

Diasporic Encounters: Displacement, Fragmentation and Discontinuity in Migrant Literature

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Abstract

The representation of 'home' in the cartographies of belonging is a much debated issue in the contemporary society as the world has witnessed unprecedented transnational flows of people across the globe in the last few decades. The migratory propensities of the human society trigger a re-assessment of the notions of home and belonging which includes reconfiguration of borders and boundaries that are continuously negotiated in a fluid poetics of unsettled identifications. The location of the self is thus disrupted beyond retrieval which interrupts and transforms the conventional spatial layouts of belonging, evolving a provisional concept of identity which is far from being implanted in a territorial rootedness, is constantly challenged by the ambivalent nature of its very existence and its intersectional positionalities. Cultural identities, in these diasporic encounters, share a fluid space of shifting locations which transcends the nativistic politics of retrospective reclamation in the articulation of a solid, pure and stable identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Home, Displacement, Memory, Identity, Fragmentation

Introduction

Identity is a relational concept, multiple in its configuration that exists and develops in relationship with others in a socio-cultural context. Being situated at the border, the diasporan, thus, is exposed to the narrative of the diverse cultural groups and necessarily influences and transforms the modalities through which we seek to explore the ways of dwelling in this shared space of identification. Identity, therefore, is not a stable and immutable entity, admitting the possibility of a single, fixed sense of belonging; rather it becomes a construct which is an evolving process of maintaining identification beyond the limits of time and space in order to live with a difference which entails a transcendence from the clearly demarcated borders and boundaries of belongingness. According to cultural theorists, a fully unified, complete and coherent identity is a myth as it is formed and transformed constantly in relation to the ways individuals are represented and addressed within the framework of cultural configurations which environ them.

Aim of the Study

The basic premise of this research involves an interrogation of the significance, relevance and capacity of a place to become home, with its informing features of collective memory and cultural identification and a summative explication of the notion of home and belonging as a response to the questions: Where is home? Where do we belong? What constitute our sense of home or homelessness? How does one relate the experience of diaspora as a contributory force to the formation of 'home' or 'homeland'? It may be summed up by stating that the spatial parameters of home, both as fixed and liminal, problematizes the rhetoric of identity formation and the supposed land of identification. Home tends more towards a range of fluid localities as the diasporans seek to embrace multiple possibilities, complex and innumerable ways of being and becoming and a permanent process of movement and change.

The Main Text

The transformative dynamics of locations and territories of the contemporary world no longer bind the people to a single particular space. The perception of disruption from a particular location constitutes the general texture of eternal human existence in a diasporic migratory reality because the privileged role assumed by 'home' does not comprise the prime goal of all human activity but becomes its essential condition and hence the perpetual movements and ceaseless commencements.

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The study of the space, therefore, is considered as one of the important determinants of identity, drawing significant academic and critical intellections. In the everydayness of life itself, the two terms such as 'place' and 'space' are often used interchangeably, although there is important distinction between the two. 'Place' is said to be a concrete manifestation of the abstract idea called 'space'. The undifferentiated spatial entity is gradually assigned the status of a place as we tend to be familiarized with it and endow it with significance and value. As Yi-Fu Tuan argues, ". . . if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is a pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (6). I am inclined to agree with Yi-Fu Tuan's opinion that space is necessarily associated with movement and place with relative stasis which makes me emphasize throughout my research that the relocation of the self is more focused on the socio-cultural space rather than a physical setting called place, delimited by the fixated premise of stability and security.

In the socio-cultural space of human society, 'personal space' is culturally conditioned and is highly dependent on the existing contextualities. Securing the sovereignty of that space and to prevent any transgression, definitive boundaries are erected to confine and construct it as 'home'. The mere possession of the territorial right over a place, however, does not ensure the construction of a home because the boundaries which premise a space do not entail a physical space, but a cultural and psychological space which connotes ownership and belonging, and home is not a mere site for comfort and security but a vital point in which one negotiates the experience of belonging and unbelonging. Home, thus, becomes a significant determinant of identity in which belonging turns out to be an important qualification to determine the distinction between those having 'home' and those who are deprived of it. Home, in the words of Buechner, is "a place you feel you belong, and which in some sense belongs to you" (7).

In the contemporary world of increasing globalization, the notion of home as a stable and fixed location has changed to represent a state of constant flux characterised by instability rather than permanence, perpetually recreated and reconfigured in the migratory process of dislocation and its summative re-plantation of individual identity and belongingness. With the experience of dislocation and fragmentation, the conventional home of stability and physical centeredness assuming a unified, absolute reality becomes fractured and disrupted which anchors the individuals in eternal transit "between a plurality of life-worlds but come to be at home in none" (Nigel and Overing 160). The notion of home at once becomes a normative, spiritual and cognitive experience which correlates the metaphysical sense of homelessness with a sense personal estrangement

on the level of consciousness. Being 'homeless', therefore, according to this view, is not so much about movements or the fluidity of socio-cultural time and space but that "one is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated – and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eschewed" (qtd. in Etoroma 103). The construction and enactment of home, both behavioural and ideational, thus is contingent upon the migratory process in which individuals deliberately operate as 'transnationals', traversing and transgressing the assumed socio-cultural borders of stabilizing boundedness and imagine new possibilities of belonging on their way. Home, therefore, is not a fixed place of identification or belonging but rather "a constantly negotiated space between self and location" (qtd. in Sojka 521). Negotiating the tension between the stasis of the remembered home and the mobilized reality of the physical home left behind, consequently, lands these dislocated diasporans in a 'third space' which emerges out as an in-between space of cultural translation, markedly different from either alternatives of identifications. This 'liminal', in-between space is a highly reactive site of symbolic interaction, bridging the gaps and incongruities between the antagonistic binarism of the contraries which "prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities" (Bhabha *The Location* 5). This interstitial passage between fixated belongingness, according to Bhabha, "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity" (*The Location* 5) which necessarily foregrounds the significance of the 'threshold' existence, implicating the indefiniteness of all home-making projects.

The meaning of home for these displaced diasporans, then, lies in the interactive process of cultural translation- the diverse ways whereby they strive to relocate 'home' in diasporic imagination. Salman Rushdie's idea of cultural negotiation echoes the concept of 'routes' rather than 'roots' that James Clifford emphasizes in his work *Routes: Travel and Translation* which proclaims the fluid notion of home signaling the "multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and Psychic boundaries" (Brah 194). The notion of 'routes' or 'translation' as home or homing desire allows for a plurality of perception and heterogeneity of identification because of its stress on multiple locations and journeys. It involves a fluctuating contextualization that Rushdie calls "ambiguous and shifting ground" (*Imaginary Homelands* 15) or Homi Bhabha's "liminal space" (*The Location* 5) which points out the inevitable non-essentialist conceptualization of diasporic space where cultural hybridity becomes the defining principle.

The evolution of the 'third space' destroys the symmetrical representation of cultural formation as fixed and static. It deconstructs the historicity of cultural identification as homogenizing, unifying and

absolute force. For this reason, Bhabha contends that the in-between third space occupied by the diasporic subjectivities is stuffed with creative possibilities: "It is the space of interaction emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence" (*The Location* 12). Diasporisation thus challenges the territorial model of nation-state and questions the rubrics of nation, nationalism and cultural homogenization.

The postmodern thinkers Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, seek to recast this multiplicity of cultural representation with the rhizomatic theory of difference in which the world is no longer viewed as comprising of distinct entities – aggregative and integrative; rather a fundamental saturation of difference becomes an essential condition for the possibility of the phenomena. Diaspora, like rhizomes, defies the dimensions of over simplification – on one hand, it focuses on the lines of articulation, of sedimentarity, strata and territories; on the other, it attends to the lines of flight, movements of deterritorialisation and destratification. It is territorialisation which constantly replicates the possibilities for deterritorialisation. Every rhizome, in this irrepresentational disruption, "contains lines of sedimentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, signified, attributed etc as well as lines of deterritorialisation down which it constantly flees" (Deleuze and Guattari 9). The diasporic individuals, like rhizome, in their search for a home, are thus endowed with a double perspective of performative negotiations which entail an attempt at reproduction and reinvention of cultural determinants in which both points of departure and arrival are always in a constant flux, transgressing the stable and frivolous physicality of longing and belonging.

The notion of diaspora revolves round an inevitable duality, split or fragmented identities between multiple cultural references the diasporic subjectivities are exposed to. Epistemological diasporisation, in this sense, evolves dual points of references between the homeland and the host land where all knowledge becomes constructs, effectuating a 'split-epistemology' produced by the intersection of both structural and cultural conditions inhabited by a specific diaspora. Thus, the multicultural domain, in the case of diaspora, works through a 'diasporic epistemology' of cultural contestation which exposes the redundancy of the cultural knowledge and other forms of hegemonizing and ethnocentric modalities. Clifford refers to this spatial virtuality as "contact zones of nations, cultures and regions" ("Diasporas" 303) that views diasporic perception as transitional connection between belonging and unbelonging, disrupting the fixity and fetishism imposed by ethnic systematization of human subjects.

This postmodernist model of diaspora connotes a condition rather than being definitive of a community. This condition not only displays a strong proclivity towards multiple journeys and localization, but also exhibits a subversive impulse of disrupting

the boundaries of the binaries. It perpetuates a differential redefinition of cultural accommodation and syncretism filtering out the pitfalls of essentialism and stereotypical reductionism. The substantiality of hybridity is thus reasserted by the recreative 'third space' which is presented as a mode of articulation in the performative dialectics of engendering reflective possibilities and exists as an "interruptive, interrogative and enunciative space of new forms of cultural meaning and production blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into questions established categorizations of culture and identity" (Meredith 3). Stuart Hall, like Bhabha, thus analyzes cultural identity as a relational and interactive entity – "fluid, contingent, multiple and shifting" (McLeod 225) which can be contrasted with the 'border lives' of Bhabha in which concepts are overlapping, hybridized in shifting subjectivities that promotes the necessity and possibility of replicating new cultural landscapes for these displaced diasporans. Human subject is no longer viewed as grounded in a fixed identity, but rather is a discursive effect generated in the act of enunciation. Diasporisation and hybridity then share the commonalities – the denial of the essentialist positions of home and belonging, purity and inherent authenticity of cultural constants. Diasporic composite formation, thus, takes up the virtual 'third space' as an incontrovertible 'in-between' position that challenges fixity, authenticity and fetishism of monolithic cultural configuration. The actualization of 'self' as well as 'other' is believed to be constructs on the same ground and allows an unprecedented cosmopolitan nomadism which perpetually dynamises the idea of belonging and rootedness.

Hanif Kureishi, in his novels namely, *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Black Album*, is particularly attentive to the factors that demonstrate a fast transformation of the conventional notion of identity as fixed, essential and strictly homogenizing to an ontological stance of hybridized cultural formation, focusing on the in-between existential reality of the immigrant subjectivities, fostering ambivalent perceptions of a fragmented cultural space. The protagonists of the novels under consideration, such as Karim and Shahid, find themselves forever suspended in an in-between position of contradictory emotions whereby a sense of utter rootlessness and a lack of essence of any kind is strongly registered in their individual psyches. Both the protagonists, in the novel, view migrancy as a metaphysical condition of life which obscures and dislocates the very idea of the unified self, and the multiplicity of being that is focalized through their dispositions offers intriguing points of intellection on the issues of hybridity and its relation to the provisional theatricality of identity and belonging. Karim and Shahid, as hybrid diasporans, exhibit in their characters an aura of restlessness and embrace a life in movements, struggling against the constraints of authenticity in a society that is preoccupied with

clear-cut absolutes and exclusive positionalities.

The condition of orphanhood, in the novel, *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro, becomes a trope for transnational identity. The protagonist gradually comes to a recognition that the 'feared other' is located within the self, which is discursively formed out of its own fear (Finney 2). Orphanhood, for Banks, is a sense of utter homelessness which registers in the individual an anxiety to belong. Banks' sense of homeliness, his childhood and the scientific precision of his professionalism disintegrate before him like his unpredictable memory. By a systematic duplication of these incompatibilities, Ishiguro seems to universalize the theme of homelessness and challenges the essentializing contours of home and belonging. Like Stevens of the *Remains of the Day* who finally realizes the significance and efficacy of the bantering skills, Banks, in a most melancholic epiphany, understands and accepts the true meaning of orphanhood as he declares: "... for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadow of vanished parents ... for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm" (313). In a similar fashion, Akira quotes the Japanese monk: "It was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together" (73) which can be called home.

Romesh Gunesekera, in his fictional manoeuvres, seems to suggest that feeling at home is essentially a subjective and culturally determined link to the imaginary, and the memory of home is recreative of the inner poetry of the private self which is evoked by emotion and not by factual recollections. Identity, in the framework of Gunesekera's novels, becomes an unsettled entity marked out by the discontinuities of time and space in which, through the ambiguity of displacement, the diasporans are able to reconstruct the inner landscape of mind to perpetrate their sense of belonging, disrupting the idea of the bounded rootedness and homogenized belonging.

Gunesekera's debut novel *Reef* tells the elegant and moving story of the young chef Triton who forsakes his father's home to work as a houseboy for the marine biologist Mr. Salgado in Sri Lanka. The narrative unfolds in flashbacks as Triton gives vent to his imagination from his present stay in England to the memory of his past ten years of life in Sri Lanka. When Salgado decides to migrate to England, Triton must follow him in his journey to the new land. But whereas Salgado is attentive to his exiled existence in the foreign land, Triton the servant, is able to erect an identity of his own in the alien ambience and transforms his makeshift existence to a successful restaurateur. While Salgado has to return to his homeland defeated "Summoned by a desire to hold onto a lost dream and memory of a lost love" (Nasta 214), Triton, the orphaned figure, profitably integrates himself to the new society he seeks to be assimilated with: "It was the only way I could succeed: without a past, without a home, without Ranjan Salgado standing by my side" (180). Triton is capable

of moulding not only the flavours and taste of his dishes through his culinary skill, but also his diasporic existence in England and forms a world of his own for his survival. The rhetoric of re-fashioning inevitably informs his migrant self, but Salgado, his master, is essentially bent by the desire to return, burdened by the sense of his exilic memory. The memory of the past which enriches Triton's diasporic existence negatively reacts with Salgado's identity, augmenting his movement back to the home country that makes him recognize the all encompassing omnipotence of memory: "We are only what we remember, nothing more ... all we have is the memory of what we done or not done?" (190).

Gunesekera's *The Sandglass* is a potent symbol to recapture time from "the orphaned fragments of [an] aborted past" (*The Sandglass* 2) which not only represents the manner time fleets but also the common everydayness of life that acts as a connective link between the past and the present through the "repetitive experiences, attitudes and practices that both maintain themselves and alter across the wider stretches of time that make up ... human history (Mulhall 178). Gunesekera's experiment with diasporic sensibility, in this manner, seeks to unsettle the historical registers and focalizes the spatio-temporal incommensurability of the migrant position, and dislocates the imaginative territoriality into a point beyond mere historical reclamation. The idea of home and belonging in this deterritorialized dialectics, as Nasta suggests, reveals "a preoccupation with the representation of an interior landscape of desire, a longing to enter the symbolic as a narrative journey" (213) Diasporic writing, as evidenced by Gunesekera, then is the expression of an immediate impulse to re-enact and reconstitute a diffused cultural order, reconfiguring that inner landscape of mind through the immutable interplay of the fractured memories and desires.

The writers discussed in this paper have projected in their novels diverse possibilities of diasporic formations in which discourses about home and belonging assume new status and meaning in the reconfiguration of individual identity in the adopted land of diasporisation. Each of the writers is particularly attentive to the manners the diasporic subjects are able to cope and construct images of their respective imaginary homelands as a strategy to perpetrate their sense of belonging, traversing the putrid premises of racial and cultural marginalisation. Although these writers are markedly different from one another in style and subject matter, nonetheless, forging a new home and identity in a foreign land, becomes a common concern for these novelists under discussion, and therefore, they deliberately seek to present their novels in such contextual realities that offer them rooms for transformation. The theme of transformation permeates through the lives of all the protagonists in the novels under discussion which makes them come out as saner and more sensible individuals at the end. Stevens of *The*

Remains thus contemplates the true meaning of his life, questioning his past services and loyalties, restructuring his old ideals and sensibilities when he discovers the 'evening' as the best part of the day: "I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day" (257). The meaningfulness of Stevens' entire life has been reduced to these few moments of truly personal meditation in which he is allowed a glimpse of the real meaning of human life: ". . . in bantering lies the key to human warmth" (259) which at once transforms him from an analyst to an enthusiast. Similarly, Christopher Banks realizes at the end that "orphanhood becomes a central metaphor for universal trauma" (Zinck 147) and the individuals in the present culture configuration of the world "must face the world as orphans" (*When We Were Orphans* 168). Accordingly, Karim's experimentation with several selves dawns in him a new reality that there is no essence in the world and that being engaged with a multiplicity of fluid, imaginary selves will finally liberate one's soul from a bounded society "obsessed with clear cut definitions of cultural or ethnic identity" (Schoene 117). On the other hand, Shahid, torn between the hopeless, orthodox, fundamentalist ideas and liberalist humanism of the West comes to an understanding that the "purity" claimed by either centre or margin is originally a 'myth' because "there was no fixed self; surely our several selves melted and mutated daily" (274). In a similar fashion, Triton of the novel *Reef* transforms his makeshift existence into a successful restaurateur in the city of London, disowning an aborted past of utter fragmentation and is convinced of the re-vivifying dynamism of metamorphosis: "We have to destroy in order to create. . . Like sea. Whatever it destroys, it uses to grow something better" (111). While his master drastically fails in his mission in the West, Triton, the servant feels utterly at home in England and prospers as he recognises the role of reconfiguration and refashioning in the narrative of his dispossessed self, unlike Salgado, who stresses the symbiotic syncretism of a mesmeric memory and its fragile power. Like Triton, Chip is optimistic of a new world order to emerge over the sordid gloom and thus sees the birth of Pearl's granddaughter Dawn as precluding the dawn of a new light, emblematic of her name which will "spin us forward from thus hurt earth to a somehow better world" (177-278).

Conclusion

All the three authors discussed in this paper are, therefore, particularly attentive to this rhetoric of transformation and change, subtly integrated and worked out into the lives of the protagonists in quest for their respective 'homes'. The protagonists such as Stevens, Banks, Karim, Shahid, Triton, Chips et al. emphatically acclaim themselves as "hybrid cosmopolitans" (Friedman 409) and are blessed with the knowledge that "all forms of culture are continually in the process of hybridity" (Bhabha *The Location* 211), admitting a free play of the supposedly cultural

constants or holistic essence. The discourse of home thus involves a radical redefinition of place and time, exposing the transgressive tendencies of the so-called rigidity of cultural or national boundaries and its interruptive interiority. Desire for a home then is a symbolic force based on the lived experience of the locality beyond the rigidified limit of perception in the present contextualities.

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