
Theorising Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Diaspora, Hybridity, and Multiculturalism

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Abstract:

This paper examines the attributes and classification of diaspora by analysing the shift from traditional to contemporary diaspora. Numerous critics have attributed diverse interpretations to the diaspora in their distinct manners. William Safran, Robin Cohen, Salman Rushdie, Vijay Mishra, James Clifford, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Paul Gilroy, and Edward Said are prominent critics who extensively analysed to elucidate the concept of diaspora. The themes of memory and nostalgia for one's homeland are prominently depicted in the works of diasporic authors. The diasporic communities have attained a notable position over time. Members of diasporic communities uphold solidarity with their homeland. They forge a communal memory regarding their homeland. Diasporic communities experience alienation in the host nation and possess a shared diasporic consciousness. Diasporic consciousness denotes the cognitive endeavour of individuals attempting to reconstruct their present from an inaccessible past. Today, however, the term has acquired a different meaning. Rather than perceiving it as a state of ultimate loss, it is regarded as a positive realm of multiple existences. The diaspora offers a platform for intercultural coexistence.

Keywords: Diasporic Communities, Displacement, Expatriates, Hybrid, Fluid Identity

Introduction

The diasporic communities have attained a prominent status over time. The members of diasporic communities uphold solidarity with their homeland. They establish a shared memory regarding their homeland. Diasporic communities experience alienation in the host nation and possess a shared diasporic consciousness. Diasporic consciousness

denotes the cognitive endeavour of individuals attempting to reconstruct their present from an irretrievable past. Today, however, the term has acquired a different meaning. Rather than perceiving it as a state of ultimate loss, it is regarded as a positive realm of multiple existences. The diaspora offers a platform for intercultural coexistence.

Diverse critics have attributed varying interpretations to the concept of diaspora in distinct manners. William Safran, Robin Cohen, Salman Rushdie, Vijay Mishra, James Clifford, Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Paul Gilroy, and Edward Said are prominent critics who extensively analysed to elucidate the concept of diaspora.

Homeland Redefined

“William Safran defines diaspora as a “condition of terminal loss and separation from one’s true home.” He proposes that the notion of diaspora applies to expatriate minority communities whose members exhibit several of the following traits:

1. “They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “centre” to two or more “peripheral”
2. They retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history and achievements;
3. They believe that they are not – the host society and therefore, feel insulted and partly alienated from it;
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and a place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;
5. They believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity and
6. They continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are defined by the existence of such a relationship.” (Safran 83-84)

Safran's six characteristics pertain to a homeland as a location to which migrants or their descendants ought to or would ultimately return. It pertains to the constituents of the "old" diaspora. It pertains to the migration of indentured labourers during the nineteenth century. This does not pertain to the members of the "New" diaspora, who have deliberately chosen to emigrate for economic benefits. Their responsibility is to uphold the concept of the "homeland" rather than the homeland as a tangible entity. An individual of Indian descent residing overseas endeavours to preserve Indian culture by sustaining their language, commemorating Independence Day, and preparing Indian cuisine, among other activities. Consequently, the objective is to preserve 'the concept of the homeland rather

than the homeland as a tangible entity.' Safran endeavoured, for the inaugural time, to regulate the proliferation of the term 'diaspora.' He attempted to establish the criteria for constructing typography. He underscored immigrants' connection to their place of origin, which is characterized as their homeland through collective memory and mythology.

Numerous critics have responded to Safran's presumption that their ancestral homeland is a location to which they or their descendants aspire to return. Vijay Mishra, in his essay "New Lamps for Old," asserts, "One of the overriding characteristics of diaspora is diasporas do not as a general rule, return. This is not to be confused with the symbols of the return or the invocations."(Mishra 75).

Rather than returning to their homeland, immigrants construct a mental representation of their country and culture that they remember. Consequently, the concept of homeland plays a crucial role in the "psychic imaginary of diasporas." They do not genuinely desire to return to their ancestral homeland. According to Vijay Mishra, homeland for immigrants "... is a series of objects, fragments of narratives that they keep in their heads or in their suitcases" (Mishra 70).

Salman Rushdie endorses this perspective, as demonstrated by his portrayal of expatriates' sentiments in "Imaginary Homelands":

"Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are hunted by some sense of loss, some usage to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge... that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind." (Rushdie 10)

Rushdie rightfully points out that the expatriates are pursued by a profound sense of loss, a desire to reclaim the past, even at the peril of being transformed into pillars of salt. However, if we reflect on the past, we must acknowledge that our physical estrangement from India renders us incapable of reclaiming what was lost; consequently, we will construct fictions—not tangible cities or villages, but rather intangible, imaginary homelands, an India of the mind.

In contrast to William Safran, who perceives the ancestral home as the true domicile, Rushdie experiences a sense of 'belonging' to that location, which may not be the place to which an individual should or would return. Moreover, the anguish arises not solely from departing the 'homeland' but also from our ascension beyond history, memory, and time. Robin Cohen has delineated the shared attributes of Diasporas in his "Introduction to Diasporas":

“Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;

Alternatively or additionally, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of a trade or to further colonial ambitions; A collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history, suffering and achievements; An idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;

The frequent development of a return movement to the homeland that gains collective approbation even if many in the group are satisfied with only a vicarious relationship or intermittent visits to the homeland;

A strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate;

A troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;

A sense of empathy and co-responsibility with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement even where home has become more vestigial; and the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism.” (Cohen 17)

Robin Cohen employs the term diaspora in a broader context than Safran. Cohen modifies the list of diaspora attributes proposed by Safran. Cohen posits that "two features should be adjusted," while additional features must be incorporated, particularly regarding the characteristics of the diaspora group in their host countries. He reformulates the initial feature by stating that “dispersal from an original centre is often accompanied by the memory of a single traumatic event that provides the folk memory of the great historic injustice that binds the group together” (Cohen 21- 23).

Through traumatic memories, individuals in the diaspora cultivate a robust sense of "imagined community" to which they remain loyal. Initially, he aspires for “groups that disperse for aggressive or voluntary reasons” to be classified within the “diaspora category.” Cohen asserts that the “positive virtues of retaining a diaspora identity” should be recognized (24).

Cohen elaborates that the widespread acceptance of negative connotations such as exile, loneliness, and enslavement is not inherent in the term "diaspora." Cohen posits that cultivating tolerance for pluralism enables immigrants to enhance their lives in their host

countries.

Cohen's updated list of features provides a more exhaustive representation of the diverse diaspora experiences compared to Safran's account. Cohen contends that the term "diaspora" ought to be broadened to include diverse and emerging patterns of dispersal, yet he does not advocate for its use as a universal term for all forms of dispersion. He adds "diaspora consciousness" as a fundamental component of becoming diasporas to Safran's list.

Khachig Tololyan contends that only through the ongoing practice of "diaspora consciousness" can an individual be deemed a member of the diaspora. In his editorial preface to the inaugural edition of *Diaspora*, Khachig Tololyan characterizes diaspora as "the exemplary communities of the transnational moment." He further asserts that "the term that once described Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersions now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (Tololyan 4-5)

Tololyan critiques Walter Connor's extensive definition of diaspora as "that segment of people residing outside the homeland." He contends that Connor's definition of diaspora, which refers to the dispersal of individuals from their original homeland, fails to delineate what a community comprising refugees, exiles, immigrants, or diasporas—or its constituents must think, feel, experience, or undertake to be regarded as a 'segment' of the transnational populace residing both in the homeland and abroad.

Diaspora in Contemporary Times:

Clifford asserts that the term now denotes novel manifestations of "multilocal attachments, dwelling and travelling within and across nations" (Clifford 249).

Consequently, it has come to denote diverse and more modern experiences of diaspora, such as migration, exile, and expatriation, as articulated by Fludernik. She observes a "proliferation of self-styled Diasporas" (*Diaspora* xvi). Consequently, 'diaspora' has supplanted terms such as 'exile' and 'foreign community.'

Clifford views 'Diasporas' as a contemporary manifestation of consciousness, collectiveness and solidarity in a time that celebrates fragmentation and deterritorialization as dominant paradigms. Diasporic communities often engage in a nostalgic narrative. They establish links with transnational political, cultural, or religious movements that aim to surpass national borders. Clifford overemphasizes the hybrid and territorial dimensions of Diasporas. The dual consciousness attributed to Diaspora communities is portrayed as a universal characteristic that liberates them from the constraints imposed by nation-states.

Diaspora denotes the migration of ideas, images, and individuals, who transport their memories. The concept of diaspora refers to 'emigration' (a voluntary departure from an original centre to a selected destination), driven by the aspiration for an improved life, as opposed to 'dispersion' (involuntary relocation from a place, indicating a lack of choice and leading to extensive wandering, exemplified by the dispersion of the Jewish peoples). The original diaspora has transformed to represent an identity space that terms like 'exile', 'migrant', 'immigrant', 'alien', 'refugee', and 'foreigner' cannot encompass.

In modern usage, 'diaspora' signifies movement and dynamism, origin and belonging, community and culture, as well as loneliness and isolation, collective nostalgia, and communal memory. The term 'diaspora' denotes the establishment of an identity, implying both a historical context and a pathway to the future, a nuance absent in terms such as 'refugee,' 'migrant,' 'foreigner,' or 'alien.' Immigrants are reservoirs of vitality and innovation. They are occupied with delineating their culture in a foreign territory.

Hybridity

The notion of "Hybrid" would facilitate comprehension of the characteristics of these immigrants. The term 'Hybrid' is clearly delineated in 'A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory': The term "Hybrid" is commonly assumed to be anything of mixed origin, of unlike parts... in literary and cultural studies, it refers to the idea of occupying in-between space; that is, of being of many, composite, or synergistic entities, new formations and creoles or intermixed peoples... (251)

In contemporary diaspora discourse, as articulated by scholars such as Bhabha and Vertovec, diaspora is perceived as a construct that engenders diverse forms of cosmopolitanism, facilitated by communities of individuals traversing physical or conceptual spaces, albeit in a disordered manner.

In this framework, diaspora serves as a socio-cultural designation for populations that do not inhabit conventional territories on an international scale. Consequently, they may be regarded as de-territorialized or re-territorialized when transitioning from their original homeland to a new one, establishing expatriate or ethnic enclaves in their adopted locales. Advocating for a more affirmative interpretation of diaspora, the process of diaspora identification may not necessarily pertain to identifying as American, British, or any other nationality upon settlement. Clifford posits that diaspora represents an epistemological shift in focus from a singular homeland to the recognition of multiple homelands.

The diaspora exemplifies the hybrid and dynamic essence of identities, which are no longer reliant on homogeneity, purity, or fixed localization. The Diasporas exhibit a

variety of cultures that coexist, merge, and emerge through hybridity. Diaspora cultures may arise from cultural interactions or suppression, exclusion, and domination; however, they are neither entirely original nor wholly impure. Dr. Myria Georgiou posits that the post-modern world can be characterized by hybridized identity and culture.

Georgiou in the article "Thinking Diaspora: Why Diaspora is a Key Concept for Understanding Multiculturalism" contends that diaspora is the sole pertinent concept for comprehending cultural hybridity. It underscores that communities may transcend national borders. Homi K. Bhabha is a pivotal figure in modern discussions regarding 'narrative' formations arising from the 'hybrid' dynamics of transnational existence and cosmopolitan awareness. In "The Location of Culture" (1994), he asserts, "Our existence today is marked by a tenebrous sense of survival, living on the borderlines of the "present" for which there seems to be no proper name other than the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix "post", post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-feminism..." (Bhabha 63).

Bhabha asserts that binary oppositions like black/white, majority/minority, and self/other are insufficient for depicting modern society. He designates this postmodern era as 'beyond.' This illustrates the reality of a multicultural postmodern society in which identity, culture, and history are interconnected. He suggests that postmodern artists should represent the fragmented and precarious essence of our existence, surpassing the temporal boundaries of past, present, and future, along with the binaries of black/white and majority/minority.

Bhabha contends that no nation is homogeneous or possesses an organic, ethnic community, as minorities are consistently overlooked; thus, all imagined communities are hybrid and multicultural. In "The Location of Culture", he introduces the term 'Dissemination' with a capital 'N' to signify that it is not only individual immigrants who experience dispersion or dislocation but also the socio-historical construct of 'Nation.' In the chapter "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," he characterizes location as an identity concept that transcends geographical boundaries, being constituted independently of specific locales. Bhabha interrogates the concept of nation and nationalism, revealing its inherent instability. He asserts that a nation is merely a historical construct, and what has existed and currently exists is solely devoid of nations. He asserts that immigrants, minorities, and members of the diaspora congregate in urban areas to alter the nation's history.

Bhabha, therefore, refutes the historicist notion of the nation and emphasizes the temporality of cultural location. In summary, dissemination is a concept that highlights the temporality of culture, in contrast to its historical originality and pre-modality. It delineates

the plight of immigrants who are severed from their homeland and struggle to assimilate into the foreign cultures of their host nations.

For Bhabha, the Diasporas are 'un-homed'. But this condition of homelessness creates the "in-between" position for the migrant. In this "in-between" position homogeneity is replaced by heterogeneity. As Arif Dirlik in his book 'Global Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism' observes: "New Diasporas have relocated the Self there and the other here, and consequently borders and boundaries have been confounded. And the flow become at once homogenizing and heterogenizing; some groups share in common global culture, regardless of location while others take refuge in cultural legacies that are far apart from one another as they were at the origin of modernity." (Dirlik 352)

Stuart Hall in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" posits that identity is constructed between and under the influence of two axes: "the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of differences and rupture" (Hall 53).

Hall characterizes the diaspora as: "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference." (Hall 57-58)

Hall asserts that diaspora identities are fluid rather than fixed. Through transformation, they develop a new self. Papastergiadis suggests that hybridity may pertain to the relationships between centre and periphery, between various peripheries, or as the identity arising from these connections. Although Hall considers cultural identities to be perpetually incomplete, this does not imply that achieving completeness is the ultimate goal; rather, this state of incompleteness and continual evolution serves as a source of vitality. The anti-essentialist perspective on ethnicity has altered its understanding, indicating that each individual possesses distinct spatial, historical, experiential, and cultural backgrounds, which underscores that we are all "ethnically located and our ethnic identities are essential."

According to Said, the exile experiences distance and separation from the concept of "homeland," despite being a source of significant loss, facilitates the development of a critical perspective and detachment that can reveal new insights into the self's relationship with the world. According to Said, exile represents a potentially fruitful stance as exiles traverse borders and dismantle barriers of thought and experience. The act of crossing borders and perceiving "the entire world as a foreign land" can be regarded as

fostering a "critical perspective" and an "originality of vision" that is inaccessible to native individuals.

According to Gilroy, diaspora can be perceived as providing an alternative conception of identity. He proposes the metaphor of analogous yet distinct "seeds" to be "sown" in various locations. This indicates that the outcome, specifically the relationship to the homeland, may differ based on the particular location to which an individual or family migrates. Gilroy presents diaspora identities as individuals compelled to embrace new influences.

Said articulates that his hyphenated identity as a Palestinian-American embodies an intermediary space, the hyphen, which facilitates the coexistence of multiple homelands and the celebration of a diverse cultural identity. Avtar Brah accurately characterises the status of diasporas within the prevailing culture as, "... all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we" (Brah 184).

Diverse nationalities unite to form a multicultural society in their adopted homeland. The multicultural society enhances global camaraderie. Amitav Ghosh, an anthropologist and novelist, contends that the Indian diaspora is less inclined towards a literal or symbolic return to the homeland and more focused on cultivating a unique culture in different locales. The aforementioned definitions indicate that various critics have attributed distinct meanings to the term. For some, it constitutes exile or banishment from one's native land. Some perceive diaspora as migration, whether between countries, states, or villages. William Safran and Cohen liken it to sentiments of alienation. They assert that if a community experiences alienation in a particular space due to socio-political policies, it is categorised as a diaspora community.

Critics such as Gilroy, Edward Said, and Tololyan argue that diaspora enables communities to transcend national boundaries. Their intermediary position facilitates the development of multilingual affiliations. Salman Rushdie and Vijay Mishra assert that the concept of homeland persists in the consciousness of immigrants. It is a migratory endeavour in pursuit of an improved future. Displacement establishes a juncture between an authority and an outsider. Self-fashioning constitutes both a psychological adaptation to mitigate the distress of physical dislocation and a physical adjustment to alleviate feelings of alienation and rootlessness. Displacement presents the dislocated population with the option to integrate into the host society or to resist the pressures of assimilation. The decision presents an ethical dilemma, as it forces individuals to choose between their

allegiance to their country of origin and their responsibilities to their country of migration. Thus, self-fashioning is an effective mechanism for constructing and redefining human identities.

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