

The Notions of Home and Identity in Diaspora Literature: A Conceptual Exploration

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Abstract

When dealing with diasporic literature, we deal with a unique form of literature that is constructed by hybrid identities that mingle in two or more different cultures. This combination causes a new world of ambivalence, which is alien to both native and host cultures. It is mostly analyzed and criticized by many critics because it is a reflection mostly mixed with the unconsciousness of an individual perception of reality experienced by the author who depends on his exaggerated imagination of the culture he/she misses. Home, culture and identity are topics that can never be avoided whenever there is a talk about diaspora and diaspora literature.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Hybridization, Homelessness, Inbetweenness, Transformation, Immigrant, Ethnoscapes, Exile, Biculturalism

Introduction

In recent years, many critics and cultural theorists got increasingly interested in the notion of diaspora. Due to many socio-political and economic factors, people sometimes voluntarily or forcibly desert their traditional homelands for other places which could afford more comfortable, safer living conditions. The twentieth century is probably the century of diaspora *par excellence*; this is due to the unprecedented flow of ethnic groups caused by wars, political strife, religious or political oppression, famine and economic crises. In fact, there are many definitions of diaspora but each seems to be the paraphrasing of the other. Generally defined, diaspora is used to refer to any ethnic group or community that is forced or induced to leave their original homeland for another place in the world, thus living dispersed and dissociated from their nation. Diaspora also refers to the traditions and culture that these people develop throughout time away from their original countries.

Diaspora literature cannot be discussed without investigating notions of identity, hybridity, space, geography, race, ethnicity, displacement, dispersal and dislocation. Studying diaspora does not focus only on immigration or leaving one's home to another for reasons of work, study, refuge, or any other reason, but rather it is an investigation of diaspora people being influenced in many ways. The diaspora literature generally, as noticed, debates the several impacts on individuals and mainly the new changes that appear on the newly formed identities. In other words, the changes that happen in the new construction of identity which take place because of the cultural encounters that the diaspora individuals face after transferring from the home culture to another specially if the two cultures have several

dissimilarities. Cultural transformation includes all the other aspects of politics, economy, religion, language, psychology and so on and so forth.

Introducing Diaspora

The etymology of the word diaspora goes back to the Greek word “diaspeirein”. ‘Dia’ means ‘through’ and ‘speirein’ means ‘scatter’. The word diaspora was firstly used in reference to the date 586 BC when the Jews were exiled from Judea by the Babylonians. (Encyclopaedia Britannica) Hence, the term has come to denote people dispersed and their ensuing culture. Clearly, diaspora has been transformed from a descriptive condition applied largely to Jews in exile, to encompass a multitude of ethnic, religious and national communities who find themselves living outside of the territory to which they are historically rooted. The term diaspora, then, always implies the experiences of dislocation and displacement. In *Cartographies of Diaspora (1996)* AvtarBrah defines Diasporas as:

...places of long-term, if not permanent, community formations [...] 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. (AvtarBrah, 2004: 190)

Yet, when looking for the word diaspora in most of the dictionaries, we find ideologized definitions trying to relate it to the immigration of Jews from Palestine to other places in the world at a certain time in the past to show that Israelis have the right to control Palestine. Whereas Robert Longley believes that there are several diasporas and gives for each diaspora community a different definition. Some are related to colonialism, others are related to people dismissed from their homelands because of political reasons and others because of immigration for study or work and so on.

Unlike diaspora created by force, voluntary immigrant groups, while also maintaining close cultural and spiritual links to their countries of origin, are less likely to wish to return to them permanently. Instead, they take pride in their shared experience and feel a certain social and political “strength-in-numbers”. Today, the needs and demands of large diaspora often influence government policy ranging from foreign affairs and economic development to immigration. (Longley)

Noticed is the influence of being indulged in a new culture whatever the reasons of immigration are. The diaspora identity loses its originality because of the many changes that take place, yet, it can never be similar to identities of people in the host culture/place though having some of its features due to the direct contact with citizens there. This transformation leads to a new identity living in a new created space characterized by being a 'third space' in Bhabha's words where identity goes through a process of hybridization. The result of such unanticipated process is an internal conflict between the previous identity and the new changes that create a 'distorted' identity and which seems for its owner to be the expected in the new host community.

The discursive limits of diaspora are likewise notable concerns within critical explorations of cultural identities. IenAng (2003) argues that the discourse of diaspora is fundamentally proto-

nationalist and essentialist, and as such ‘feeds into a *transnationalist nationalism* based on the presumption of internal ethnic sameness and external ethnic distinctiveness’ (2003: 145). While Ang prefers the term ‘hybridity’ in place of ‘diaspora’, because it ‘confronts and problematizes boundaries’ (2003: 149), that concept also ‘remains problematic insofar as it assumes the meeting or mixing of completely separate and homogenous cultural spheres’ (Barker, 2004: 89–90). (Catherine Simpson, 2009: 20)

Admiring the host land and culture cannot prevent immigrants from being victimized by the psychological conflict where they lose the ability to control themselves from being hybridized neither it would prevent the originality of their identities from being distorted. Also. The feeling of nationalism becomes shaky because they simply lose their belonging to a certain place. Diaspora literature shows lots of writers who are unable to defend their original home without defending their new home even if they are treated as aliens/unwelcomed immigrants. Yet, they feel they are new citizens of the host land and believe people there should welcome them as new citizens as the indigenous people living in the host country. However, this feeling differs from a diaspora community to another. It becomes very problematic if they come from a previously colonized country and reside in the colonizer's land as the case of TayebSalih in his *Season of Migration to the North* 1969 and LeilaAboulela in her *The Translator*(2002). Also such feeling of belonging to the host country and culture is different in the case of Abd-el-Kader Benali in his *Wedding by the Sea*(1999), and HafidBouazza in his *Paravion* (2003) where there is an attempt from both Moroccan writers to merge in the host country, culture and language. The question that are raised when dealing with topics of diaspora are: Where is home? To where do diaspora communities belong?

The Notion of ‘Home’ in Diaspora Literature

Home is what gives the individual the sense of belonging, belonging to a certain community or group, a certain race and culture. The experience of migrant and diaspora people goes beyond this perception of home. Home is not only the geographically bounded territory. Rather, it does exist in the minds of the migrants and diaspora communities. Hence the famous expression of the Palestinian diaspora: “all people have a home where they live except us. We have a home living inside us.” So, even the physical return to the place of origin does not solve the problem of ‘unhomeliness’. Rosemary Marangoly George claims that diaspora literature is a literature of homesickness in the sense that it embodies the embedded desire to come home, to be recognized and to be protected by boundaries and a sense of sameness. (Daniela Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi, 2005: 178) To question diaspora is to debate its relation with geography as well. Alison Blunt clarifies this relation by stating that:

The term ‘diaspora’ is inherently geographical, implying a scattering of people over space and transnational connections between people and places. Geography clearly lies at the heart of diaspora both as a concept and as lived experience, encompassing the contested interplay of place, home, culture and identity through migration and resettlement. (Blunt, 2005: 282)

Apparently, Blunt makes clear how diaspora is connected to geographical spaces but when mentioning diaspora as a 'concept', he also means that there is another space that is mental and this space is characterized by Homi Bhabha as a third space where diaspora communities do not find themselves in either of the native or host spaces. In their research *Geographies of Diaspora: A Review*(2010), Michael

Rios & Naomi Adiv comment on Blunt's speech by relating diaspora to the geographical and demographical key words used when debating diaspora in greater details stating that:

the term 'diaspora' is defined through the words "scattering", "transnational", "migration" and "resettlement". Within the field of geography, these terms are used, alternately, to describe very specifically, but also generally, the various circumstances of migrating people. However, this muddle of language also points to a different phenomenon – the practice of geographers to describe patterns of human migration as well as the social identities and political constructions that are created by diaspora populations around the places they call 'home'. (Adiv and Rios, 2010: Introduction)

This yearning for home is legible in diasporic writing such as that of the Moroccan-Dutch novelist Abdel-Kader Benali whose novel *Wedding by the Sea* (1997) won him the Libris Prize for Fiction, and also in Hafid Bouazza's *Abdellah' Feet* (2000). Rosemarie Buikema in her analysis of Benali's novel states that:

Homesickness, the desire for a home, in Benali's text, is a longing to come home to the magic of stories, a longing for the feeling of community that emerges through the actual telling. (Rosemarie Buikema:184)

By perfectly using the Dutch language, Benali and Bouazza bring together two different cultures: the culture of origin recognizable in the metaphors, settings, and characters of the novel, and the culture of present day life apparent in the use of the Dutch language. This duality reflects their biculturalism. The idea of being bicultural makes some immigrants proud of having more than one culture forgetting the role of multiculturalism in the formation of identity. In fact, some think of the new acquired culture as much better than their previous one and thus they enhance its influence on their identity. Commenting on biculturalism in diasporic writings Selman Rushdie states in *Imaginary Homelands* (1992) that:

Language needs remaking for our own purposes... 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. (Rosemarie Buikema:181)

In this regard, Rushdie treats himself as a metaphor language that has been translated to another language. Though he confesses that he loses something within him, however, he claims "that something can also be gained". He was rewarded by Queen Elizabeth as a noble prince, but he lost the right to return to his home land forever. One can imagine the inner conflict that one would feel when being deprived from the original home whatever gains could be got. The reward Rushdie could get whatever its cost is cannot compensate his lost home, nor can prevent the split of his identity, because in all cases he cannot forget his land, culture and the authenticity of his original identity.

Hybrid Identities and the State of *Inbetweenness* in Diaspora Literature

The investigation of identity in the diaspora literature is something that cannot be avoided. Critics of diaspora literary works believe that there is a crisis in the formation of the new identity. Hybridization seems to be a must whether immigrants accept or resist such process of identity reconstruction. Some

writers as Salman Rushdie and Hafid Bouazza never resisted being culturally transformed to new people who belong to a totally different culture. In their works, they try their best to show that they have become new citizens of the 'new world' which they believe is much better than their original homes. Tayeb Saleh shows another sense of belonging and homesickness though he cannot get rid of his perpetuation of the colonial discourses practiced on his original home. Yet, writers like Mahmoud Darwish presents the suffering of diaspora as being split into two people who find themselves a stray in nowhere where one can take the other to.

We have become two friends of the strange creatures in the clouds ... and we are now loosened from the gravity of identity's land. What will we do ... what will we do without exile, and a long night that stares at the water? (Darwish)

Darwish begins his verse with 'but', which tells readers that the poet is not like his previous ones and therefore it needs different treatment. 'But I am the exile' tells the readers how different his situation from all others. This situation is further explained when it shows how this exile is seeking warmth and safety in whatever he encounters due to his feeling of loss and insecurity. Clearly, it is deduced from this poem that a diasporic lives a very tough dichotomy between what is strange, eccentric, and unconventional on the one hand and what is familiar, common and conventional on the other. This weird situation leads one to suffer from nostalgia, longing and homesickness like the case of the protagonist of the previous poem.

That establishment and construction of a new world in exile bear a resemblance to the image of one's own home which is produced in the host land as a way to conquer the sense of loneliness, failure and yearning. In-betweenness is constructed here when one is trying to impose his culture of the homeland on the host land's culture. These cultures meet, overlap and even clash, which leads to what is called "a third space" by producing a new culture that neither resembles to what is applied on the home land neither to what people are used to in the host land.

Diaspora presents us with the process of representation and construction of identity at the complex juncture where the categories and impulses of empire, nation, religion, gender, and metropolitan location converge. Unlike nationalism, where territory is the ultimate aim and battleground, Diaspora is territoryless. It is a point of tenuous balance. Diaspora implies negotiation of borders and frontiers, exile and alienation, ambivalence, duality, and even duplicity. Based in a "host" space, Diaspora is often defined by outside danger and as dangerous to the outside. (Salhi and Netton, 2006: 82)

Much of the work about 'hybridity' and 'fluid' identities is due to post-colonial theory, especially to the Indian critic Homi Bhabha. The concept of hybridity comes to subvert the assumptions about fixed identities and essentialized cultures. To Bhabha, all cultures are under a constant process of change and hybridity. Hence, speaking about such or such culture as a pure culture would be to no avail. What puts cultures and, thus, identities into a permanent process of change and reciprocal contamination according to Arjun Appadurai in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) are the 'scapes': ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finanscapas, and ideoscapas.

Ethnoscapes or migrant communities occupy a position of third space, a position of neither nor. As far as the literature produced by migrant writers, it is always said to be allochthonous. A case in point is the literature produced by young Moroccan-Dutch writers such as Hafid Bouazza, Abd-el-Kader Benali, Stitou and Al Houbach. These writers reject the labeling of their work as allochthonous, that's to say, as separate from the Dutch literary field. Hafid Bouazza says: "I write in Dutch and I have a Dutch passport. What else can I do to be a Dutch writer?" In his turn, Benali states:

No, I do not feel the allochthonous of my publications. The division allochthonous-autochthonous has no sense at either literary or human level. What is important is the credit paid to my work, not to my origin. (Quoted in *The Transnational Family*: 108)

The inbetweenness of the Moroccan-Dutch literature is expressed by Benali when he speaks about the generation of writers of Moroccan origin in the Netherlands. He says:

A new literary stream has developed during the last five years. It is not entirely Moroccan, it is not entirely Dutch. Neither. It is something in between, which would be too easy. No, it is an action. (in *The Transnational Family*:108).

Conclusion

Diaspora and diaspora literature are multidisciplinary fields of study. We cannot approach them without building on anthropology, geography, psychoanalysis, post-structuralist theory, history, literary studies, and cultural studies. The themes treated modestly though in some details, are home and identity. The notions of home, culture, and identity have been treated in this paper as diverse and they depend on the reasons of immigration. Though some writers like Darwish and Tayeb Saleh resist having changes in their identities and resist the colonial mode of identity formation, others like Benali and Salma Rushdie glorify these changes and welcome more changes believing these changes are real and needed amendments in their characters. However, the undoubtable outcome of transformation and biculturalism is identity crisis. The split of identity seems to be an unavoidable fate whatever. None of those writers who glorify the Western culture can be treated as a Western citizen whatever costs those writers.

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