

Diasporic Dis/location: A Study of the Themes of Memory, Home and Homecoming in *The Namesake, Desirable Daughters* and *Beloved Strangers: A Memoir*

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August 2016



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A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English and Humanities

Of

BRAC University

By

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Student ID: 14163011

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

August 2016

Acknowledgement

First and foremost my gratitude goes to almighty Allah for giving me the patience and enlightenment to do the research.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Rifat Mahbub for being patient, encouraging and helpful throughout my thesis writing. I am sincerely grateful to her for her valuable suggestions that helped me to focus on my topic. It would have been very complicated for me to work on this thesis paper if she would not have been there for me whenever I needed.

My hearty thanks go to the Chairperson of the English department, Prof. Ferdous Azim. Her knowledgeable lectures enlightened me and my thoughts and these helped me to think creatively. Besides, there are many people who have given me inspiration and support to finish my paper. I would like to thank all my teachers of the Department of English and Humanities. They have inspired me to understand literature in a better way. I also thank my friends for their suggestions.

Last but not least, I want to thank my parents and husband for always being with me and for guiding me to take all the major decisions in my life.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the themes of memory, home and homecoming in three novels *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Desirable Daughters* (2002) by Bharati Mukherjee and *Beloved Strangers: A Memoir* (2014) by Maria Chaudhuri which fall in the category of diasporic literature. Diasporic novels primarily deal with issues of movement and (re)settlement from one's original home to a new country. This movement may lead to reframe the issue of nostalgia and homecoming at an individual level. The diasporic fictions I have taken, provide an opportunity to explore these themes from the perspective of the characters who leave their own country and settle in a different country, creating a relationship between memory, present and their future. This thesis argues that the diasporic experiences and memories are embedded in people's culture, background and surrounding. My choice of the novels *The Namesake*, *Desirable Daughters* and *Beloved Strangers: A Memoir* are mainly originated from South Asian concepts and engage us to the characters who deal with different experiences as people of diaspora.

This paper starts with an introduction followed by two chapters and finally reaches to the conclusion. In my introduction, the term diaspora has been briefly discussed and then the two analysis chapters discuss memory, home and homecoming. Where memory can be metaphorical and make people of diaspora nostalgic, home has a fluid concept to them because home works as an unsettled place. The conclusion states how these diasporic themes work diversely in the life of the characters of the selected novels.

Introduction

Vijay Mishra in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* states that, “[a]ll diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (1). Mishra modifies this line from the famous opening sentence of the book *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy. It denotes the non-stereotype that the term diaspora cannot be generalized always. Rather, every diasporic character is different from one another. Their culture, cast, situation and background shape them differently.

It is hard to put all diasporic people in one category and to relate only specific issues with it. There are several issues related to diaspora. Moreover, the life of every diasporic people is not same even though they fall in one big umbrella of diaspora. Diasporic novels, or diasporic literature, have been a powerful lens to understand, represent and interrogate some of the varieties of people’s diasporic experiences. This research looks into three diasporic novels of female writers of South Asian origins, mainly from India and Bangladesh, to explore the ways in which American diasporic lives for the novels’ South Asian characters are manifested. In examining the novels, I focus on three main topics which are very common emotion of diasporic experiences, but are not always addressed with their due intersectionality. The topics are: memory, home and homecoming. In this introductory chapter, I will mainly focus on the theoretical aspect of diaspora, allowing me to set the ground for textual interrogation.

Diaspora

In simple meaning, diaspora is the dispersal of people from their own land. The term diaspora comes from a Greek word that means “to scatter about”. Thus, the word indicates the scattered people who had to leave their homeland and settled in a new place across the world.

This term is also associated with Jewish people. It can also be found from the Bible that diaspora was used for the Jewish who were exiled from Israel by the Babylonians.

Though the term was mainly used to describe the homelessness of Jewish communities, now it has a newer and diverse meaning all over the world. Now the term mainly means people's voluntary or forceful movement from their homeland to a different country. Thus, diaspora has become an umbrella term which includes both people's voluntary and forceful movement, mainly, though not exclusively, for better life chances. The term diaspora is being used metaphorically for the refugees, immigrants, expatriates or the exiles. All of them experience resettlement and dislocation in their life. Anna Harutyunyan says in her essay "Challenging the Theory of Diaspora from the Field" that, "[t]he Diasporic condition is a combination of being uprooted and placed in a temporary setting" (8). Diasporic condition is not a single condition but it is a blend of different issues such as uprootedness and temporary living. In today's meaning, when the people of diaspora face voluntary uprooting from their own land, they may have the right to come back to their homeland if they want. Perhaps, this chance is less possible for people who are fleeing from war or serious turmoil. For an example, now we see people from war-stricken countries like Syria are moving towards Europe, with an anticipation to survive. They have hardly any chance to return to their homeland.

Since the term diaspora implies re/settlement in a new place, it needs to be differentiated from terms such as transnationalism or travelling. Lily Cho suggests in her article that, "[d]iaspora must be differentiated from transnationalism, not only because the crossing of national borders does not necessarily define diasporic subjectivity, but also because to be marked by loss" (19). The term transnationalism has a broader meaning and this social phenomenon is linked up with other national issues. On the other hand, James Clifford suggests that diaspora

cannot be merged with travelling because travelling is just a temporary shift where diaspora is more constant (307-308). Though travelling means going to a different place but that is only for a temporary time and it has nothing to do with identity crisis or any other diasporic issues.

Features of Diaspora

As claimed by Clifford there are some main features of diaspora. Those are:

1. A history of dispersal
2. Memories of homeland
3. Alienation
4. Support of the homeland
5. Collective identity (305).

In harmony with Clifford, Robin Cohen also explores similar features. He further adds a development of return movement or homecoming (515). Based on the features, I will be choosing two important features of diaspora for my paper, which are memory and homecoming.

There could be different types of diaspora. Cohen suggests five types of diaspora in Wulandari Retno. They are victim, labour, trade, imperial, and cultural. Jewish diaspora could be mentioned as victim, South Asian could be the labour diaspora as people were taken as labour from South Asia to different colonies. Trading diaspora represents the movement of Chinese population and on the other hand, the British exemplifies imperial diaspora. Finally, the Carribean represents cultural diaspora because they live with their own culture and have to merge with the host country's culture (2). In this paper, I will discuss only labour and cultural diaspora focusing on the characters of the novels. However, as I have chosen the post-colonial or newer diaspora, here, labour diaspora signifies people who leave their country for education or job and settle in a new land.

Phases of Diaspora

It is essential to discuss that diaspora is often defined in two phases, which are:

1. Old diaspora
2. New diaspora

In the South Asian context, the old diaspora is the time during the colonial period, roughly from 1830 to 1930 when there was British rule. Thus, it also can be named as the Colonial phase. In Indian region, the colonial phase started in 19th century. It continued up to 20th century. Diaspora in the colonial phase indicates only those immigrants who were taken from India to British colonies such as Fiji, Surinam and other French Colonies. Old diaspora had no opportunity as the people were taken forcefully or been uprooted. Therefore, the chance to go back to their homeland was less. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the old diaspora was the result of war, religious oppression, slavery and trade since the nineteenth century and the new diaspora is “the new scattering of the seeds of ‘developing’ nations” (246). Therefore, the old one represents the forceful scattering and the new diaspora represents migration, border crossing and voluntary scattering from developing to developed countries. The novels such as, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison deals with the themes of colonization, slavery, oppression and discovering colonies which fall under the broad umbrella of old diaspora. The story of *Robinson Crusoe* is told from the perspective of a white colonial explorer. Dr. Zeba Siddiqui states that, the story tries to show how Europe attacked Africa and enslaved the people and throughout the story the voices of the blacks were suppressed and they were treated as sub-humans (458). This novel was written in the colonial time period and also it stands with strict colonial perspective as it was an age of European exploration.

New diaspora obviously started after the old one and it is also termed as the Postcolonial diasporic phase, and it indicates today's diaspora. In India, the Postcolonial diasporic phase started from 20th century right after the independence. In this time, people were being migrated to developed countries for a better life. Mostly professionals and semi-professionals were being migrated in this phase. They were mostly from the educated background migrated to the USA, England or Canada. My chosen novels for this thesis show the postcolonial phase where the professionals and students are being migrated to the USA. Some are there for job and some are for education and eventually they settled down there. This modern diaspora has a positive connotation and opens up possible windows of opportunities for the diasporic people. This has turned migration in a standard level. Unlike the old diaspora, new diaspora has more opportunities and today this is the most prominent issue all over the world.

With the discussion of those different phases of diaspora, it is important to highlight the shifts between these two phases. Steven Vertovec in his article "Three meanings of 'diaspora' exemplified among South Asian religions" states that,

At one time, a concept referring almost exclusively to the experiences of Jews, invoking their traumatic exile from an historical homeland and dispersal throughout many lands. With this experience as reference, connotations of a 'diaspora' situation were usually rather negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimization, alienation, loss. (2)

In the older phase of diaspora, only Jews were being discussed with their traumatic experience of dispersal. Moreover, in the older phase, diaspora had a negative connotation. Forceful scattering, alienation and a sense of loss was associated with the older phase. However, the new phase is not

as negative as the old one, rather, it is desirable and necessary to cope with the demands of globalization.

According to Rosemary Marangoly George, recently, the term diaspora has expanded and it considers various situations besides the experience of the dispersal of Jewish people (179-193). The new diasporas, who have left their homeland by their own choice, they do so mainly for making a better life for themselves and their future generations. Moreover, the class issues are also there. Even though people are living outside the country with their own choices but because of different class issues they are leading different lifestyle there. People of high academic qualification and good job status, get preferences in advanced countries. As a consequence, they face less difficulty compared to other diasporic people. To elaborate more, the people who are educated and do better job in foreign countries, they can have good and respected life there. Comparatively, the people who are less educated and do manual jobs, they have to deal with difficulties even after migrating to an advanced country. Hence, even though people fall under one diasporic umbrella but because of their class or educational status they have different experiences.

As diaspora is a broad term, to narrow it down I will be focusing on new or the post-colonial diaspora in the South Asian context. As for my paper, I have chosen three different novels from different authors, but all fall under the umbrella of new diasporic novels. From three novels, two has Indian and one has a Bangladeshi context. They are *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Desirable Daughters* by Bharati Mukherjee then the last one is *Beloved Strangers* by Maria Chaudhuri.

The first novel *The Namesake* represents the diasporic themes such as dislocation, cultural orientation, memory and homecoming. It describes the nostalgic feelings of the first

generation protagonist of the novel named Ashima Ganguli. It tracks her sense of uprootedness and re-rootedness and finally her choice to live between two different countries and cultures.

In *Desirable Daughters*, Bharati Mukherjee describes the situations that deal with diasporic women. In her writings, she brilliantly portrays the sights of migration, memory, nostalgia, home and cultural transformation. This novel shows protagonist Tara's quest for her roots in India and it is also her journey to search for her identity. She wonderfully adapts American lifestyle but she is unable to detach herself from her roots entirely. Finally, she comes back to her roots and reconciles her Indianness and attaches herself with her past traditions.

Beloved Strangers is written by a Bangladeshi author named Maria Chaudhuri and it has a Bangladeshi context. This is actually a memoir of the author herself. It also falls under the bildungsroman category which deals with a young protagonist and settles to adulthood. It deals with the moral and psychological growth of the main character from childhood to adulthood. This novel shows how the author Maria dreams to leave her country or home, to gain her sense of independence. The novel blends her diasporic experiences and memories in a textual frame. It is also full of memories and an urge to return to the homeland like the other two novels. Discussing of diasporic novels mainly restrict to novels written by Indian writers from America. It is important to move beyond this traditional framework and by introducing Maria Chaudhuri's novel, I want to shed light on the diasporic experiences of Bangladeshi characters. Thus, it opens up the possibility to look with our local resources.

The following chapters will study these three novels and examine how the themes of memory, home and homecoming are present in the novels. The first chapter discusses memory with references to the protagonists, where it discusses how the novel uses objects as metaphor of memory. From the novels, it can be found that there are various objects that work as metaphors

to take a person to go back to the past. The second chapter discusses the idea of home in diasporic literature and how it is represented in the selected novels. Moreover, it discusses home as a place of emotional space of investment and shows that the significance of home does not work same for all the diasporic characters. This paper will show how because of time, situation and place the characters carry different view about home. Thus, the diverse idea of home and the urge of returning to the roots have been discussed. Finally, it concludes by developing the fact that diasporic novels bring out diverse issues but this paper analyses the specific features of it to explore the diasporic characters.

Chapter One

Memory

People recall their past because it can be associated with things that help them to understand what they are today. Besides, when they feel lonely or alienated, they consciously or subconsciously go back to their past memories. There are specific ways of situating memory. There are ways of going back to the memory. It could happen physically or mentally through recalling the past and being nostalgic. The aim of this chapter is to give an analysis of memory of the characters and how they recall their bittersweet memories in their re/settled diasporic life. I am going to observe different objects as metaphor to memory. The novels show us how simple objects like food, camera, clothes or people work as metaphors of memory and take the characters back to their past. Further to this, the chapter will discuss the way the characters recall their memories.

Defining Memory

Memory is the process where information is stored and retrieved. Some scholars compared memory to history or to psychology. According to Jon D. Holtzman, “[m]emory ties anthropology to history, and in a different sense psychology” (362). People recall past incidents and those have become history. In this sense, it can be related to history, but this is a psychological process of human mind. Tzofit Ofengenden defined memory through the light of Neuroscience and states that, “[m]emory is not a literal reproduction of the past, but instead an ongoing constructive process. Memories are modified and reconstructed repeatedly” (34). Thus, she sheds light on the fact that memories are ongoing process and it can be modified and rebuild. Generally, memory is the ability to use the past or to remember the past. Endel Tulving states in his article that, “[m]emory is the present conscious awareness of an event that has happened in

the rememberer's own past" (3). Thus, memory is being considered as a conscious awareness. It can be an enjoyable or a bitter one. Through it, people go back to their past and remember the events.

Jie Zhang classified memory into three categories based on the time a memory lasts. These are: sensory memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory. Sensory memory is the shortest memory that lasts only milliseconds and it exists for each sensory channel. When information passes from milliseconds to several seconds or few minutes, it becomes short-term memory. When the memory lasts from an hour to lifetime it is called long-term memory (1). Zhang defined memory within the context of sleep and dream but here in my paper I am looking into memory as a metaphor. As a consequence, here only the long-term memory is being discussed. The selected diasporic novels discuss characters, who recall their bitter-sweet past that fall under long-term memory.

Objects as Metaphor to Recall Memory

There could be many materials which can force a character to recall and go back to the past. One of such materials is food. The selected novels open up a new section where food works as a metaphor. According to Gina M. Almerico's assessment on food, it is not confined as a nutritional substance for the body but it exposes people's belief, passions, culture and personality. Therefore, the field of food studying has emerged. This field does not examine food itself but the relationship among food, culture and social science. Basically, it studies human experiences regarding food (2). Food can be looked as a cultural mixture but here I am going to look food as a means of memory. Pamela Goyan Kittler, Kathryn P. Sucher, Marcia Nelms define the function of food with cultural identity. They state, "[f]oods that demonstrate affiliation with a culture are usually introduced during childhood and are associated with security or good

memories” (4). The selected novels show, how the characters go back to their past through food and have many memory linked up with various types of food. Or maybe there is one or some special food that occupy immense place of the character. They recall it sitting in a remote place far away from their own land.

To further explain the idea of food as a metaphor to recall the past, I will start with the novel *The Namesake*. It starts in the year 1968, two weeks before Ashima and Ashoke Ganguly’s son Gogol’s birth. It opens with Ashima who is upset and homesick, trying to recreate the taste of her favorite Indian snack “Jhalmuri”, I will also start this chapter by mentioning this incident. This very incident proves that when anyone is far away from her own land, to an alien place, simple and small materials or elements reminds her of her past. It starts with Ashima’s craving for such a food that is special only in her old home India. In the time of pregnancy, Ashima craves for Jhalmuri. As it cannot be found in America, Ashima makes this at her home with a little modification. She is “combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper” (Lahiri 1). Even though she does not have exact ingredients to make a perfect jhalmuri found “on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India” (Lahiri 1), but she makes a fusion out of what she has in her new land. Here, the time frame is important because in 1960s, unlike contemporary time, some Asian food was not available in America. However, presently one might easily get puffed rice or even Jhalmuri in any super shop in America. This specific food works as a metaphor and through this Ashima goes back to India and recalls her past life there. Moreover, she tries to make a bridge between her both lives. She lives her life in both the places. Her craving for Jhalmuri does not stay only during her pregnancy but after that also. So, this craving not only reminds her of a local snack but also reminds her of India and her life there. It shows that how

hard it is for Ashima to cut off her roots. As a consequence, a simple Indian roadside snack becomes a metaphor to recall the life in India. Preference for Indian food symbolizes how Ashima is attached to her roots. Hence, the novel actually starts with the theme of memory and it narrates the power of memory.

When the characters are away from their own land, they crave for the special food they used to have there. Though it is not only the food they crave for, but also they want to retain the memory of the place, situation and land as well. At the end of the novel *Beloved Strangers*, the author confesses that they were hungry “but not just for food” (Chaudhuri 193). They were hungry for the moment they were spending, they were hungry for the bittersweet memory they have shared. People have a hunger for their past life and the memory they have experienced and had to leave. The author has memory with specific food and one of them is special “pora morich bharta” (fried mashed chilli) made by her grandmother. Unlike Ashima, the memory is a bitter one. She was fond of her grandmother’s special item of moric bharta. One day she craves for it and requests her grandmother to make it but her mother disapproves the idea by saying that it is too late to make that. As she insists and screams, her mother punishes her and locks her in a room. She writes, “[e]ven as I wept, a part of me kept waiting for someone to come and find me and lead me back to the dining table where I could hear everyone sitting down for the meal” (Chaudhuri 59). The dining table conversation and the recognizable smell of daal and curry made her hungrier. It was simply unclear to her why her mother punishes her for a small thing. This incident forces her to think that “the world was becoming an increasingly complex place, where even the smallest pleasure came at an enormous price” (Chaudhuri 60). She used to wait impatiently for her grandmother to come to their house so that she could make this special item. Therefore punishment for a small thing according to her, took away her “appetite for anything

spice” (Chaudhuri 60) from that. This small incident of her childhood sets in her memory, which in many ways indicates the distance between her and her mother.

Another object that forces a character to recall the memory is camera. In the novel *The Namesake*, once Ashoke told Gogol, his only son, that they have to remember the place they are travelling because there is no camera to capture the moment. If the camera is not there to capture it, they just have to capture it with their memory. Being a little kid, Gogol asks his father, “how long do I have to remember it” (Lahiri 187). Thus, a question arise that how long anyone have to remember their past or memory. Is there any time length? Actually, that is the beauty of memory. One can just remember his memory, there is no time length. Sometimes even though people wishes, their memories are gone forever, or sometimes it does not vanish even if they try hard.

To Ashima, her child’s face becomes an object to recall her past life. As it was hard for her to give birth and raise her child in a new land, her intuition makes her recall her parent’s face in her child. However, she believes that the face of her baby reminds her of parents. It is said in the novel, “at times, staring at the baby, she sees pieces of her family in his face – her mother’s glossy eyes, her father’s slim lips, her brother’s lopsided smile” (Lahiri 35). She often felt unhappy for being away from her family and loved ones. Hence, when she got her child, she imagined her loved ones faces in the child. It was a mind soothing feelings for her, like a medicine that heals her inner pain. It not only gives her pleasure but also it makes her comfortable in an alien land. This could be the only possible way for her to think that she is surrounded by her loved ones in her new home. Also, it is a capacity to tie the past to the future through memory.

Ashima decides to live half of a year in India and half in America. It becomes tough for her to leave her home in America because she was living here for the last twenty-seven years.

This is the longest time she was living in this home than any other. When it was time for Ashima to return to India, small materials are taking her back to her past days. She sees the photograph of her husband hanging on the wall. She decides to remove it at the very end. The wall reminds her of the first day they have shifted to this home. The moment she goes to take a shower and wears the bath robe it reminds her of Ashoke. Also it takes her to the time when Ashoke bought it to her. She recalls that it was a Christmas gift from Ashoke chosen and wrapped either by Gogol or their daughter Sonia. She also recalls that, “all her husband had done was to write his name and hers on the to-and-from tag. She does not fault him for this” (Lahiri 279). She has come to understand that such distant devotion or affection does not matter in the end. What matters is the memory she can now have. The novel shows how the little objects no longer remain minor objects, rather, they represent moment of memories.

There is no particular object that works as a metaphor to memory for Tara in *Desirable Daughters*. However, her story itself moves from past to present constantly. Furthermore, it moves with such fluidity that it becomes difficult to make a distinction between what has happened and what is happening. Furthermore, it blurs the boundaries between India and America. Tara is overburdened with her past memory. It seems that she wants to live in her past life. Here, Tara uncovers her multiple consciousnesses along with the secrets of the past.

As Tara feels an obsession with the past life, she becomes nostalgic quite often. Nostalgia itself is an obsession about the past and it mostly works as a positive emotional experience. Though it can work as some bittersweet experiences often. Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés define nostalgia. The word “*notos*” means “to return home” and “*algos*” means “pain” and it has evolved from Greek roots (19). To them, “it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the

present” (20). Through the study of the novel *Desirable Daughters* it shows how Tara becomes obsessed to find out the past. The novel revolves around a crisis of a letter that comes from a young man named Chris Dey. He claims to be the illegitimate son of Tara’s sister Padma with a Bengali Christian named Ron Dey. Though her sister never admits it because she is not bothered with her past. On the other hand, Tara’s curiosity turns into obsession. It becomes a problem for her because she is digging the past and it is making her uncomfortable. Finally, she finds out that she is being stalked by a group of gangster and the young man is an imposter while the real Chris Dey was found dead. Her past is not giving her pleasant moment but giving her tension and fear. The past could be fearful and could haunt people. Therefore, her Hungarian Buddhist lover Andy Karolyi once says to her, “The past is nice, this place is nice. It’s nice to visit the past every now and then. Just don’t live there” (Mukherjee 76). It signifies that Andy understood Tara’s difficulty. So, Andy’s advice to Tara was not to be carried out by the bitter past but to live in present.

Like Ashima, when Maria feels lonely in a new home, she constantly recalls her life in Dhaka. When she moves to live with her boyfriend in the US, she not only goes back to her past but also she tries to smell every bit of Dhaka as she experienced in her past. Consequently, she becomes nostalgic and says, “I could smell a rain-soaked Dhaka, spicy, earthy, beguiling in her freshness. The kodom tree at the entrance of our house would have bloomed by now, its musk extending beyond its shade” (Chaudhuri 168). Nostalgia arises from fond memories. It is not only a longing for a place, but also a yearning for a different time. Here, her childhood memories pull her back to the time and place. It is actually a revision of the time. Memory works in a complex manner. It is not a one-way journey. Rather, it is a multi-way process. When people live away from their home for a long time, memories get reinforced and they do not fade away. The

more people start living complicated life, the more they tend to go back to their simple past or memories.

As, Maria is physically not present in Dhaka, she tends to relish all the memories of Dhaka. It happens because time changes people and makes them mature enough to understand things in a better way. Her thinking about relationship changes through time. She had a complicated relationship with her mother in her past. At the very beginning of the novel, she shares the first separation with her mother. It was the story of her birth. With time, they become more separated. However, when she is again separated from her mother, she could feel the depth of their relationship. Now that she is far away from her mother, she starts missing her badly. She says, "I missed Mother's insufferable presence, where I felt safe if not free" (Chaudhuri 169). This line opens up Maria's present mentality that though she can claim herself as a free woman now, but she urges for being safe staying with her mother. It proves that, she prefers being safe with her parent even though that make her to live a less free life. Now that she is lonely in an alien place, she starts missing the chaos, and too many voices in her old home. Moreover, she does not feel furious of the fact that she was being watched and followed in the past home. Rather, she misses all of these. She then accepts that never before her childhood felt as alive as she feels it now. Finally, when Maria's dream fulfills and she is literally living in America but inside her heart, she feels that something is missing. She starts wondering that though she has got what she ever wanted but now she is in the middle of two realities. One she dreamt for and the other is present time that she is living. In between her dream and desire, she feels alienated.

The three characters show how small materials could lead them to their past and take them back to the life they have left behind. Living in diasporas, the characters are more allied with memory because the new place actually force them to go to their past very

straightforwardly. They feel the value of their past life more, when they are not there physically. They do not want to miss the chance to go back to their memories mentally, through recalling the past.

Chapter Two

Home & Homecoming

This chapter discusses the theme of home and homecoming as depicted in the novels. It further focuses on the characters' homesickness and on the urge of returning to the old home or their home country. The urge of returning to one's root is strong. In the characters of these selected novels, this returning or homecoming could happen both physically or mentally. The characters go back to their roots psychologically through various vehicles. They can return there through their memory and by remembering the past. Also, some of them return physically. The chapter discusses how diasporic literature handles this theme of homecoming in different contexts and with different emotional engagement.

Home in Diaspora

Home is not only a structure. Home is a place where a person lives and that belongs to him or her. Christina Heckmann in her paper states that, "[t]he term home is highly complicated in a complex and multicultural world like ours" (1). Thus, the idea of home in diasporic literature is complex. Home in diasporic literature is both fixed and temporary. The idea of home changes because of various reasons. It changes because the characters change. Their personality changes through time. Personality shapes the reality and through their different personality the character may view their home differently. Moreover, the home might have been changed because of time.

For people in diaspora, home is a fluid concept. Besides, home has diverse meaning in diasporic situation. In the present era of transnational migration, the concepts of homeland forms a complex framework. Barnali Dutta says, "[a]ccording to the critics like Homi K. Bhaba, Avtar Brah and Stuart Hall, the floating nature of home and fluid identity have replaced the age-old concepts of fixed home" (1). The notion of home builds up a sense of self and ties the person

emotionally. Today the idea of home is not only a place or house, but also it is linked up with emotional territory. A person is emotionally attached to his/her home and it is hard to deny the emotional affection.

Home and Dis/location

With the idea of diasporic home, the term dislocation is significantly related. People of diaspora are literally dislocated or displaced from their own place. In this paper, I will argue on dis/location where the slash before the word “location” indicates not a complete separation. It does not mean absolute dislocation, rather, it is a change of location. Either, this dis/location may happen through memory or physically. The selected novels show different diasporic characters who faces this dis/location throughout their lives. They carry different views about home. Some of them are exceedingly attached to their homeland but because of time and situation, their attachment changes or gets new turn. Home is the first thing that people need when they move to a different place. Initially this new home may seem alien to them, but over time, people get used to their new destination.

As the diasporic home depicts home as a place of dislocation and it does not have a stable meaning, it is perfectly shown through the character of Ashima from the novel *The Namesake*. Once India was her root, but with her years of staying in America, “she feels both impatience and indifference” (Lahiri 278) to go back there. So, a mixed feeling work for Ashima. Being a diasporic woman, now she does not feel a particular home as her root, but a huge change through time. Now that she has made a new root in America it was hard to leave this new home on Pemberton Road. It is said that, “the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit”

(Lahiri 280). As a consequence, she does not have a fixed root but she is forced to change it and leave it by time.

Ashima overcomes her dislocation and makes both the place her real home. However, at the end when she decides to live six months in America and the other six months in India she creates a bridge. After Ashoke's death she had literally two homes that were difficult for her to leave. We come to know that Ashima plans to move back to India for half of each year. Ashima decides to divide her time between India and America. She decides to live between her roots and her family. According to Rita Joshi it was, "an attempt to merge Old and New Worlds" (86). Ashima's changed mentality now thinks India as foreign place. It shows that now she is no longer a complete Indian woman but she has not been an American either. She proves her name right as it says, "She who is limitless, without borders" (Lahiri 26). Like her name, she tries to erase the land boundary. It is said, "true to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri 279). This statement conveys that, one can have multiple homes but not every home is a same home. This "without boundary" feeling is actually a mixed feeling. Though it may remove the boundary but it also creates an anxiety of movement. As a result, the character Ashima opens up various windows to look at the idea of home.

It is noteworthy to mention that being the first generation immigrant, Ashima finds it hard to cope with the new environment at first. Moreover, pregnancy becomes the hardest time for her and an emotional moment when she wants to be at her parent's home. Motherhood in a foreign land is a challenging experience for Ashima. The pain of being lonely kills her more than the pain she feels in her pregnancy. She becomes terribly confused to raise her child in such a land that she finds hard to relate to her. While in the hospital, she recalls that according to the

Indian culture “women go home to their parents to give birth” (Lahiri 4). For such a unique moment, a woman is permitted to go to her parent’s home, because it gives her more comfort and she finds more strength. Thus, the idea of home is actually related to comfort. She feels emotionally and physically dislocated from her comfortable home of her father’s. She recalls her home in India by calculating the Indian times to make sure what activities are going there and how her loved ones are spending time there.

Ashima’s character has lived in five houses in all her lifetime. First one is in her parents’ house then her in-laws house in Calcutta. Then in America, the house they rented in Cambridge, after that the faculty apartment and lastly their own house in Pemberton. Lahiri mentioned this as, “one hand, five homes. A lifetime in a fist” (Lahiri 167). Besides this, the novel further hints that when Ashima will go back to India she will live with her brother. This means again a new home is waiting for Ashima. As she has lived different houses in her lifetime, she has gathered different experienced and has various observations about home. Thus, she has been dislocated from one home to another. However, her dislocation is not complete separation because of her memory and physical connection to the place.

Like Ashima, Tara in the novel *Desirable Daughters*, is also a first generation immigrant. Tara was nineteen years old and completed her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Calcutta. Though she wanted to study more but her father chose Bishwapriya Chatterjee for Tara and she had an arranged marriage. She leaves her parents’ home and comes to America after her marriage. But for her, home in diaspora is complicated. After she is divorced from her husband, she starts living with her son Rabi in San Francisco. She does not go back to India to her parents but lives an independent life in America after her divorce. She faces the dislocation living in America but in many ways she goes beyond her Indian traditions. She calls her husband by his

name and it is considered a dishonor in Indian culture. Moreover, she divorced her husband without any reasonable reason. She mentions that, “[d]ivorce was not in our family vocabulary” (Lahiri 101). Consequently, she goes against her family value and does something unexpected. To some extent, she tries to overcome her dislocation and tries to be the new American woman.

Her stay in America, being a single woman has a considerable impact on her. There she can choose to live with her boyfriend Andy. She also mentions that Andy is not her first American lover. Though presently she is with him but the novel tells the reader that she had encounter with many men after her divorce. After the breakup with Andy, Tara recalls Pramod, Mahesh, Donald and many others in the past seventeen years. Since, she was from upper cast and Indian background, it would never be possible to maintain such a lifestyle in India. Living in America and being a single mother, she could enjoy such a liberal lifestyle. Ambika Sharma & Dr. Tanu Gupta defines it as a struggle of Tara and to them Tara becomes the modern woman who is trapped in the struggle between Indian and the modern traditions (45). It shows that Tara is caught between Indian and America, also in between the culture and tradition.

The dislocation or displacement does not work similarly for all the diasporic people. For an example, this particular novel shows us three sisters Padma, Parvti and Tara who have settled respectively in New Jersey, Bombay and San Francisco. Though they are sisters but their lives and mentality are very different from one another because of cultural issues and experiences. Though Padma and Tara are idealized as diasporic woman but they move in diverse direction. Their self-realization is different, and because of that each sister responses to the issue of their past conflict differently. In this sense, Tara is incredibly different from her other two sisters. Her elder sister Padma also came to America after her marriage and unlike Tara, she holds her Indian tradition living in this new land. However, Padma wipes away all the bitter experiences she had

in her past life. As discussed in chapter one, the incident of the controversial letter from Chris Dey does not bother Padma at all. As a contrasting character of Tara, Padma makes America her new home and does not show any urge to go back to her root in India. Neither she changes herself in America nor does she want to go back to India. In twenty five years of living in New Jersey, Padma always wears saree. She is fully an Indian traditional woman who made a little India in America. Now America is the land of preference for Padma. Tara accepts the fact that she “barely knew any Indians. But Didi, whose every utterance was couched in hatred for those times and for the family and for the city, was trying to lead a traditional Bengali life in New Jersey” (Lahiri 181). Unlike Tara, her sister Padma tries to hold her own culture and tradition and she makes America her home and does not feel dislocated.

At the very beginning of the novel *Beloved Strangers*, the author gives a long explanation of how she feels for her home. She states,

It was not that home, for me, was an unhappy place. But in our home joy had an ephemeral quality to it. It was like trying to catch a glimmer of sunshine that slips in through a crack and dances around the room but never quite settles. We were novices at capturing joy, never able to hold on to it for very long. (Chaudhuri 3)

To her, home was not fully an unhappy place, but joy was a temporary object that used to stay for a short time. She further compares joy with sunshine, that slips through hand and impractical to grab. Also, she mentions that they are not experts but armatures to capture that short-lived joy. This could be a reason for her to grow a wish to leave her home. While in school she wanted to run away from her country and from her parents too. Though she was not sure where exactly to go or what to do but only wanted to run away and shares this idea with her friend Nadia. Both of them had a lesser amount of attachment with their parents. When they thought about their

parents, both positively said that, “they will forget about us” (Chaudhuri 3). From their conversation it seems that their family bond might be weak and it forces them to think about leaving them. Like Ashima, home has a complicated vision in Maria’s life. At first she wants to run away from her home but through time when she is actually outside her own home, she feels for it badly. Thus, the idea of home changes for her positively and she excitedly wants to come back to her root at the end.

The (Im)possibility of Homecoming

For the people of new diaspora, it is possible to return to their home literally, at the same time it is impossible. The reason that makes it impossible is the time and situation. Because of time, things will not be exactly the same as it was before. It may not be the same home one left. As it has been discussed earlier that, people and emotions are connected to a home, so, when the same people are no longer there, that home does not remain same. Along with that the emotion changes. According to Kwok Pui-lan home has no fixed or stable location, rather, it is adventurous like travelling (102). Her definition suits the diasporic people because diasporic people create their own space. To them, the idea of home is not stable. The home as birthplace and home as a place of settlement, change their position with the passage of time. The selected novels show how there can be an (im)possibility of homecoming to the characters.

The image of home changes in diasporic literature because the character goes through physical and mental changes and home itself turns into a metaphor. Hence, there can be a fear of returning and encountering the changes in their own home. As a consequence, the characters realize that there is a gap and an overlap between the old home and the new home. Furthermore, the comfortable home could turn into a fearful place because of time or situation and homecoming becomes tough for the diasporan.

For Ashima, her comfortable home becomes a fearful place after her husband's absence. The moment she hears that her husband has expired, it takes several seconds to understand the line and she calmly argues that, "no, it must be a mistake" (Lahiri 169). Her world shatters and suddenly she feels terribly cold. Though she realizes her children's thought that, "everyone should live on their own at some point" (Lahiri 161) but it is hard to follow. She feels frightened in such a home where her husband is missing; she is on her own now in an empty house. When the principle idea of home changes, it becomes almost impossible to live there. Instead of becoming a comfort zone, the fear of change or emptiness fills up the place. The little sound at night frightens her and the sense of loneliness grips her. Her everyday routine is collapsed.

The first shock Ashima gets in America of the news of her father's death. They plan to go to India but this time Ashima does not want to go there. There is a fear of seeing her mother with a white saree, and a little empty place on her head where there used to be red vermilion. If anyone stays far away from her origin for a long time, situation and people change. While diasporic homes may change, people often do not want to admit the obvious changes that happen to their ongoing house. It is absurd to think that everything will be the same where they have left. It becomes difficult to cope up with the new change in their old home. For a second time, Ashima does not have a strong feeling to go back to India after her husband's death. The novel states, "but for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died" (Lahiri 183). She does not feel happy, rather, she sees it as a painful returning. When it was time for her to move back to India from America, "she feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign" (Lahiri 278). She feels that she is going to move in such a place that was home once but now the

time has been changed; her own home in India feels foreign to her. She is overwhelmed by this mixed feeling. Judith Caesar states, “[t]hus throughout the book, she struggles to recover the material and social selves of her life in India and yet somehow adapt herself to the life in the country to which she has come” (108). Ashima’s struggle to cope up with both the countries has been flawlessly depicted in the novel.

Tara also faces the struggle to deal with her American and Indian life. Though she enjoys living a free life in America, but then life shows her anxiety and fails to bring potentials that it promised. She faces the ultimate bitter experience in America while her home is bombed by terrorists. She with her ex-husband and son get injured. She realizes that they are not safe in this alien land as they were in India. As soon as she finds herself in a totally different situation in America than India, it takes her to the past where her cast matters. It is explained by Tara in the novel that, “we are Bengali Brahmins from Calcutta, and nothing can touch us” (Mukherjee 44). This line conveys the idea that being the upper cast Brahmins, they feel safe and respected in Calcutta. However, life in America is totally different. Their high cast does not matter here now. Rather, being an outsider anyone can easily be teased by the American people. Thus, she finds her life in frustration and become dishearten. Suddenly, she feels unsafe and feels the impossibility to live in such a place which she considers as her home. Now, she is in dilemma in between her past and present life, also in between two cultures and countries.

Kim D Butler states that the concept of return is an essential part of the diaspora. There could be a physical return or cultural return as well (204-205). In this novel Tara’s homecoming or returning is both physical and cultural. She does not only recall her past through memory but she physically returns to India. On the other hand, her homecoming is cultural in a sense that she wants to find her past and her roots. She compares herself with the pilgrim and says, “I’m like a

pilgrim following the course of the Ganges all the way to its source” (Mukherjee 289). As the pilgrim goes one place to another to track the source of the holy Ganges, she also returns to India first, then Rishikesh just to track her ancient roots. Her quest for her roots connected with the tree bride, proves to be the journey of her search for identity. When she trips back to India, it regenerates her longing to find her family’s ancestral roots. From her urge to recover her past, she tries to re-figure it. Ambika Sharma & Dr. Tanu Gupta describe this and say,

Tara’s quest for her roots connected with the tree bride proves to be the journey to her search for identity. She has adapted American style of living but she could not detach herself from her roots completely. Her stay with her parents at Rishikesh proves to be her encounter with her lost Indianness. Her abandoned faith in Indian culture is revived again. (46)

Consequently, her urge to find her identity creates a possibility to bring her back in India. She is unable to ignore her Indianness and at the end of the novel she returns to find out her roots.

Though Maria Chaudhuri in the novel, *Beloved Strangers* does not face such difficulties as Tara faces, but she has her own difficulties to deal with home and homecoming. She also faces the dilemma between the possibility and the impossibility of homecoming. She has the possibility to return to her old home because she starts missing her country badly. Besides, she starts losing the attraction of living in an alien country and in a new home. More surprisingly, she thinks about leaving her country and she gives it a second thought. She thinks that, as she misses her life in Dhaka, whether she would leave it if she had been asked by her father?

On the other hand, there works an impossibility and fear of homecoming to her. This novel shows her physical return, in the end she returns to the land of her own. When coming back to Dhaka she says, “I am readjusting, realigning, rearranging into my other self. I am in

Dhaka” (Chaudhuri 172). Now that everything has changed, she needs to readjust herself to this old place she has left once. Here, she finds it painful to go back to her own place. It is not that she does not want to go, but she is afraid. To her, the fear is the change that took place by those years. The home she recalls is with her father who is no more there. However, the family itself is disbursed and is settled across the globe. Her sisters are living in different places. Naveen has moved to Turkey after her marriage, her other sister Tilat sifted to her new home also after her marriage. Her brother is no more a child but “turned into a reclusive young man I hardly recognize” (Chaudhuri 149) and her mother turns in such a person who moves around one place to another. Therefore when the novel ends, though she returns to her home in Dhaka, but there is no close tie with it. Home is not only the place or the building one lives. It is related with the members and the past memories, these makes a place home and a house a home. Home is not the same home when the same members are not there or the memory is not there. Maria confesses that, “without all the members of my family under one roof, without the old kinesthesia of our beings against each other, I cannot decode the vision of my home” (Chaudhuri 149). This line of her proves that a home becomes a perfect home when all the family members and the bonds between them are there.

This chapter discloses the theme of home and homecoming. It further tracks down the possibility and the impossibility of homecoming. It evokes different emotions that the characters go through. The selected novels portray the diasporic characters in different perspectives. It is hard to judge all of them in one measurement because they face diverse situations in their life.

Conclusion

Diaspora conveys a vast meaning and it cannot be generalized. Out of many themes of diaspora, my paper focuses on specific themes of memory, home and homecoming. The protagonists of the selected novels are capable women who portray these particular themes of diaspora very well. By analyzing these selected novels, these themes become clearer and the significance of them is shown.

This paper intends to explore the features of diaspora and relates it to the selected novels. The introduction talks about the theoretical part of diaspora. It gives a detail definition and background of it. Also, it discusses the features and types of different diaspora. Moreover, the selected novels have been briefly discussed in the introductory chapter. Then in the first chapter, one of the significant themes has been discussed which is memory. It further focuses on different objects that work as metaphor to recall memory. From the novels, different objects like food, camera, clothes, place or peoples face becomes that object and the characters recalling their past memory and being nostalgic by these objects. The second chapter deals with the theme of home and homecoming. It defines home in general and also how the characters observe home. The idea of home in general is not the same to the people of diaspora. The people of diaspora view home as an unsettled place because they have no fixed home. To them, most of the time home is temporary. They leave their own home and settle down in a new home. Moreover, the paper shows that all diasporic people cannot be generalized. Everyone is different and their thinking about home is also different. Furthermore, a character can have a changing mentality. The selected novels show how a character viewed home previously but as time goes by the view changes because of various reasons. Through the discussion of the novels it also becomes clear that home is not only the structure or the place, rather, it is the people who makes it a home. This

chapter also focuses on homecoming or the urge or returning. This retuning can happen mentally or physically. However, the theme of homecoming brings the possibility and impossibility along with it because the home does not remain same always. Thus, a fear of returning works for the people of diaspora. Home can be the most secure and comfortable place but time can change it to a fearful place accordingly. The novels shows how people of diaspora view homecoming differently. Some do not want to return to their root at all, some return and never goes back. Some may return for a limited time. Other may return to find out their roots. Every returning is not same but most of the time there is an urge of returning to the diasporas. Those who cannot return physically, they may return through memory by recalling it. Finally, the conclusion sums up by reviewing the chapters.

What I have tried to establish in my paper is that, in order to understand the people of diaspora, these themes play a significant role. My paper considers these noteworthy themes and these helps to view the diasporic people in a vast area.

[10, 423 words]

Work Citation

Primary Texts

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