



## THEORIZING DIASPORA LITERATURE: A REVIEW OF KEY CONCEPTS

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### Abstract

*Diaspora studies are the sub-genre or extension of postcolonial literature into wider socio-cultural horizons. The term, 'diaspora' refers to the displacement of an individual, community or groups of people from the original homeland to an alien territory. It also connotes a cultural transition from pure roots to mixed customs in the adopted land. Due to this transition, the diaspora groups are not able to maintain their cultural identity, which compel them to endure experiences of alienation, nostalgia and longing. While entering the threshold of hybrid situation, they either end up in embracing cross-culturalism or encounter continuous experience of trauma. Therefore, migrancy metaphor and the migratory geographies are at the core of diaspora and form its stepping stones. Hence, this paper is an attempt to review some common concepts like cultural identity, alienation and hybridity, which form an intrinsic part of the diasporic dialectics.*



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### Introduction:

The term 'diaspora' was originally applied by Greeks to imply triumphalist migration or colonization. The original meaning of the word was related to voluntary migrations. But until recently the mass migration of the people either as consequences of conflict riddled contemporary history or voluntary migration from the third world countries to the promising metropolitan cities has somehow diluted the original meaning of the word. According to Robin Cohen, the word diaspora can be traced back still earlier, to a Greek word used to describe the 'sowing of seeds' and then applied to Greek colonization in the Mediterranean.

The Biblical use of the word was one of scattering, what the Lord would do as punishment for not obeying the divine laws. The Hebrew equivalent was 'galuth' or 'galut,' which meant 'captivity' or 'exile' and the term initially, referred to the scattering of Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile and has assumed a more general connotation of people settling away from their ancestral homelands. In the contemporary period, the word diaspora has lost its original meaning and encompasses variety of connotations given the incessant movement of peoples from one country, to region, or continent to another for variety of reasons: economic, political, social and cultural, exhibiting the characteristics of multiethnic, multicultural, multiracial and pluralistic society and hence questions the relevance of types of 'nation-states'.

### **Discussion:**

The migrancy metaphor and the migratory geographies are at the core of diaspora and form its stepping stones. All migrations, whether, voluntary or forced, are characterized by the encounter of different cultures, customs and values. The immigrant/emigrant groups fail to adjust entirely in an alien culture as such display symptoms of alienation, boredom, longing for homeland and encounter other traumatic experience, during the period of acustomization. They feel alienated in their adopted land and these feelings are well reflected in diasporic writings, whether, it is poetry, fiction or prose. To analyse literature, we depend on theory, which is essentially a body of ideas and methods required for the practical reading of literature. The diaspora writings form well recognized part of postcolonial literature, essentially an extension of postcolonial literature to encompass several other cultural facets- globalization, celebration of diversity and challenge to geographical borders. The diaspora communities encounter series of physical, emotional and psychological disconnections from their homeland, resulting in formation or experience of collective trauma, nostalgia and memory. The new diasporic writings, nevertheless, also encompass celebration of multiplicity, globalization and challenge the relevance of borders and the nation states. According to Safran, the diaspora communities experience the following features:

1. They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral' or foreign regions.
2. They retain collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland- its physical location, and achievements.
3. They believe that they are not and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it.
4. They regard their ancestral homeland as their true ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate.
5. They believe that they should collectively be committed to the maintenance and restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity.
6. They continue to relate, personally or 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.

Similarly, Robert Cohen developed other criteria that gave more weightage on characteristics other than the group's relationship with its homeland. According to Cohen, a diaspora group must have the following characteristics:

- (i). The dispersal of the group must be the result of a traumatic experience, a pursuit of work or trade, and colonial ambitions.
- (ii). A commitment to the homeland's maintenance, restoration, safety, prosperity, and even in some cases its creation.
- (ii). A group consciousness sustained over a long period of time including a sense of empathy and solidarity with other members of the group in the host land.
- (iv). A potential for contribution to the host land when a tolerance for pluralism is present

These two thinkers emphasize that physical dislocation of people from their ancestral roots creates a number of socio-psychological problems, but still they endorse a sense of empathy with each other. The idea of homeland constantly forms the part of their unconscious, making sudden intrusions from time to time. So, in diaspora literature the themes of panic, nausea, hysteria, violence, nostalgia home, home, alienation, identity, hybridity, cross-culturalism frequently recur. Therefore, to define these human experiences, we depend on theory, the body of ideas and methods used for the analysis of literature. The concepts like- cultural identity, alienation and hybridity are central part of diaspora condition and assist us in understanding the wider perspectives of diasporic experience. Since, diasporic condition is associated with numerous 'homeland' memories, diaspora literature forms an imaginary home to what Margaret Atwood in her book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* argues:

“What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately; we need to know about because here is where we live. For the members of a country or a culture shared knowledge of their place is not a luxury but necessity. Without that knowledge, we will not survive.”

The concept of identity was always and still remains a debatable issue in social science studies because of its very formative and transformative nature. When we analyse diasporic writings, we observe that diaspora works are mostly autobiographical and explore self in

order to trace the traces of real identity. Since identity is cultural construct which one carries from womb, and through surrounding culture, with its own beliefs and values, and continues adaptation and assimilation until the tomb or death. So, in this sense identity is never fixed or stationary, therefore, literary and cultural theorists suggest its numerous interpretations. So, Let us briefly examine each term under below sub-headings.

**1]. Cultural Identity:** cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Stuart Hall, in his book, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, outlines the reasons why the question of cultural identity is so compelling and yet so problematic. To him, in common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal and with natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. Hall believes that:

‘Identity is a construction, a process never completed- always in process, it is not determined in the sense that it can always be won or lost, sustained or abandoned. He, while taking insights from Derrida’s deconstructive thought, says that identification is then, a process of articulation, a suturing, on over determination not a subsumption. There is always too much or too little an over determination or lack but never a proper fit, a totality like all signifying process it is subject to ‘play’ to ‘difference’ it obeys the logic of more than one. (Hall, 3)

In psychoanalytic field, identity is also an ambivalent term. Freud calls identity as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. In the context of oedipal complex, it takes the parental figures as both love objects and objects of rivalry, thereby inserting ambivalence at the very centre of the process. In the essay, *Mourning and Melancholia (1917)*, Freud describes the concept of melancholia by comparing it to the condition of mourning, a state produced by the object-loss of a person or a thing bearing the imprint of affective investment. Whereas mourning is characterized by Freud as a condition with apparent cause that the human subject can eventually overcome, melancholia on the other hand is the result of more elusive loss. The depression associated with melancholia creates a shattered consciousness incapable of undergoing the process of individualization and thereby entering the Lucanian realm of the symbolic order. As a result of this painful failure, the subject suffering from wound inflicted by the separation from the mother is unable to transcend the ‘infantile depressive position and to establish internal ‘good’ objects and to feel secure in its inner

world. While as Kristeva claims depression is the hidden face of ‘narcissus,’ it is because the wounded ego, as in the act of mourning, has lost the external support of its ‘self-image’ and in that process has developed ambivalence towards the lost-object.( LD. Kritzman).

**(2). Alienation:** Etymologically, the word ‘alienation’ is derived from the Latin term ‘alienatio’ having ‘alienere’ which means to snatch, to avoid, to remove, to make a thing of others etc., In the present day literary world, this term has acquired a very complex and multidimensional character. The term designates individual or group remoteness from and or disaffection with something or someone. It may therefore be said that alienation stands for a discrepancy of some sort. It is at best a sophisticated term denoting a variety of conditions that could, without loss of clarity, be just as well apprehended with numerous other words. In fact, the use of vocabulary other than alienation to describe situations in which individuals or groups are remote from someone or something and or are disaffected about something would most likely lead to increased specificity in the way language is used to describe social phenomena. There are six varieties of alienation- powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, Self-estrangement and social isolation. Similarly, Marx believes that involuntary division of labour under capitalism is the source of estrangement. The voluntary division of labor under communism creates a condition of nonestrangement. (William, Isidor)

Erich Fromm defines alienation as:

“A mode of experience in which a person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experienced; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and the world outside productively.”

**(3). Hybridity:** Hybridity in simplest term refers to mixing of eastern and western culture. However, the term hybridity, which relies on a metaphor from biology, is commonly used in much broader ways, to refer to any kind of cultural mixing or mingling between East and West. Hybridity can be of many types like linguistic hybridity, literary hybridity cultural hybridity. In linguistic hybridity, many elements of foreign language enter into the given language or vice versa. In simple terms, it is the adoption of English words into Asian or African languages, or the advent of Asian or African words into English. Today, words like

“pajamas,” bungalow,” and “mulligatawny” are often used without an awareness that they derive from Indian languages. The second is literary hybridity, which refers to the adaptation of literary genre like novel or narrative technique like magic realism in mainstream literary canon. Another, slightly different example of literary hybridity might be Agha Shahid Ali’s adaptation of the concept of an English-language ghazal. The third is cultural hybridity. Culture, defined in terms of art, music, fashion, cuisine, and so on, refers the broadest field of hybridity.

According to Stuart Hall, hybridity or hybrid strategy or discourse opens up a space of negotiation between different cultures, where hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (Hall, 58)

### **Conclusion:**

Therefore, by analysing these key concepts, we come to the conclusion that diaspora literature can best be situated within these theoretical dialectics to connote multiple aspects of diasporic dispersion. These concepts help us to locate the common issues that diaspora communities face during the process of adaptation in an alien culture. Thus, it becomes necessary to apply these concepts to diaspora literature in order to have better understanding of expatriate literature of diasporic minority communities.

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