England provoke her to divorce Antony, splitting her identity. The binary oppositions her perception of Antony before and after the marriage, her idealized memories of Calcutta and the reality of middle class life she has escaped, her colonial education and the life in England, her own idea about who she is and the identities other people have imposed on her, home in Calcutta and the home in England. These binary oppositions prevent her from forming her own diasporic identity. They stand as huge blocks in the formation of her identity. She realizes that she cannot form a diasporic identity for herself and this awareness quickens her return to her roots, a re-imagined Calcutta. She has fashioned herself towards her roots.

Neerupama, Reba, and Niharika in *A Sin of Color* decide to pattern themselves, abandoning their previous identities. Neerupama, the wife of Indranath Roy, and the efficient, elegant, and dignified Reba, the wife of the eldest son were unable to achieve their self-identity in the patriarchal home of Mandalay. Neerupama was forced by the patriarchy to confine herself to the domestic space of Mandalay mansion. She had to sacrifice her personal identity. The members of Mandalay house visualized

her identity through her role as wife, mother, and queen of the house. Her identity is grasped only in relation to her marriage. She nurtured the ambition to go up to the university. It was neither encouraged, nor denied, and the imposed collective identity caused her to withdraw herself into her inner self and she becomes an indifferent and passive member of the family. (S.C. 45). Neerupama was also affected by a psychic complex with the arrival of her enigmatic daughter-in-law and gradually loses her self-identity and dies.

The patriarchal domestic space exhausts those who do not abide by it, and leaves them empty and helpless like the discarded buildings. Silence and stillness are the consequences of an imposed role which does not fill the gap left by a personal identity. There is no space for self-assertion and personal growth. Individual thinking, decisions, and activities are outside the boundary of patriarchal home. There is no flexibility and intimacy for the construction of individual identity due to its public dimension. Institutionalized hierarchical family structures are spaces of eternal non-belongingness and exclusion for the individual self, and does not favor the construction of identity. The Calcutta house slowly but forcefully negates the individual's subjectivity, their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations, and the inner yearning that contributes to the formation of one's own individual identity, into enclosures of unhappiness, loneliness, shut out from the external world into spaces of restrictions, unarticulated desires, unexpressed words and finally ends in a clash between the imposed identity by the collective and one's individual identity.

Based on her personal experience of diaspora, Gupta imagines her characters oscillating between their native homeland and the host country. Such oscillation, according to Menicucci, takes place across physical geography, mostly in the metaphysical and metaphorical dimensions of memory, imagination, and dream. It is in these three dimensions that the psychological de-construction or re-construction of the characters' identity takes place. Gupta's characters are disconsolate to find a new place of belongingness in order to begin the process of self-identity construction, a "home" without being confined to the walls of a house.

Reba's arrival gives Neerupama the impression that it is possible to embrace the role imposed by the power structures that support and organize domestic space, and turn it into an identity that, far from suppressing one's subjectivity, seems to highlight it. The collective ideal is accepted, assimilated, interiorized and made into a part of Reba's identity. This shocking revelation makes Neerupama to make a sad mockery of her daughter-in-law. But from Neerupama's perspective, Calcutta house is a space where one's personal identity is lost, and the individual self is silenced stunting its growth in return for the security, belongingness to a communal dimension. The domestic space appears to have public

dimension without any privacy. Self construction requires privacy as well as intimacy, free from socially imposed restrictions and flexibility to remain true to its dynamic, ever-shifting nature. The first and second generations see institutionalized hierarchical family, as spaces of perpetual non-belongingness, and exclusion for the individual self, and thus opposite to the concept of “home as a place of inclusion where the process of self-identity construction can actually take place. The imposition of a collective identity eradicates the subjective autonomy and independence from the individual members of the patriarchal and patrilineal family. As long as domestic space is owned and identified with a public space it will never be called a home by its subaltern inhabitants (Menicucci).

Reba masters the roles of wife, and mother, with her womanly presence, retaining her “personality”, her own identity, radiating it on the surrounding environment. She plays her role as expected by the family members. The individual’s personal identity has no space as long as they fulfilled their role. And Neerupama is an apt case. Her mother-in-law did not mind Neerupama’s desire on getting a university degree; she was not upset by her attempts to enrich her identity by higher education. Gupta stresses the fact that all these considerations are simply irrelevant, and what matters, from the point of view of family space, is that Neerupama plays her role as a new bride as expected by the visiting relatives (S.C.44).

When Debendranath visits Reba’s father’s house he realizes that Reba’s identity has been subject to a process of transformation within the Calcutta house. Through the thorough examination of her father’s house furniture he gets a deep insight into her personal identity. Her individuality is isolation, and her passion derived from the novels of her childhood. She had invented herself among these noiseless bookladen walls, with her mother sleeping in her sickroom, and her father deep in his papers, and the maids silently doing their work in the kitchen after lunch. It must have been in such a time that the novels she had devoured in her childish loneliness, from images prescribed by her father and his friends, from the silence around her, that she had made herself (S.C. 19).

The process of self-construction for Reba consists in taking pieces of the socio-cultural space that surrounds her and using them to shape her identity. She has made her personal space out of collective and alien space and will use “her arts” to find her own space outside the imposed domestic space. After his return as a married man to his native Calcutta house, Debendranath finds her “playing for hours upon her esraj, rushing between rehearsals, and sitting at mealtimes, no longer hooded by her sari, but dedicated to her art” (S.C.54). She has chosen to identify with and to be identified by her artistic talent and now she herself is on the stage of a theatre. Reba attracts the attention of everyone around her with her “formidable composure, extraordinary ability to diminish anyone with a slight slant of her eyes”

(S.C.17), “to make everyone stand in complete awe of her” (S.C. 53). She is portrayed as powerful in her grace, superior in her kindness, a strong charismatic leader. Reba is a more elegant, and dignified refugee than Neerupama, but out of frustration and bitterness. The Tagore songs she sings so beautifully playing on her father’s tanpura are out of sheer loneliness. She had failed in communicating with the world beyond her art. Her songs had no addressee.

Niharika, Reba’s daughter, represents the third generation. She successfully frees herself from the oppressiveness of the Mandalay house and constructs her own identity in her home in England. Niharika’s self fashioning is visible in the pygmy whose life and death was the topic of her research. Niharika and the married English man Daniel Faraday were in love with each other and in order to hide their scandalous love affair enter a punt on the Cherwell River in Oxford and drown. They have abandoned their old identities and formed new identities.

Conclusion

The concept of home, nation and cultural identity of belongingness to the ancestral place differs from person to person. The writers of diaspora have been writing upon the lives of men and women. They describe the predicaments, joys, and sorrows, the issue of identity of men and women of Indian Diaspora and depict the various situations of life in the alien land and represent the human experiences from different perspectives and dimensions. Indian-American diaspora is one of the important diasporas which made a massive impact on the literary world and produced literary genius of present time. Their cultural traits, excellent knowledge, good work habits have credited them the label of model minority. They have strong regional consciousness and their literature is among the very young literature in the United States. Writers express their personal, familial identities and socio political contexts explaining how and why they came to be where they are and to write what they do.

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