



DEFINING DIASPORA; A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DIASPORA STUDIES

RAMCHANDRA R. JOSHI¹, Dr. URVASHI KAUSHAL²

¹Assistant Professor, Silvassa College, Naroli-Silvassa D.N.H. U.T. of India.

²Assistant Professor, S.V.N.I.T Surat, Gujarat.



Ramchandra R. Joshi

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at focusing and analysing various issues related diaspora study. The paper traces the theoretical examination of the diasporic concerns and how these issues on socio-political literary grounds affect an individual and entire diaspora community. The term 'diaspora' since its use in the post modern era has been proliferated and explored with variety of perspectives. It traces historical, political, social, anthropological and literary aspects of a nation adopted by the diasporic community and the nation they left behind (homeland). The proliferation of the meaning of the term diaspora lies in the forced dispersion of Jews. Since last two decades, the term diaspora has attained an epistemological recognition with the exploration of the term in various branches of studies like; anthropology, social sciences, politics, studies about globalisation and migration, and literary studies.

At the initial stage, the term diaspora was mainly applied to the people, who are displaced from their homeland, refugee, or the community de-territorized due to unavoidable circumstances. But over a period of time, increased phenomena of global migration made the meaning of the word diaspora multifaceted. The recent advancement in science and technology has turned the world from global to 'glocal.'(global-local) It has also created trans-national relationship. As a result, people frequently move from one place, country, and nation to other for better living prospects. Interestingly, the word diaspora is being studied by the theorists and researchers for further exploration. Thus, the term diaspora has become a catchword in the modern world especially in the post modern period.

Key Words: Diaspora, Theoretical, perspective, Socio-political, literary perspectives

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Defining Diaspora; A theoretical perspective on Diaspora Studies.

"Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting." (Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, p.128)

Etymologically the word 'Diaspora' has derived from the Greek ancient term 'dia' which means across and 'Speirein' meaning to sow or scatter. Historically, the word 'Diaspora' has been employed

to describe the settling of scattered Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile. Their settling was mainly due to geographical displacement and relocation in one or more states, nation or territories. Conceptually, the term diaspora deals with the historical, political and sociological and literary aspects. By and large, the word is recognized as an identifiable phenomenon. It also denotes the consequences resulting from the expansion of colonialism.

Since last two decades, the term diaspora has attained an epistemological recognition with the exploration of the term in various branches of studies like; anthropology, social sciences, politics, studies about globalisation and migration, and literary studies. But among all these branches, the main and common point of exploration denotes the idea of the study related to transplantation of people on a huge scale or migration of the willing immigrants in reference to the post modern period. Social mobilization of the people in the post modern era had increasingly shown a subtle change in the migratory approach of the people. Their experiences of migration underwent a change from forced migration to willing immigration. Consequently, the phenomena of hybridity and multi-locality have also come into being which predominantly creates the problems of identity crisis and diasporic consciousness for the migrated community. Finally, it leads us to the question; what is the use of the study of diaspora and their migration? To provide an answer to this question, **J.E. Braziel** and **Anita Mannur** put forward two reasons.

First, diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation-states. Second, diaspora offers myriad, dislocated sites of condensation to the hegemonic, homogenizing forces of globalization. (J.E Braziel and Anita Mannur 7)

Historically, the term diaspora passed through various social, political, cultural and ethnic phases. By and large, the studies related to diaspora have been also modified in terms of migration policy of a nation or state. For the systematic study of various phases of the term diaspora, Robin Cohen illustrates mainly four phases of diaspora studies in his book *The Global Diaspora*.

Cohen describes the first phase of the diaspora studies from 1960 to 1970. In this phase of diaspora study, he talks about the use of the term in the classical sense of the Jewish diaspora. Initially in this phase, studies were associated with experience one of the original diasporas-Jewish diasporas (force migration) while in the later stage, studies related to other diaspora were also studied. The study of the

Indian diaspora or indentured labourers can also be included in this phase of diaspora studies. In short, at that point of time the term diaspora was associated with the groups of people uprooted or moved forcefully from the country of their origin and living in a destitute condition in the adopted land.

The second phase inscribes the journey of the term from 1980 to 1989. In this phase of the diaspora study, the use of the term was forwarded to the sociological study of diaspora. The use of the term, in the words of William Safaran, was as 'a Metaphoric designation'. For him, the word diaspora implied different categories of people like, '*expatriates, expellees, political refuses, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities.*' (Safaran, 83)

The third phase of the diaspora studies uses the term in the modern context. With the emergence of studies related to migration and globalisation, the term diaspora achieved multifaceted exploration and criticism. Along with the socio-ethno-cultural studies of diaspora, studies related to nostalgia and homeland revealed a new understanding of human phenomena. In addition to this, the problems like identity crisis and searching for identity have also been identified by the literary critics.

The post-modern time period is considered to be the fourth phase of diaspora studies. In the present scenario of the twenty first century, the term diaspora passed through various aspects of the exploration. In this so called globalized world, the phenomena of migration became frequent and normal for the human beings. People usually started migrating for better life prospects or better life comforts.

Defining Diaspora:

The term diaspora has been defined and redefined by various theorists and experts of the special branch of the study related to diaspora. Anthropologists, sociologists, cultural theorist, literary critics of diaspora studies and researchers of migration studies have persistently endeavoured for the description and definition of the term diaspora. Defining diaspora proposes to know the pedagogical studies and the nuances of the diaspora community.

In fact, among the theorists of diaspora studies, many of them are themselves diasporic personalities. In a way, they became the spokesmen of the respective diasporic society as they share common identity as compatriot.

To define diaspora, scholars have been debating with variety of analysis and perspectives on the diaspora studies. Scholars from various branches of diaspora studies have attributed their definitions about the term diaspora. For this **William Safaran** in 1991 defined that diaspora is "*that segment of people living outside their homeland.*" This definition refers to the living condition of Jews after the Babylonian exile. Another scholar and editor of 'Diaspora' magazine, **Tololian** defined diaspora as "*exemplary communities of the transnational moment.*" (Tololian, 3) While **The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of English Language** defines diaspora as "the dispersed Jews after the Babylonian Captivity." (1993, 264). Increasingly, the term diaspora has been related to the process of migration either of a mass or an individual migration. As the term associates with the notion of migration and rootlessness, many scholars have also regarded this act of uprooting or dispersion as one of the reasons of diasporic problems. In this regard **John Docker** defines the term diaspora and relates this diasporic experience as, "*A sense of belonging to more than one history, to more than to one time and place, to more than to one past and future.*" (John Docker,vii)

Docker's definition of diaspora throws light on the notion of sense of belonging to some place to which the diasporic community feels anchored. Diaspora or displaced community thus, constantly moves from one place to another place in order to find proper place to live or for the better life prospects. Their identity is in constant flux. However, many a time diasporic community with the seer sense of adaptation and assimilation succeed in establishing their individual identity in the host countries. But they could hardly imagine their future at one place for a long period of time as the notion of 'here' and 'there' constantly impels them for the further venture. While describing the geographies of the diaspora, **Blunt** in his scholarly article entitled *Geographies of diaspora and mixed*

descent: Anglo-Indians in India and Britain defines the diaspora in context of the geography and how the term diaspora corresponds to the geographical orientation.

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 282)

Blunt's definition describes the geography of diaspora and constant change in it. The definition primarily relates to the scattering of Jews as they were expelled from Palestine. In the same way, Blunt describes how a diaspora community is scattered in various geographies of the world. However this diaspora community has manifested their strong solidarity with the geography of their homeland. In short, the term diaspora encompasses even geographical orientation and final settlement in the land of 'others'.

Apart from this, **Van Hear, N. Pieke, F. et al** have also defined diaspora from the classical view of Jews migration. But their core idea is to highlight how diaspora maintains link with the home and how important role a diaspora can play in constructing their home land with the remittances from the adopted land.

Diaspora are defined as populations of migrant origin who are scattered among two or more destinations, between which there develop multifarious links involving flows and exchanges of people and resources: between the homeland and destination countries and among destination countries. (Van Hear, Frank Pieke et al., 1)

Vijay Mishra, a literary critic, defines diaspora from the individual's perception about homeland and adopted land. Any diasporic personality since his or her displacement lives in a state of 'imaginary homelands.' In a country of host

land, their identity is like pseudo. In this regards **Vijay Mishra** notes that;

Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passports..... They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. (Mishra, 1)

Thus, the term diaspora is defined and redefined with various perspectives and personal experiences. The term likewise received an identifiable attention of the critic and theorists of the particular branch of the studies of diaspora. During its journey, the term has come across a variety of meanings applied in order to describe a class or group of people displaced or migrated.

In this way, the journey and phases of the term diaspora ultimately established its entity at a significant degree of importance. Along with the defining of diaspora, it is also important to know various perspectives of the diaspora studies.

Sociological

On the sociological ground the term explicitly refers to the experiences of Jews including their distressing expulsion or forced migration from their homeland. This dispersion was regarded as 'Babylonian exile' and the phenomena of diaspora lies in this 'Babylonian Exile'. The forced migration or victimisation of these diasporic communities was eventually termed as dispersed or displaced. In respect to Jews diaspora and their exile, Martin Bauman categorises this diasporic community and their experiences in three phases. (i) The process of being scattered (ii) the community living in foreign parts (iii) the place of geographic space in which the dispersed group live. The categorization exemplifies the social conditioning of the dispersed community and the formation of the word diaspora.

The sociology of the diaspora has also been encouraged with the institutionalisation of the diaspora community by maintaining harmony with the co-ethnic group of the adopted country. This assimilation of the dispersed community finally

resulted in the (re)construction of their identities. In order to have proper understanding about the sociology of diaspora, the characteristics given by **William Safaran** would provide a link to diaspora study. He argues that the term diaspora can be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share some of the common characteristics given hereunder:

1. They or their ancestor have been dispersed from a special original 'centre' or two or more 'peripheral' of foreign regions;
2. They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland-its physical location, history and achievements;
3. They believe they are not- and perhaps cannot be- fully accepted by their lost society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulted from it;
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their, true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would (or should) eventually return- when conditions are appropriate;
5. They believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and its safety and prosperity; and
6. They continue to relate, personally and vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno- communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (William Safaran,53)

Thus, sociological background of diaspora deals with the special branch of studying diaspora from the classical view of the Jews migratory experience. In the initial phases of the term diaspora, sociological studies were much in practice. In fact this branch of study of the term originates new gateways for the exploration of the term.

Psychological

This approach defines the term diaspora from the state of mind of the migrated people and their consciousness of being displaced. Their diasporic consciousness generally reminds them about their migration process, adaptation and

difficulties in settlement in the host country. Due to multi-locality and their fractured memories about past life, diasporic consciousness generates in them a sense of alienation.

Diasporas are conscious of their memories of past and present difficulties in the adopted countries. In the words of **James Clifford**, "Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension." (Clifford, 312) It is the duality in them that makes them uncomfortable among the people of host country. In this way, the formation of the sense of 'here' and 'there' persistently haunts them in social access and cultural assimilation. But on the other hand, this diasporic consciousness played an important role in bonding all those diaspora who shared the same 'route' and 'root'. **Robin Cohen** points out proper consequences of this diasporic consciousness which untimely results in transnational relationship.

...transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination. (Cohen, 516)

Apart from the diasporic consciousness, scholars have also described functions of the mind of the diaspora people whose fractured memories are associated with the migration and dispersion. For example **Arjun Appadurai & Carol Breckenridge** note that, "*diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment.*" (Arjun Appadurai et al, i)

Moreover, the establishment of an identity is also included in the psychological study of diaspora. Their self awareness and life in an exiled condition (diasporic state of condition) strives them in questioning their identity. **Robin Cohen** notes about their self questioning and endeavours to construct his self identity. *Awareness of their precarious situation may also propel members of diasporas to advance legal and civic causes and to be active in human rights and social justice issues.* (Cohen, 13)

Cultural

Diaspora as a cultural phenomena associates with the (re)construction of the traditional and religious values of the particular nation or country. The production and reproduction of the cultural values have created a strong solidarity between their current life in the adopted country and the past socio-cultural practices in the county of their origin. And with this accordance, diaspora could maintain their ethno-cultural values even in the most resentful conditions. As **Stuart Hall** remarks about the cultural resilience of the diaspora by defining them as;

[D]iaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other peoples into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing form of 'ethnicity.'...

Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Hall, 235)

The attempts of diaspora to reinstate cultural values and traditional customs constructed and reconstructed diasporic social-cultural bonds either with their homeland or host country. Their social access and sharing of daily life activities imply to the idea of cultural collage.

Literary:

The study of the diaspora literature has also been emerged and explored in order to know inner traumas and predicament of diaspora writers. Diaspora literature reflects the problems caused by migration. People of diaspora community indulge in memories of their past and problems of present life. Their consciousness as being uprooted or displaced plays a pivotal role in the creation of diasporic literature. About the importance of diaspora writings, **Ashcroft** significantly notes that;

The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which

diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity. (Ashcroft, 218)

Literary writings for the diasporic person became a tool to manifest their inner landscapes. In short, the emergence of the diaspora literature can be laid down to one's (diaspora) fractured memories about homeland, tradition, culture and most importantly language. Their way of exhibiting these ideas of reviving socio-cultural linguistic aspects through literary genres rejuvenate the spirit of diaspora people and writers as well. Consequently, with the help of literary study of the diaspora writings, an encompassing view about the society and culture can be easily identified. In this regards, **Ahmad Aizaz** remarks that how a study of literary text from diaspora literature enables us to understand socio-cultural background.

Diasporic writings are to some extent about the business of finding new Angles to enter reality; the distance, geographical and cultural enables new structures of feeling. The hybridity is subversive. It resists cultural authoritarianism and challenges official truths.(Aizaz, 126)

Thus, literary study of diaspora illustrates a journey of diaspora community or individual through various socio-political milieu of a country/nation. From the initial phase of the term diaspora to the post modern era, diasporic community has been facing myriad problems and challenges. Subsequently, the projection of a literary writer in his/ her literary text results a firsthand experience about the diasporic consciousness. In this regards **Homi Bhabha** remarks that "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history-subjugation, domination, Diaspora, displacement- that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking"(Bhabha, 172)

Thus, the condition of being diasporic affects one's thinking and creative writing process. Personal experience of a diasporic writer gets accelerated in his/her literary writings. In this way, the study of diaspora literature becomes a connecting link to display diasporic consciousness

and to facilitate in comprehending the problems of diaspora in past and present.

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