

Paradigm Shift in the Perception of Cultural Identity: A Study of Indian Diaspora

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Abstract

The term diaspora has become a politically loaded and culture specific term. Indian Diaspora is an international phenomenon. Right from the migration of the indentured labourers to that of the Silicon Valley young brains, the concept of cultural identity and its perception have undergone drastic change. Earlier, it was perceived as a wholly unquestionable acceptance of the mainstream culture and disowning one's native culture. Today, minority cultures have become integrated enough to involve as part of the mainstream culture of the host country. The role, the modern diasporic Indian writers like Bharati Mukherjee attribute to the migrant community in the remoulding of the host nation is a revolutionarily innovative concept revealing the paradigm shift in the construction of Cultural Identity. The paper is an attempt to study the paradigm shift in the perception of cultural identity of Indian Diaspora.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Diaspora, Expatriate, Immigrant, Transnational Identity

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The recent debates of the Social Sciences perceive Diaspora as an umbrella term for all those who have been away from their homelands, voluntarily and involuntarily. The Indian diaspora is an international phenomenon. In spite of their different backgrounds and their multiple spatial locations, Indian diaspora has some common features, such as sharply defined family roles, superiority of society's interest over that of the individuals and patriarchy based status and gerontocracy. Based on the history of Indian emigration to other parts of the world, Indian diaspora can be accommodated under four broad patterns of emigration: pre-colonial emigration, colonial emigration, postcolonial emigration and recent emigration.

The large scale migration of people from the Indian subcontinent to South East Asia began with the expansion of Western colonialism and capitalism. During postcolonial times, migration was directed towards developed countries and the migrants consisted mostly of talented professionals and skilled labourers. The mid twentieth century witnessed the beginning of a change in the pattern of Indian migration. For the first time, people moved not to the colonial periphery, but to the metropolitan centers at the heart of the Empire.

The old and the new Indian diaspora reflect the very different historical conditions that made their migration possible. For people of the old Indian diaspora, the departure from India is final. In a global world, diaspora subjects become travelers on the move, and their homelands contained in the simulacral world of visual media. Earlier, assimilation was perceived as a wholly unquestionable acceptance of the mainstream culture and disowning one's native culture. Today, minority cultures have become integrated enough to involve as part of the mainstream culture of the host country.

The consensual sense of community as well as the notion of assimilating minorities to holistic and organic notions of culture are now outdated, because the theoreticians like Bhabha and Hall affirm that the cultural identity is productively constructed. The model of diaspora that Paul Gilroy develops (as do others such as Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall) is one that disagrees with the idea of diasporas essentially having a centre from which a group of community has scattered, or a command resource of origin, a model that privileges the allegory of "roots". Rather Gilroy's model of diaspora privileges hybrid subjectivity, where the diaspora is no longer unitary, but based on movements, interconnections and varied indications.

The South-African critic and novelist, Elleke Boehmer in her seminal work *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995), observes that the postcolonial migrant writing is the writing of "not quite" and "in-between". She underlines the unprecedented migrations and uprooting of people, not only from former colonies, but also from the countries teeming with internal conflicts, economic hardships, lack of opportunities etc. to the

metropolitan centers. Though Boehmer has identified the postcolonial migrant writer as a cultural traveller, migration is different from travel, and cannot be applied them in a synonymous way. Ian Chambers, in his scholarly work *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994), observes that “to travel implies movement between fixed positions, a site of departure, a point of arrival” (8). It also intimates an eventual return, a potential homecoming” (5) while on the contrary, migrancy “involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable and certain” (5). Unlike travel, migrancy calls for a ‘dwelling’ in places, histories, language and identities that are subject to ‘mutation’ and always in transit, the promise of a homecoming, thus, becomes impossible(5). On the other hand, beyond the debate of arrival and departure of migrancy and travel, Salman Rushdie considers migration as a universal phenomenon which befalls all mankind.

Rejecting the binaries of Western Centre and the Eastern Periphery, Homi Bhabha asserts the ever shifting cultural hybrid constructions of the postcolonial subject characterized by what he calls hybridity. Cultural identity will change with development at a personal as well as at a social level along with migration and acculturation. Indicators of cultural identity include religious beliefs, customs and practices, rituals, language, nationality, food habits and leisure activities. Linguistic competence and socio economic status act as determinant factors prompting individuals to eventually modify their non-dominant cultural group, which typically is geographically bound, when he or she ventures into the dominant culture. It allows an individual to feel part of their culture, while living in a place with a different culture and each individual responds to the acculturation process in a distinctive manner. Social and cultural qualities and attitudes are typically more resistant to change and are usually the last to adjust during acculturation. When culturally divergent groups of people mingle with each other and work together, the cultural values, customs, beliefs and language of a minority group get modified by assimilating into the dominant culture.

Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, chronicles the geographical, cultural and psychological dislocation and relocation of Indian diaspora, their struggle for identity, their bitter experiences, and their final emergence as self-assertive individuals free from the cultural and political bondage imposed on them. The role she attributes to the migrant community in the re-moulding of the host nation is a revolutionarily innovative concept revealing the paradigm shift in the perception of Cultural Identity of Indian Diaspora.

The trajectory of the metamorphosis of the immigrant characters of Bharati Mukherjee involves three distinct phases: the expatriate phase, the immigrant phase, and the transnational phase on the basis of the attitude and sensibility of the diaspora towards their lives in the host country. According to George Steiner, an expatriate “focuses on the native country that has been left behind. The expatriate dwells on the ‘ex’ status of the past, while the immigrant celebrates his presence in the new country.

The Tiger's Daughter is an apt manifestation of the cultural dilemma of an expatriate, who is afraid of venturing into an entirely new and alien world. She finds herself exotic and marginal since she belongs to another country and lives in a country of which she is not a citizen. Moreover, Tara is surrounded by strangers whose social behaviour and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to her own. After the initial excitement of emigration, Tara is haunted by a sense of loss and helplessness. She is pushed to the fringes of the society, where she remains unaccepted by her American friends. The disconcerting perplexities that haunt Tara upon her arrival in the new land lead her to a liminal ambivalent identity. Unsure and embittered by her being treated as a minority in America; she is nostalgic about her peaceful existence in India. Shobha Shinde refers to this expatriate weakness, when she says, “An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it” and so does Tara in America, but when she comes to confront the changed and hostile circumstances of her home country, all her romantic dreams and ideals crumble down (58). Tara's visit to India is a fledging attempt of an expatriate to rest and restore the balance, which she felt she had lost in life after moving off to the US. racial discrimination and she becomes homesick.

According to the theoreticians like Homi K. Bhaba, Avatar Brah and Stuart Hall, the floating nature of home and fluid identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed home. The notion of home builds up a sense of self and ties with the human emotion, feelings, sentiments, proximity and intimacy. Today the idea of home is not only a place or house, but also it is linked up with emotional territory. An expatriate can neither take refuge in the native culture nor in the host culture. This difficulty of choosing lies in their refusal to condemn any one world. Somdatta Mandal in the introduction to *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*, comments that the *Tiger's Daughter* is a “loosely autobiographical story about an Indian immigrant, who is unable to adjust to North American Culture, but who at the same time is painfully aware that she will never again belong to the culture, she has left behind” (15).

Though the words, “expatriate” and “immigrant” are often used interchangeably, unlike an expatriate, an immigrant is the one who tries to re-root and re-house by assimilating/acculturating and replanting himself /herself in the new soil. Rushdie has rightly mentioned in his *Imaginary Homelands* that immigrants not only lose but also gain, while venturing into the host country. In the immigrant phase, a diaspora has the privilege of

having a dual perspective, of being able to belong to and taste diverse cultural mores and of getting the leverage provided by the networking within the diasporic community.

Being the narrative of dislocation and relocation, the novel *Jasmine* symbolizes the ever-moving regenerating process of diasporic life itself. "Shuttled between identities" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 77), Jasmine's journey towards her own female psyche, is an elaborate process of shedding her existing identities to move into new identities. Instead of leading a pathetic life of a widow, she becomes flexible enough to make compromises and adjustments in every extremely stirring circumstance. She hops from place to place, shedding her names and previous identities to construct a new one in order to carve a place of her own. In the process of migration, the immigrants can neither adopt alien culture nor can leave their culture of 'home' and finally a new hybrid culture comes to flourish.

Jasmine is the celebration of the multiple identifications. Sharing the features of alternating and blended biculturals, Jasmine performs her identity and consciously decides how to act in a given situation and she chooses "which identity to display and/or when to display both simultaneously." (57) Jasmine is no more a shy Indian woman with ethnic prejudices and pretensions. She learns how to behave like an American in such a way that people tend to think that she is born and brought up in America (134-135). She spends a lot of time in front of the mirror to check and recheck "her new appearance in a T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes" (133).

Jasmine is adaptive and adept at the art of learning as well as unlearning. Unlike Tara Banerjee of *Tiger's Daughter*, who desperately longs to go home, Jasmine is neither burdened with nostalgia nor paralyzed by the flood of memories of homeland. Jasmine aptly demonstrates the immigrant phase in which, the immigrant is in the pursuit of the idea of America that privileges freedom and individual identity over traditional taboos, stigma and gender role in familial responsibility. It prods the immigrant to negotiate with the mainstream and strive for the ideals of being American. Jasmine is a character constantly in the process of fabrication, whose making involves an unmaking of the past. Every time Jasmine is confronted with some crisis in her life, she derives spiritual energy from within to murder her past only to reincarnate as an entirely different and new self.

Belonging to the transnational phase of the writer, the novel *Desirable Daughters* shows how Tara Chatterjee, a modern educated lady migrates to San Francisco and accepts the challenges of the host country. Instead of being afflicted with the fragmented identity, she looks ahead for adjustment and survival. The conservative and strangulating Indian background works as a strong stimulus to let her enjoy the free and liberal atmosphere of America. She wears jeans and t-shirt in place of a sari, drives a car, establishes live in relationship with Andy, accepts divorce, an ominous word in Indian dictionary and also grants her son Ravi gay sexuality. Tara's journeys from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration become the milestone in the evolution of the transnational identity.

An immigrant psyche becomes a playground of cultural assimilations. The experiences in the alien land and the socio-cultural meaning inscribed in those experiences can never be expected to be described in the same manner. Thus, it has become an epistemological difficulty in projecting any single cultural identity as authentic. Since it is impossible to know what experience can be taken as exemplary, one cannot access any criteria with certainty to analyze and understand the phenomenon called cultural identity. As a result, the cultural identity of a diaspora can only be conceived and understood as an arbitrary construct.

Experiences and the multiple identification of diaspora constitute hybrid forms of identity that differs from the essential notion of national and ethnic identity. It also explores multiple belongings that enable people to inhabit more than one space at the same time. Under such condition in the absence of a dominant code, culture is becoming an individualistic enterprise, in which people create their own super structure and super culture, becoming in a way their own 'cultural programmers'.

A trace in Derridian philosophy is the sign left by the absent thing, after it has passed on the scene of its former presence. Every pre and post-migration experience of an immigrant has the form of a trace. For experience is the present consciousness of past and future; every present understands itself as not being its origin, and also understands itself as incomplete. The cultural identity of the Indian immigrants comprises many culture traces such as dominant host culture, residual native culture, and the emergent transnational culture, etc. The culture trace in the identity of an immigrant can be seen as a mark here and now of something else, of something not-here and not-now. Even when an immigrant claims that she/he has become an American both in thoughts and in attire, native culture seems to flicker in her/his indomitable will which surfaces in certain moments and helps her/him to reconstruct a new identity. This new identity is transnational in nature which challenges the age old assumption that cultural encounters invariably establish hierarchical dominator / dominated relationship.

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