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## Positioning Women in Diaspora

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Migration has long been part of human history and has always entailed the creation of multiple affiliations and identities. In an interview with Susheila Nasta, Salman Rushdie refers to the process of migration as “the actual condition of change through movement” (Nasta 149). The poet Meena Alexander speaks of it as: “A harmony that underwrites a poetics of dislocation where multiple places are jointed together, the whole lit by desire that recuperates the past, figures forth the future” (Alexander 15). The diasporic identity is defined by choosing selves. In other words, identity in diaspora is transformed and redefined into novel nexus of relationships available in new circumstances. This becomes doubly problematic for women. Women have to negotiate identities which can be just endurance at first that can lead to renewal and empowerment later on. Though the loss of roots is there for all diasporic individuals, but leaving home also gives rise to new frameworks of engagement, interaction and space for women. It is the kind of freedom and identity which would not have been possible in the homelands. Edward Said makes a point that a condition of marginality, stemming from being an expatriate or exile “frees you from having always to proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the applecart, anxious about upsetting fellow members of the same corporation” (Bayoumi and Rubin 380). Homi K. Bhabha, one of the seminal scholars of diaspora theory, in his influential and widely disseminated essay, “Border Lives: The Art of the Present” (1994), argues that:

It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*....The ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (Bhabha 01-02)

Bhabha is one of the originators of the contemporary discourse of ‘narrative’ constructions that arise from the ‘hybrid’ interactions emerging from transnational existence and cosmopolitan consciousness:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated....Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference...is a complex, on---going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation (Bhabha 02-03).

Identity is a psychologically fixed position that is approved by the society or assumed by the individual himself/herself. Whenever there is an issue of cultural crisis, the question of relationship and position of individual with society becomes prominent. It is particularly true in case of the Third World societies which are many as well as varied. The common thread between these societies is that mostly they are the post-colonial and developing nations present on a point where the legacies of colonialism, tradition and modernity are in direct conflict with each other. The structure of each and every Third World society is shaped by distinct social, cultural, religious, economic and political factors. However, all discussions about the position of women in these societies direct our attention towards their doubly marginalised status. Mere presentation of women as oppressed without further analysing the case is futile. The very term “women’s problem” is problematic because of the differences of classes, cultures, races, castes and religions, thus, giving rise to multifaceted challenges. Judith Butler remarks that in the Third World societies power is exercised through the process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women. ‘Diaspora’ has traditionally been understood as a yearning for a lost home. Steven Vertovec explains that the overall Jewish history of displacement has embodied the longstanding, conventional meaning of diaspora. Martin Baumann indicates that there have been at least three inherent, and rather different referential points with respect to what we refer to as the Jewish (or any other group’s) historical experience ‘in the diaspora’. That is, when we say something has taken place ‘in the diaspora’ we must clarify whether we refer to (a) the *process* of becoming scattered, (b) the *community* living in foreign parts, or (c) the *place* or geographic *space* in

which the dispersed groups live. “The kind of conceptual muddle that may arise from the failure to distinguish these dimensions with regard to historical Jewish phenomena continues to plague the many emergent meanings of the notion of diaspora” (Vertovec 02-03). Vertovec further elaborates that in the contemporary context, interpretations of migration as loss of home and familiars are no longer current and instead have given way to ideas of diaspora as communities of simultaneously local and pluralistic identities, ethnic and transnational affiliations and celebrations of cosmopolitanism:

Diaspora discourse has been adopted to move collective identity claims and community self--ascriptions beyond multiculturalism... The alternative agenda – now often associated with the notion of diaspora – advocates the recognition of hybridity, multiple identities and affiliations with people, causes and traditions outside the nation state of residence (Vertovec 05).

In the context of current diaspora discourse, led by scholars such as Bhabha and Vertovec, ‘diaspora’ can be viewed today as a ‘place’ which can create multiplicities of cosmopolitanism, produced and reproduced through communities of people moving physically or conceptually between spaces, albeit through a chaotic order. In such a context ‘diaspora’ may be a socio-cultural label applied to populations that, intentionally, do not occupy conventional territory. They may, thus, be considered ‘de-territorialized’ or ‘re-territorialized’ when they move from an original land to an adopted one and build expatriate or ethnic enclaves in the land of their adoption. Their emotional, social and cultural affiliations transect borders of nation--states and, indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that they form global communities across geographical, political, social and cultural boundaries. Vertovec refers to diaspora as ‘social form’ and a ‘type of consciousness’ (Vertovec 07). He suggests that diasporic populations retain a collective memory or vision of their original homeland and continue to relate personally or vicariously to that vision. It follows that their conscious identity is importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. Extrapolating on this idea of diaspora as social consciousness, contemporary feminist diasporic scholar, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, speaks of a ‘feminism without borders’ in which diaspora is border-crossing. She argues for a trans-cultural, feminist identity that seeks: “The simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and the emancipatory potential of crossing through, with, and over these borders” (Mohanty 02). To these scholars diaspora does not imply universality but the movements of ideas, images and people, who carry ideas and memories with them.

The notion of diaspora especially for women, as a concept of ‘emigration’ (a voluntary movement away from an original centre and towards a specific chosen destination, based on the hope for a better life in that destination), rather than ‘dispersion’ (forced removal from a locus, implying lack of choice and resulting in widespread wandering, as in the dispersion of the Jewish peoples, the original Diaspora), has evolved to signify an identity space that words such as ‘exile’, ‘migrant’, ‘immigrant’, ‘alien’, ‘refugee’ and ‘foreigner’ cannot claim. For women it is doubly problematic. In its contemporary usage, ‘diaspora’ indicates movement and dynamism, origin and belonging, community and culture, along with loneliness and isolation, collective nostalgia and community memory. In “Imaginary Homelands” Salman Rushdie writes:

The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained. (Rushdie 16)

There are of course differences in men’s writing of the immigrant experience from women’s, so it is not a coincidence that Rushdie says, “Having been borne across the world, we are translated *men*” (emphasis mine). This is because the particular forms of loss and yearning articulated in much of diasporic literature relate to the experience of men as men, as sons, husbands and fathers. I have explored ideas of borders and the borderless as they are expressed by the diasporic authors. I argue that the simultaneous containment and porousness of borders, and the idea of borderlessness that the two novels explore, offer an arena within which it is possible to construct creative, cosmopolitan and plural identities for diasporic women. The traditional immigrant discourses of alienation and loss can be subverted by women, liberating them from established norms and allowing them the space to review the social fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears and challenges that make up their traditional roles, thereby interrogating the very roles themselves.

Mohanty refers to the “emancipatory potential” of border crossings, suggesting that “a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice” (Mohanty 02). This idea is relevant when discussing emerging identity constructs which are manifestly without borders and thus without the lines of familial and cultural demarcation and division. At the same time, this dissertation argues that the nature of both the border crossing and its aftermath vary greatly with rooted experiences of class, and thus, the nature of the new freedoms varies as well.

The migration of women is propelled by their unquestioning acceptance of the social norms that define their destinies; but their quiet acquiescence is turbulently challenged by the overwhelming experience of their compulsive migration. Perhaps the most significant aspect that distinguishes narratives of male migration from female migration is choice.

Women are not the primary agents of emigration – the diasporic experience is one that is forced on them by the circumstances of their choiceless marriages – but they emerge, through this experience, as evocative symbols of a new and aspirational, more justly ordered society. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that “being a woman has political consequences in the world we live in; that there can be unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our...marginality and/or privilege” (Mohanty 03). Diasporic novelists Monica Ali and Jhumpa Lahiri propose that the absence of the boundaries of home, lost through exile, permits the vision for transformation and hence the creation of modern, contextual, identities. Estranged from the known comfort of traditional boundaries and constantly yearning for their lost home, Lahiri’s and Ali’s heroines tenaciously cling to the idea of creating a home such as they have known, but the omnipresence of foreignness and the necessity of grappling with its influence renders this act a creative reconstruction, liberating it from circumscribed limits. The diasporic identity is often about choosing between selves. In other words, identity, in the process of diaspora, is transformed and translated into a new system of relationships that gives diasporans an alternative position from which to re-formulate their visions of the local and global.

Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* chronicle the lives of two women who are reluctant immigrants by marriage but who navigate the ‘un-belonging’ and ‘in-betweenness’ of their stark, lonely lives, to make singular contributions to the idea that women’s immigrant identity can be potentially creative, critical and liberating. Both novels present immigration as an ultimately empowering experience but both also draw their substance from the brutal alienation that the protagonists suffer in the act of creating their new interstitial selves. The protagonists of these novels Nazneen and Ashima both share the classic ‘insider’/‘outsider’ perspectives of immigrants and both narrate the experiences of alterity. The lived difference of their lives alters even their physical spaces; thus *Brick Lane* in London (Ali) and Cambridge in Massachusetts (Lahiri), which are initially depicted as alien, are, through the course of the novels, transformed into spaces *chosen* as homes by the protagonists. Indeed it could be argued that it is precisely Nazneen’s and Ashima’s positions as ‘insiders’/‘outsiders’ that permit the double-consciousness which allows them to cross borders of various kinds. The idea of choosing an identity, defined by context and culture,

rather than inheriting one, is increasingly finding support among contemporary social thinkers who are themselves products of this hybridization. Nobel Laureate economist, humanist and diasporic, Amartya Sen, suggests that:

History and background are not the only way of seeing ourselves and the groups to which we belong...identities are robustly plural, and...the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others. (Sen 19)

While this may be seen as an argument from a position of privilege, since many people in the world cannot think to pick, choose and pluralize their identities at will, it is this notion of plurality that Lahiri and Ali use to frame the growing agency of their protagonists. The heroines through their experience of exile, develop the consciousness that their identities are less a matter of origin and more an issue of choice. Sen suggests that “substantial freedom” is necessary to decide “what priority to give to the various identities we may simultaneously have... Life is not mere destiny” (Sen 38-39). The control of agency over destiny is the trajectory that the authors chart for their two protagonists, building through the novels a narrative of gathering freedom.

Female diasporic novelists speak to their own positions as authors inhabiting interstitial spaces, as much as to those of their characters, when they present identity as a malleable social construct in their novels. Consequently, it can be said that creating identity is a dynamic performative act through the actions of their lead protagonists. Both novels thematize and enact processes of fictional transformation as women in diaspora traverse their changing circumstances and move from positions of voiceless passivity to greater self-knowledge and independence. The relevance of this narrative of identity as a dynamic performative refers to the extent to which the protagonists in the two novels actively construct their own identities through their circumstances of migration. Female characters, far from being the agents of migration, are traumatized migrants; but the experience of migration liberates them from the known and familiar boundaries and enables them to create new, contemporary, cross-cultural identities, shaped by their gender and class location. One can view women’s identity within the diaspora as a realm of dynamic dialogue. The energy created by that dialogue propels a re-interpretation of gender roles and promotes a gendered vision of diasporic identity.

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