

Diaspora: An Introduction

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Robin Cohen is regarded as one of the founding members of contemporary diaspora studies. He is a prominent voice in the fields of migration, diaspora, globalization and national identity. He is chiefly remembered for his most influential book *Global Diasporas*. In this phenomenal work, Cohen defines the term diaspora as:

The term (diaspora) is found in the Greek translation of the Bible and ... originates in the composite verb *dia* and *speirein*, namely 'to scatter', 'to spread' or 'to disperse'. There are in fact two other Hebrew words, *gôla* and *galût*, signifying 'banishment' and 'exile', but 'diaspora' evolved as the preferred and catch-all expression covering sin, scattering, emigration and the possibilities of repentance and return. (21)

William Safran is a distinguished contemporary political scientist. He has contributed immensely in the discipline of nationalism, ethnic politics, and diaspora studies. Robin Cohen in his *Global Diasporas* writes that Safran believed the concept of a diaspora can be applied when members of an expatriate minority community share several of the following features:

- they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original 'centre' to two or more foreign regions;
- they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland including its location, history and achievements;
- they believe they are not – and perhaps can never be – fully accepted in their host societies and so remain partly separate;
- their ancestral home is idealized and it is thought that, when conditions are favourable, either they, or their descendants should return;
- they believe all members of the diaspora should be committed to the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
- they continue in various ways to relate to that homeland and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are in an important way defined by the existence of such a relationship. (6)

Homi K. Bhabha is a renowned literary figure in the contemporary postcolonial studies. He is regarded as one of the most influential cultural theorists of our times. Bhabha is known for coining the literary concepts—third space, liminality, interstice, hybridity, ambivalence, mimicry and difference. According to him, diaspora refers to a situation wherein people leave their original homeland and live temporarily/permanently in a foreign land due to both push and pull factors. He suggests that while living in an alien land expatriates are constantly living in 'third space'.

The term "diaspora" which is derived from a Greek word "diaspeir" literally means the dispersion or scattering of a group of people to a foreign/alien land from their traditional homelands. In other words, diaspora is the movement, migration or scattering of people away from an ancestral homeland, or people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location/region, or people settled far from their ancestral homelands. Bill Ashcroft et al in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* define diaspora as "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions" (61). Originally, the term diaspora was used for Jewish, Greek and Armenian groups of people expelled from their homeland. Therefore diaspora was considered a forcefully driven out exercise. If the migration is based on push factors it is called involuntary migration. 'Exile' is another term referring to this phenomenon of migration. The term has now changed not only to mean forced dispersion but also relocation of groups of people or members of communities from one country to another. This may happen without the use of force. If the migration is governed by pull factors it is called voluntary migration. It is an established fact that exiles, refugees, expatriates, asylum-seekers, ethnic communities and immigrants are other terms used to signify diaspora.

Nostalgia, homesickness, cultural displacement, dislocation, alienation, cultural change, discrimination, identity, problems of rejection and acceptance are the most typical characteristics of diaspora. These are metaphorically identified by Salman Rushdie in his monumental work on diaspora entitled as *Imaginary Homelands*:

Exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt ... our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (Bill Ashcroft et al 428)

Nostalgia or homesickness is mainly described as a feeling of want for one's familiar milieu or longing to be back home. This longing may be caused by missing near and dear ones or familiar surroundings. The people in this condition generally feel hopeless, depressed, frustrated or even of suicidal thoughts because they could not bear to stay away from their parents, native land, relatives and so on. Homesickness becomes an essential ingredient in the emotional life of the diasporans. Monica Ali, a celebrated diasporic women novelist of Bangladeshi origin, in her novel *Brick Lane* depicts wonderfully the feeling of homesickness through a character named Chanu: "Their bodies are here (England) but their hearts back there (Bangladesh)" (32). In *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa beautifully captures the sense of loss of home and nostalgic sentiments through her character Aban:

I thought coming to America was such a big deal, so wonderful – my Prince Charming carrying me off to the castle of my dreams. Everybody back home thinks I'm so lucky, but I'm tired of coping, tired of doing everything on my own Oh, I miss home. I am longing to see my family and friends and longing to talk to them. Just sit and talk to them. Sometimes I wish I'd never come here. (315)

Dislocation is one of the first experiences that torment the diasporic people. There are diverse circumstances which are responsible for the dislocation of a group from their native land to a foreign country. These can be chiefly divided into—voluntary and non-voluntary migrations. The people who migrate voluntarily experience less homesickness than those who leave their home country due to war, famine, destitution, political disagreement, unemployment, religious intolerance and harassment or forced displacement. Moreover it is an acknowledged matter that diasporic community experience psychological pain due to movement from one place to another.

More often the members of diasporic community experience seclusion and isolation in the adopted nation and due to which they do not intermix with others in embraced countries. The feeling of loneliness is such that these people feel they are 'aliens' among the citizens of settled societies. The feelings of isolation and separation in foreign land make these people believe that life is empty, meaningless and hollow. Hence sense of separation, isolation and feeling of loneliness are inevitable for the diasporic communities. Despite they face exterior obstacles such as identity crisis, discrimination, rejection and gender inequality, yet their own innermost impediments like separation and alienation cause more discomfort and anguish to them.

Cultural clash is yet another dominant feature of diaspora studies. The basic reason for a cultural clash is the 'differences' in civilizations for each civilization/nation is different from each other in the matters of culture, tradition, language, religion and history. The problem of cultural conflict becomes more conspicuous when people move from one country to another in order of employment, education, better standard of living and so on. While carrying centuries old traditions with them, the diasporic people find foreign culture strange, alien and at times unadoptable. On one hand, these people are not ready to give up their culture yet they have to adjust themselves with the culture of adopted nation in order to sustain their lives. Thus they are caught up between the two cultures—native and non-native which results in identity crisis. Living in a foreign land, the diasporic community remains by and large attached to their tradition and culture. Their attachment to their customs and beliefs are so strong that they create another home in an alien land. This condition is similar to what Salman Rushdie calls "imaginary homelands." Moreover, the cultural conflict is a dominant theme of almost all diasporic writers.

Discrimination and rejection are other important features of expatriate communities. People from Asia and Africa more often become victims of racial discrimination in Western countries which are mostly the adopted homes of diasporic people. Their food habits, language, dress style and even the manner of worshipping are being looked down upon there. They are being discriminated even in the fields of jobs, education, sports etc. These things make them more alienated and therefore the question of their identity, history and civilization begins to haunt them more powerfully.

Last but not the least, the diasporic communities are divided into two types of— traditionalists and assimilationists. The former preserve separate identity whereas the latter blends with the host/adopted society. The traditionalists are generally referred to as first generation diasporas who maintain their culture in an alien land. They are deeply attached to their customs, norms and mores. They are most of the time homesick. On the other side, the assimilationists accept the host country and live most often according to its standards. Though they too remain inwardly attached to native culture yet to perceive the settled societies with antagonistic eyes is neither suitable nor logical for them.

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