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Multiculturalism and Identity Crisis in Diasporic Communities
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Abstract

The term diaspora has been so widely and loosely used in postcolonial criticism and cultural studies that in the true sense of the word, its meaning has become over-determined. In its popular and everyday usage, it is used to stand singly for migration, exile, or any form of demographic displacement. For any meaningful and analytically rigorous discussion of the idea it is helpful to begin with the earliest meanings of the term, and some of the major theorists who have written extensively about the modern diaspora. This paper attempts to interrogate the major trajectories of debate in the contemporary critical writing on diaspora and identity crisis. It also situates the debate with reference to the works of two most prominent voices of diaspora today, Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali.

Keywords: Acculturatcion, Identity as production, Cultural construct, Politics of recognition, Salad-bowl model, Mosaic model.

Races have migrated throughout history, giving rise to new civilizations and settlements. These mass migrations, at different times, have been attributed to extreme climatic changes, geographical conditions, political upheavals, famines, and wars among other causes. The term 'modern diaspora' refers to the large diasporic movements of population, that was an immediate consequence of the establishment of colonial empires, and continues in various forms as a fallout of postcolonial displacements and globalisation. However, before we start the deliberation on the contemporary forms of diaspora and the multicultural societies, they give rise to, we must explore the evolution of the term over the millennia.

The Biblical Diaspora

In the Biblical context the Diaspora (generally written with a capital 'D') refers to the long and well documented history and experience of exile, and is a crucial component of the history of the Jews. It is central to the idea of the homeland in the Western imagination. As Psalm 137 says:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
When we remembered Zion.
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
While in a foreign land?

In the Hebrew Bible, the term Diaspora refers to the fate of the Israelites who were forcefully exiled from the Kingdom of Israel during the 8th century BCE, and of the Judahites from the Kingdom of Judah during the 6th century BCE. There were two such expulsions: The Assyrian exile, and the Babylonian Captivity.

The Assyrian exile was the period during which several thousand Israelites were dispossessed and forcefully relocated immediately after the Assyrian conquest of Israel by the

Assyrian kings Tiglath Pileser III and Shalmaneser V. The second phase was the Babylonian captivity, in which portions of the population of the Kingdom of Judah were deported in 597 BCE by the Neo-Babylonian Empire under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar II. During the Middle Ages, due to increasing migration and resettlement, Jews divided into distinct regional groups that today are generally addressed according to two primary geographical groupings: the 'Ashkenazi' Jews of northern and eastern Europe, and the 'Sephardic' Jews //The concept of diaspora places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins. The problematic of home and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but now, when, or in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of a particular diaspora. Not all diasporas inscribe homing desire through a wish to return to a place of origin. For some, such as the South Asian groups in Trinidad, cultural identification with the Asian continent might be by far the most important element.

When we talk about the diaspora today, it is mainly with reference to the twentieth century emigration, along with the colonial diaspora. The most prominent name among the theorists of diaspora is that of William Safran. Safran's definition of the diaspora conceives of it as only one particular form of mass migration, that involving forced exile and a fraught and lengthy period of resettlement and planting of new roots in the location of destination. According to him diaspora consists of migrations where:

1. Original communities have spread from the homeland to two or more countries.

2. These communities are bound to their original geographical locations by a common vision, memory, and myth about their homeland.

3. They believe that they or their descendants will return to the homeland should conditions prove favourable.

4. They are strongly motivated to maintain support for their homeland and communal consciousness and solidarity enable them to continue to take interest in homeland affairs.

Another prominent contemporary theorist of diaspora is Robin Cohen (1997). Cohen has moved to widen Safran's definition. Cohen argued that diaspora should include those groups who scatter voluntarily as well as those who move as a result of aggression, persecution, and extreme hardship. It should, additionally, only be applied to groups who have settled in a new destination for a relatively long period of time. It should also take into account the positive aspects of the migrants' lives in the land of destination. It should also acknowledge that assimilation and integration into host cultures does occur and should include in its consideration the first, second, third and later generations. On the basis of these considerations, Cohen identified five types of diasporas:

1. Victim diasporas: This includes classic diasporas forced into exile such as the Jewish, African, and Armenian diasporas.

2. Labour diasporas: Mass migrations in search of work and economic opportunities, such as the Indian and Turkish diasporas.

3. Trade diasporas: Migrations seeking to open trade routes and links such as the Chinese and the Lebanese diasporas.

4. Imperial diasporas: Migration among those keen to serve and maintain empires such as the British and French diasporas.

5. Cultural diasporas: Those who move through a process of chain migration such as the Caribbean diaspora.

Now let us consider some specific diasporas.

 The African Diaspora:

The African diaspora refers to the Atlantic trade of enslaved people of the 16th to 19th centuries, in which as many as 12 million people in Western and Central Africa were taken captive and shipped to the Americas. Made of mainly young men and women in their childbearing years, the native African diaspora grew rapidly. These displaced people and their descendants greatly influenced the culture and politics of the American and other New World colonies. According to the U. S. Census Bureau, nearly 45.6 million people of the African diaspora lived in the United States in 2017.

The Chinese Diaspora:

The modern Chinese diaspora began in the mid-19th century. From the 1850s to the 1950s, large numbers of Chinese workers left China in search of jobs in Southeast Asia. From the 1950s to the 1980s, wars, starvation, and political corruption in mainland China shifted the destination of the Chinese diaspora to more industrialised areas including North America, Europe, Japan, and Australia. Driven by the demand of cheap manual labour in these countries, most of these migrants were unskilled workers. The current Chinese diaspora is estimated to consist of some 46 million ethnic Chinese living outside China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Macau.

The Mexican Diaspora:

Emerging in the 19th century and gaining traction in the 1960s, the population of the Mexican diaspora is based mostly in the United States. The Mexican American wars of 1846 and 1848 resulted in many Spanish speaking Mexicans settling in the Southwestern United States, particularly in California, New Mexico, and Arizona. By the time the Gadsden Purchase was ratified in 1853, around 300,000 Mexican nationals were living in the United States.
In his seminal essay on diasporic identity, Stuart Hall has this to say:

> Who is this emergent, new subject? From where does he/she speak? Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of *enunciation*. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is never as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead, of identity as 'production', which is never complete, always in

process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural

identity' lays claim. (Hall 222)

That the question of identity is central to any understanding of the diasporic condition is amply attested to by all the major studies of diaspora. For instance, the subtitle of Avtar Brah's highly influential study, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, is 'Contesting Identities'. He reminds us that at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey, and paradoxically "diasporic journeys are about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'". As he details:

These journeys must be historicised if the concept of diaspora is to serve as a useful heuristic device. The question is not simply about who travels, but when, how, and under what circumstances? What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora? In other words, it is necessary to analyse what makes one diasporic formation, similar to or different from another. (Brah 182)

Because of this basic inflected understanding of diaspora, Brah suggests that the concept of diaspora offers a critique of the discourses of fixed origins, while taking into account a 'homing desire'. However, he cautions us that the 'back-home syndrome is not the same as the desire for a 'homeland'. Economic inequalities within and between regions, expanding mobility of capital, people's desire to pursue opportunities that might improve their life chances, political strife, wars and famine are some of the factors that remain at the heart of migrations. People on the move may be labour migrants (both documented and undocumented), highly qualified specialists, entrepreneurs, students, refugees and asylum seekers, or the family members of previous migrants.

As far as the origins of the term diaspora is concerned, it derives from the Greek—*dia* meaning 'through', and *speirin* meaning 'to scatter'. It refers to a 'dispersion from', and hence embodies a notion of a centre, a locus or a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. It calls upon images of multiple journeys.

The South Asian Diaspora:
Coming to the topic of our immediate concern, let us take stock of the South Asian diaspora in Britain. In Britain the term South Asian usually refers to people from the Indian subcontinent. In the UK, as of 2022, South Asian minority groups include Indians 1.45 million (2.3 per cent), Pakistanis 1.17 million (1.9 per cent), Bangladeshis 451,500 (0.7 per cent). Other Asians include Sri Lankans, third-generation Indians, Asians of mixed parentage, people from Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives.

The first group of South Asians to migrate in notable numbers, in the 18th century were the *lascars* or sailors recruited from the Indian subcontinent (largely from the Bengal region) to work for the British East India Company, with some choosing to settle down in Britain after either being abandoned by their captains or choosing to desert from their positions of employment. Letters to newspapers of the time (1785) talked of the "number of miserable objects, Lascars…shivering and starving in the streets". Some lascars took British wives, and

some converted to Anglican Christianity in order to marry, possibly due to the shortage of South Asian women in Britain of the time. Between 1803 to 1813 there were more than 10,000 lascars from the Indian subcontinent visiting British Port cities, and by 1855, 12000 lascars were arriving annually.

Due to the majority being lascars, the earliest Muslim communities were found in port towns, barracks, and charity homes and hostels. The first ad most frequent SouthAsians often adopted British names, dress and diet. Naval cooks also came, many of them from the Sylhet division of what is now Bangladesh. One of the most famous early Muslim immigrants to England was Sheikh Deen Mohammad, a captain of the East India Company, who in 1810 founded London's first Indian restaurant, the Hindoostan Coffee House.

It must be emphasised that diasporas are not synonymous with casual temporary travel. Nor is diaspora a metaphor for individual exile but, rather, diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities, whether or not, members of the collectivity travel as individuals, as households or in various other combinations. Diasporas are places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations, even if some households or members move on elsewhere. The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble, and reconfigure.

All this leads to the central question about diasporas. When does a location become home? What is the difference between feeling at home, and staking a claim to a place as one's own? Where is home? On the one hand home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sound and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, the lush green and brown wheat fields of the Punjab, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day…all this, mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. In other words, the varying experience of the pains and pleasures, the terrors and contentment, and the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture constitute the memory of homeland.

Clearly, the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations, mediated as it is by memories of what was left behind, and by the experiences of disruption and displacement as one tries to reorientate, to form new social networks, and learns to negotiate new economic, cultural, and political realities. Within each generation the experiences of men and women will also be differently shaped by gender relations.

Coming to the question of identity proper, one's identity can be thought of as that particular set of traits, beliefs and allegiances that give one a consistent personality and mode of social being. It always implies, in the dynamic sense, a degree of thought and self-consciousness about the self. Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control. The big question always is: Is identity something substantive which one owns, or is one owned by one's

identity? In the context of the diaspora, we are specifically concerned with cultural identity and a closer look at its various types is in order.

Cultural identity is a part of person's identity or their self-conception and self-perception, and is related to one's nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, gender or any kind of social group that can be said to have its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is both characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity or upbringing. It gives us a sense of security through identification with the other members of the group. Cultural identity is a fluid process that is continually evolving within the discourses of social, cultural, and historical experiences. Generally, there are three elements that make up a person's cultural identity: cultural knowledge, category label, and social connections.

Since cultural identities are the most natural and fundamental constitutive elements of individual and collective identity, their historical evolution has always been a matter of curiosity among scholars. Identity development among immigrant groups has been studied across a multidimensional view of acculturation. Acculturation is the phenomenon that results when groups or individuals from different cultures come into continuous contact with one another and adopt certain values and practices which were not originally their own. However, as we shall see, acculturation is entirely different from assimilation.

Multiculturalism, when it is used as a term for identifying and analysing the characteristics of plural societies, is "a heuristic concept to be tested against the reality of situations in different countries with an appropriate openness to the contrasting accounts of individuals and groups on what they seek from government and society" (Watson 26). As compared to other words like multiethnic, polyethnic and multiracial, available to denote identical demographic constitution of many modern societies and countries, multicultural is preferably used because of the positive connotations it evokes. Multiculturalism creates not just a sense of difference—in the sense of cultural difference—but also recognises those differences as springing from a universally shared attachment of importance to culture and to an implicit acknowledgement of the equality of all cultures.

Culture for a person and a people is strongly associated emotionally and nostalgically with a distinctive way of life, which, despite all its deficiencies, speaks directly to an individual's sense of identity and belonging. Precisely because individuals recognise in themselves the emotional charge which this sense of distinctiveness conveys, they are also prepared to recognise the significance and importance of the notion of culture in the lives of others. This idea of multiculturalism is advanced by Charles Taylor in his pioneering study, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (1994). The phenomenon of globalisation added new dimensions to the issue of multiculturalism as national boundaries have become more porous and international travel has become accessible. However, with the opening of borders and the influx of populations from Asia and Africa, the indigenous populations of Western countries started feeling threatened in their homeland and all kinds of restrictions and barriers were erected to regulate the inflow of the migrants. Even for those migrants who had settled down permanently in those countries the issues of cultural incompatibility featured afresh as a major issue of contention.

One way out of this conceptual ambiguity is to distinguish the two strategies for dealing with the existence of several cultures within the nation, and one which has become a commonplace, is the analogy of a melting-pot to refer to the process of assimilation. Originally coined by the Anglo-Jewish writer Israel Zangwill in his play of the same name, produced in New York in 1908, the term referred to the manner in which immigrants who came to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century were encouraged to think of themselves as Americans, gradually abandoning their cultures of origin until, as in the action of the melting pot, they eventually became fully a part of the bright new alloy. Through a process of assimilation, facilitated by the state, all develop into Americans sharing a single common culture. It became the social philosophy of the time, the desired outcome for which successive governments were trying to draw up a blueprint.

By contrast, in the period beginning roughly 1960, this way of looking at the problem began to lose its credibility for the simple reason that in actual terms different cultural groups were simply not abandoning their original cultural characteristics. So, the descriptive power and the very desirability of the melting-pot analogy was more and more being questioned, and in due course of time it was replaced by a new and more felicitous analogy of the 'salad-bowl'. In the bowl, different constituents retain their distinctive flavours and forms but the dish as a whole is recognisably unique, having its own distinctive character because of its specific mode of blending. Culinary metaphors can be misleading and can be carried too far, and there is a potentially disturbing dimension to the thought of social groups being tossed around like salad ingredients. Nevertheless, this comparison of the melting-pot and the salad-bowl is immensely helpful in imagining the difference between assimilation and integration as also in clearly visualising the benefits of celebrating rather than suppressing diversity.

In Britain and America this emphatic shift towards the endorsement of multiculturalism took place in the mid-1960s, although for different reasons. As Watson points out:

> In the USA it was a consequence of the civil rights movement and a perception of the strong and sincere emotions which underlay the black power campaigns that liberal Americans gradually understood the importance of allowing all American citizens the space and opportunity to build a foundation for their self-respect on the bedrock of their own cultural traditions. In Britain it was the novel experience of large number of immigrants from countries known as the 'New Commonwealth' who, while committed to the laws and norms of society at large, saw no need to abandon their religious traditions or their cuisines or their languages. This led to a realization that assimilation was not the only means of incorporating immigrants into the society and that integration offered a more practical way forward, as well as a more liberal and ethically acceptable one. (Watson 5)

In this broadening of the concept of multiculturalism to encompass the rights of minorities, the feminist movement has frequently provided a model for the resolution of apparent injustice. Both in terms of conceptualizing the issues and in setting the agenda for what needs to be done, there has been a constant movement of ideas between feminists and minority rights activists. An example of borrowing by the feminists is the idea of double consciousness taken from the black writer W. E. B. Du Bois, who used it to describe the way in

which blacks in the USA had two simultaneous perceptions of themselves—one which derived from their own community and its traditions, and the other from how they perceived the white population to regard them. As a consequence of this double consciousness their lives were lived as a negotiation between those two perceptions, sometimes responding to the white gaze by acting in a way corresponding to its expectations, while at the same time guarding a sense of self-respect.

Debates around the term 'Multiculturalism' irrespective of their orientation have been centred around the idea of liberalism. Liberalism *a priori* is, a creed of tolerance and intrinsically identified with certain freedoms—free speech, worship, equality before law—and is apparently neutral in its evaluation of other beliefs, at least in so far as they do not threaten liberalism itself. This stance of neutrality, in relation to non-Western cultures in particular, appears to reach its culmination in the principle of cultural relativism: a belief that no single culture is better than any other and that there are no transcendent criteria to which one can appeal for justifying the imposition of one culture's norms on another. This principle, however, gives rise to the quintessential liberal paradox underlined by Ernest Gellner (1995). The argument goes something like this: If there are no transcendent values then liberal values are themselves not transcendent, and if they are not transcendent then there is no reason why we should accept the primacy of the tolerance of relativism as a good in itself, and if that is the case then we can as well reject tolerance; but liberalism insists on the centrality of the acceptance of tolerance. Thus, liberalism is transgressing its own fundamental tenet. To argue in this reductionist manner is, however, to ignore the complexity of liberalism and it amounts to a mere victory of rhetoric over substance.

However, even among strong supporters of liberalism there are disagreements regarding the limits of tolerance in context of multiculturalism. For instance, Bhikhu Parekh (1994), himself a staunch votary of liberalism in its universalist form raises a very pertinent issue. He notes that the liberalism so frequently enunciated in the tradition stretching from Mill to Rawls is a liberalism which fails to understand how deeply it is influenced by Western values deriving in effect from an intolerance of non-Western cultures. The context in which Parekh is making this point is no less pertinent and something with which we in the academia are all too familiar. When in 1987 the faculty board of Stanford University made a decision that a core course in the undergraduate programme on great books should be changed to reflect the range of world culture, and no longer be confined to Western classics, there was an immediate outcry.

Two closely related objections were raised: first, whether there were any other cultural traditions which were as rich and sophisticated and therefore as worth studying as the Western one; and second, whether, even if there were, it was not incumbent on those studying and residing in USA to familiarise themselves with the Western tradition to the exclusion of others, since it was that tradition which was the foundation of the cultural, social, political and economic organisation of the nation of which they had chosen to be citizens. The first objection was most succinctly expressed in a remark attributed to Saul Bellow to the effect that when it could be shown that the Zulus had produced works comparable to the writings of Tolstoy, then he would read them.

With the emergence of multicultural and plural societies with mixed populations and this brought the question of cultural equality and difference to the forefront of domestic politics in many Western states. The question was whether the cultural norms and practices and by

implication the being of the immigrant was to be recognised as equal to the native identity. It was basically a question of according recognition to the 'other'. In Britain, too, the presence of large Muslim immigrant populations from South Asia in the cities of North England and the Midlands sharpened the debate about multiculturalism.

The Rushdie affair as it has come to be known, is perhaps the best documented example of several public confrontations in large part orchestrated by the media. The fatwa (injunction) issued by the Iranian supreme cleric calling for the death of Salman Rushdie for presumably insulting Islam in his novel the Satanic verses understandably evoked a storm of protest from liberal opinion. However, in the ensuing and developing arguments the target of British liberal critical opinion became less the fatwa than Islam itself. Very rapidly, through a process of what the social anthropologist Gregory Bateson 'schismogenesis', the two sides in their opposition to each other, through their confrontation accentuated the elements of their position which the other objects to –Muslims of even liberal sentiments found themselves vilified by the liberal press at its most bellicose. The ever-vigilant liberal press has not let tempers cool, and has from time to time raised issued and practices which it considers to be deviations from the British cultural norms. Some of these issues are: the ritual slaughter of animals, the patriarchal power exercised by Asian men, and the practice of withdrawing children from schools so that they can make visits to the family on the Indian sub-continent.

If we are more conscious of the way in which these appeals were being voiced, we would be less likely to succumb to the seductive power of nationalist rhetoric and more inclined to interrogate the claims being made in the name of nationalism or national culture. We have to consider that beyond the appeal to the commonly shared polysemic symbols—which can mean different things to different people, while still carrying the same emotional weight for all—what are the values and the institutions which we are being asked to endorse, and are they in their present form as central to our identity as they appear to be for the advocates of a national tradition? These are the questions that occupy substantial space in the contemporary debates on identity crisis and multiculturalism.

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