

*Fractured Identities: A Study of Diasporic Reality & Identity
Crisis in Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry*

Ajay S. Deshmukh

Department of English

Shri. Muktanand College

Gangapur, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India

ajayd802@gmail.com

Rajdeep R. Deshmukh

Department of English

Shri. Muktanand College

Gangapur, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Diaspora is much talked and celebrated discourse across the disciplines. Confrontation of diasporic community with native community gives rise to multi-dimensional problems. Diasporic community thus undergoes different levels of realities that change their perception as person who migrated from his/her homeland in search of new opportunities. Their perception as a segment in foreign land is marked with the sense of alienation, hybridity, identity crisis and many other mental and physical, cultural-religious, and spatial-geographical turmoil. In a sense they come across the diasporic reality. Diasporic reality is a combined study of Diaspora and problems of migrants. This paper explores the meaning of diaspora through the definitions of different writers and the problems of migrants. It specifically attempts to trace the problems of identity crisis and hybridity as confrontation

with different often contradictory socio-cultural, religious, and different historical backdrop in which diasporic community is located in.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Identity Crisis, Agha Shahid Ali.

Introduction

Diaspora is much talked and celebrated discourse across the disciplines. Confrontation of diasporic community with native community gives rise to multi-dimensional problems. Diasporic community thus undergoes different levels of realities that change their perception as person who migrated from his/her homeland in search of new opportunities. Their perception as a segment in foreign land is marked with the sense of alienation, hybridity, identity crisis and many other mental and physical, cultural-religious, and spatial-geographical turmoil. In a sense they come across the diasporic reality. Diasporic reality is a combined study of Diaspora and problems of migrants.

This paper explores the meaning of diaspora through the definitions of different writers and the problems of migrants. It specifically attempts to trace the problems of identity crisis and hybridity as confrontation with different often contradictory socio-cultural, religious, and different historical backdrop in which diasporic community is located. It is an imperative to trace the different meanings of diaspora.

Diaspora was represented within different fields from an Ancient period up to 21st century. Definition of diaspora constantly changed with changing period. It had shown the views of different philosophers, authors, research scholars, with respect to the contemporary period. It became more generalized to migration of any person from one place to another. It is specifically used in Jewish context. Graham Huggan presented diaspora with the definition of Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin to show colonization and colonialism of Europeans over the entire world. Forced migration of large number of people indicates the indentured laboring in

ancient and colonial period. Definition of forced migration also changed with changing times as:

The mass relocation either voluntary or forced, of people from their homelands to new regions –probably still the most common understanding of the increasingly multivalent term ‘diaspora’- has been a central feature in historical processes of colonization, ... (Knott and McLoughlin eds., 2011, p. 55)

Colonial studies had shown Europeans and native encounter during colonial period. Europeans dispersed from their homeland to different parts of the world. Their reason for displacement from native place mainly focuses on the ambitious greed for money and power as explained by Ashcroft and others as, “radically or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans over the entire world” (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin eds., 1998, p. 69).

Living place of migrants in foreign country and their presence of mind in a homeland with respect to culture has some relation. It beautifully describes an imaginative world of diaspora. Culture travels with a person wherever he/she goes, and it is deeply rooted in the minds of migrants.

The disturbing thoughts existing in the mind of migrant lose his control over physical body. It shows body-mind co-ordination in an irregular manner resulting into an imaginary travelling to a homeland. A person goes into a trance state. In this connection Cohen defined Diaspora as:

Diasporas are positioned somewhere between nation states and “travelling cultures” in that they are dwelling in a nation state in a physical sense but travelling in an astral culture or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation states space/time zone. (135-136)

Collective memory in relation to history and culture shows the brain imagery of diaspora, which always maps the past events. Diaspora can also be defined by the *“role played by collective memory which transits both historical facts that precipitated the*

dispersion and a cultural heritage latter often being religious” (Chaliand and Jean, 1995, p. XV).

Diaspora shows displacement of person from one territory or one nation to other. In this sense of migration, social or economic identity or status of a person also crosses the borders and becomes national or global in nature. As Vertovec defines diaspora as, *“practically any population that is considered ‘deterritorialised’ or ‘transnational’- that is which has originated in land other than that in which it currently resides, and whose social economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed span the globe”(277).*

Diaspora is multidisciplinary phenomenon. It intersects different disciplines such as education, music, films, media, and business work. These different disciplines are the reasons of dispersion from homeland. Diasporic person feels alienated, separated, and lonely in the new geographical space of foreign land. In the foreign land, uprootedness from motherland gives rise to anxiety about homeland. Global discourse on diaspora forms bondage to their homeland through imagination, which is known as diasporic imagination.

Diaspora is very closely related to place; whether, it is a native or foreign. Nowadays diaspora and communication technology are interlinked, which shows the easy connectivity. Diaspora redefines place in a radical way. Simultaneously, in modern times, it has crossed the barriers\boundaries of place due to revolutions in telecommunication and technological sectors. Stewart presents his views on diaspora as:

Diaspora involves a radical ... redefinition of place. Simultaneously, nowadays, diaspora increasingly transcends place as a result of the technological revolutions in the telecommunications industry. (13)

Thus, revolution in information and technology has brought the world together. The relatives now can be in touch with their families at the touch of mobiles. Video conferencing,

video calling apps and advanced mobile services have bridged the spatial gap. Simultaneously it has redefined the psychic and cultural processes and diasporic experiences of expatriate communities.

Diasporic Identity and Impending Identity Crisis:

Although Diaspora are facing the problems associated with their identity, in a foreign land. They are living with dual-identity in a migrated nation. Unacceptance of diasporic person by the members of this new land, native groups, gives rise to the issues of identity crisis. Identity crisis in first generation non-white immigrants is due to the racism in adults. It becomes necessary to look into the concept of identity in brief.

Identity is a label given to a person based on his/her gender, race, religion, nature, nationality, and ethnicity. Identity has its own importance in the life of a person. It brings many facets such as:

Of course, identity is today a growth industry in the academy, across the humanities and social sciences, influencing even law and communication studies. The constructive power of gender race, ethnicity, sexuality, and other forms of identity has, finally, suddenly, been recognized as a relevant aspect of almost all projects of inquiry. (Paula, Moya and Hames-Garcia eds. 2001, p. 312)

Diaspora brings many problems and immigrant experiences shape the life of a diasporic individual. Human identity is classified into different types. Types of identities are based on the human identification in the world. Nationality, gender, social, cultural, race, and ethnicity plays an important role in formation of identity. Different animals are present in the world. Animals and plants are classified up to certain extent. However, humans are classified into different manners. Classifications of humans are different from the others. Human identity makes differences and leads to the identity crisis. Human beings are born with the

different tags as their identity. Children do not know about these different tags. It made impact on their lives. Society also changes its structure with changing groups. Groups are formed among similar kind of gender, races, ethnicity, and culture.

An immigrant suffers from many problems such as identity crisis, hybridity, assimilation, acculturation, multiculturalism, exile, rootlessness, alienation. Identity crisis is mainly associated with migrants. They are entrapped between two languages, culture, nation, and society. They are unable to adjust in foreign land because they don't want to cut off their bondage with homelands. They are torn between two nations. Racial and cultural conflicts have made their life troublesome.

First-generation migrants are adults as they had lived their major part of life in homeland. However, second-generation migrants are born into foreign land which becomes their birthland. They even do not know about their foreign land personally. Parents forced them to adapt culture and ethics of their homeland whereas they naturally adopt everything from native community bring exposed to it since their birth. But frequent visits to homeland with their children keep them in touch with its culture and language. These attempts result into strengthening of bonds with roots. But it also causes a question of dual identity which shapes their life through different experiences in the societal circles and within the periphery of family. Thus, second-generation migrants neither completely adopt the culture of host land nor homeland. Thin in-betweenness leads to their identity crisis. But their efforts to do away with such mixed identity results into pathetic conditions of second-generation migrants. But with Third generation of migrants, where their children are complete absorbed into the host land milieu, the concepts of homeland, culture, language are completely changed. Homeland has just become the nomenclature of the place from where their grand parents hailed.

Although Vanaja Dhruvrajan explains the issue related to Canadian society in her paper *Second-Generation Indo-Canadians: Change, Resistance and Adaptation* as follows:

In Canadian society racism as an ideology is built into institutional structures and manifests itself in social practices. People of non-European origin are routinely evaluated as less worthy because of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. The first generations non-white immigrants who immigrated as adults have had to experience racism in their daily lives. (Varma and Seshan eds., 2003, p. 174)

Identity Crisis in non-white immigrants was not only affected adults but also children. In both cases, racism is the common factor. Adults in their previous years of settlement developed their own identity and esteem. It helped them to deal with these problems at some extent. But the children of these immigrants failed in doing so. Cultural and historical differences were the main reasons behind it. Unequal treatment given to the non-white children as compared to the white children leads to identity crisis. It impacts their mental and physical health.

Vanaja Dhruvrajan in her paper also criticized about the school systems in the host country like Canada. Subject syllabus in these schools covers the history, culture, and literature of white people only. It mainly focused on the Europeans and their history of colonization. Children of immigrants feel alienated and are hurt due to such school system.

Phenomenon of identity crisis occurs with Diaspora. It has a special relation with dispersed group of people from their motherland. Cultural identity maintenance and regulation in a foreign land becomes the issue in the life of migrants. However, crisis of identity is not only depending on the culture but also on the race, religion, nation, language etc. Creolized identity is the birth of a new identity in a foreign land.

Diaspora paves way to multiple identity crisis such as national, linguistic, cultural, gender, ethnic, racial etc. It would be traced briefly as below:

Nationality Identity

Migrants are often called as Expatriates. This notion underscores the identity of a migrant as person from other nation. As every person is born in a space located on the particular location in the world, he/she is known by the nation in which he/she is born. For example, a person born in India is known to be an Indian, while one born in America is known to be an American. A mixed identity of both may be called as American Indian, which is outcome of national identity of migrant community. It causes great trouble between the citizenship of native and migrants. These differences lead to identity crisis in the life of migrants. The questions of loyalties the outcome on the debate of belonging. But the cartography in the age of globalization is consistently revising the maps of nation by blurring the national boundaries through the growing networks of digital communication and technology.

Gender Identity

World is differentiated into masculine, feminine and neuter genders. Gender differentiation leads to discrimination. In any patriarchal society, male dominance is in prominence. Although in modern age, men and women are getting equal opportunities in every field, gender remains the point of departure in many humanitarian discourses. However, third genders are on the periphery of opportunities as compared to men and women. Taboos are often not discussed and identified. Problems of LGBTQ are pertinent all over the world. It has also impacted the social dimensions and psychological make up of diasporic community. It causes panic situation and cultural shock to the migrant communities in multicultural and multi-ethnic scenario.

Cultural Identity

Every nation has its own cultural identity in the global context. Culture brings out the different dimensions of nation and its people. Sometimes, people are divided by geographical space and national boundaries but brought together with cultural belonging. In case of Asian

subcontinent, Indian, Pakistani, Bangla Deshi may be divided by national boundaries, but somewhere cultural identity brings them together in the migrant society. However, a nation with multicultural backdrop becomes the melting pot of cultural identities. It causes overlapping of cultural identities of different migrant groups with a common thread that binds them together. In India with its huge population divided into multicultural groups are brought together with singular national identity. In the multicultural set up of Canada, migrants often encounter cultural differences as well as confluence of cultures which enriches their expatriate experience and on the other hand, causes deep concerns of existential problems.

Cultural identity crisis can be studied under the concept of diaspora. Diasporic Identity is totally opposite to the Creolization identity. It preserves culture and memories of homeland even in foreign land. (In book *Diasporas: Concepts, intersections, identities*,) Robin Cohen in his essay '*Social identities and Creolization*' demonstrates the idea of 'Creolization' as new identity in foreign land which cuts off the old roots of homeland and its culture by accepting new culture and land. He describes it as:

Creolization is thus a 'here and now' sensibility that erode old roots and stresses fresh and creative beginnings in a novel place of identification. A diasporic consciousness, by contrast, generally reflects a degree of unease with cultural identities in a current place of residence. In evoking diaspora, a homeland or looser notion of 'home' is reconstructed and revalorized through fabulation, recovered historical memory and social organization. The past provides a continuing pole of attraction and identification. (Knott and Mcloughlin eds., 2011, p. 71)

Language Identity:

Language becomes prominent marker and category of identity formation. Linguistic aggression and assertion of purity or linguistic superiority causes great concerns to the people

in diasporic community. Migrants are forced to adapt the language of native community. It also causes great anxiety to the host community to safeguard their native language amid the rigorous encroachment of different diasporic community. To look it from both sides, language becomes the prestige issue for host or native community whereas need for diasporic community. The possibilities of language change in both communities brings out the linguistic fusion or hybridity. This indeed enriches both the languages as well as creates new identities on linguistic horizon.

Racial Identity:

Racial or ethnic identity have been worst denominators of discrimination which results into inhuman treatments of the migrants. Race brings out the genetical or biological norms where whites and colored are polar categories whereas ethnicity too implies racial undertones with its cultural implications. Race however is often used weapon against migrant communities to relegate them on the margin of existence. Diasporic communities themselves are divided into many races. It creates the collage of racial identities in diaspora. The prevalent racial crisis too is outcome of this socio-cultural milieu in the host land. The whole canon of African American or Black literature is result of racial canonization of literature. The Jewish literature and Holocaust Literature is also the symptomatic of alignment of literary experiences based on race.

Thus, identity crisis is inherent discourse in diaspora. It is impending reality which is manifested gradually on the diasporic community. The diasporic experiences are layered and overlapped. The sensible writers have given literary expression to such issues. The diasporic writers have portrayed their fluid identities and relentless efforts to overcome the crisis in multifarious dimensions of diasporic life.

Agha Shahid Ali and Problems of Diasporic Identity:

Though, diasporic sensibilities have largely explored in the prose literature i.e., fiction. Poet like Agha Shahid Ali has expressed the diasporic realities in a meticulous way. He has portrayed the dilemmas and identity crisis in his poetry.

A Nostalgist's Map of America Beyond the Ash Rains explores the migrant's identity.

When the desert refused my history,
refused to acknowledge that I had lived
there, with you, among vanished tribe,...(23)

In this stanza of the poem, Ali tried to wipe out or erase the borderline between two nations, by giving proofs of the evidential common history. The Promised Land refuses the history that shows the common root of emergence of human race. A grief of loss of identity or refused identity is expressed in the poem. Ali used the evidences from past to realize his old identity to the new natives. Migrant's issues are raised by Ali in this poem. Native society does not accept the migrants as a member in their society. Two different migrants also did not accept each other even though they had common status of an outsider in this new land. It might be due to doubts for each other's interest or conflict in the past or present. The world of migrants became world of exile in this poem. The emergence of making new identity in the immigrated world is only choice before migrants. Broken identity of migrants is depicted in *A Rehearsal of Loss*.

I drove away from your door. And the night,
it left the earth the way a broken man,...(25)

Diaspora and the migrant's condition are worsened at the night. Migrants feel broken under the darkness of an environment and human feelings. Homeland separates the migrants while mind tries to bring it back. *Loss* of one's identity leads to identity crisis. Ali compares darkness in an environment with his life as a loss. Helplessness, broken image or identity of a person is correlated with the earth and night. Muteness, silence in the relationship is also

depicted in the last line of a poem. Ali used different symbols, images to portray the loss, grief, and loneliness in his life.

Migrant always try to find out similarities between homeland and foreign land. He is always in search of his identity. He feels relief when some identical name became visible to him in a foreign land. Agha Shahid Ali was travelling in America. He suddenly found Calcutta at an exit of a *Route 80 in Ohio*.

When on Route 80 in Ohio

I came across an exit
to Calcutta. (41)

Calcutta name had created a feeling of a great relief to Ali's mind. He unknowingly travelled to India through his mind and whole imagery stood alive in front of his eyes as a mindscape.

Agha Shahid Ali is known to be a Kashmiri-American. Hyphenated identity sometimes causes disturbances in the mind of a migrant. Travelling in America and mind is travelling in India present diasporic imagination of poet.

India always exists
off the turnpikes
of America
so I could say
I did take the exit
and crossed the Howrah
and even mention the Ganges
as it continued sobbing
under the bridge. (41)

The *turnpikes of America* senses poet of his present locus in foreign land while as journey starts and moves from that particular place, he again imagines homeland. It also is related to the currency of America different from the Indian currency, which reminds poet about America while paying the toll. Ali again fall into a dreamland of Calcutta after taking an exit from that place. The imagery of the Howrah Bridge and Ganges River flourished in his dreamland of Calcutta. Ali had compared his identity crisis with the Ganges identity in foreign land and it resulted into an action of sobbing.

Agha Shahid Ali is a very creative writer. His poems are the examples of his creative writing. A use of a figurative language in a poetry made him famous in the field of poetry. He expressed the situation of identity crisis in his own word as-

What can I be but a stranger in your house? (49)

Ali compared his identity in homeland with the identity crisis in a foreign land. He simply uses a home word for Homeland and *house* word for a foreign land. He asks a question about his identity in foreign land by putting or writing a *stranger* word in a poetic line.

The Half-Inch Himalayas explores the migrant's view from foreign land. *Leaving Your City* is a symbolical title of the poem, it portrays the migration theme. Movement from one place to other, around the world is the main characteristic of diaspora.

My finger, your phone number
at its tip, dials the night.
And your city follows me,
its light dying in my eyes. (43)

Suspicious identity of migrant is portrayed in the above lines. Nocturnal activity of phone calling gives birth to doubt and suspicion. Migrants try to communicate with their

friend and relatives at night. It brings attention of natives towards migrants. They follow migrants at night. It also expresses the identity crisis.

The identity crisis and culture are focused on the *Cremation*. Ali discusses comparison of death and an attitude, position of a person in life. He wrote about anxiety for homeland Kashmir. It did not leave him even after his death.

Your bones refused to burn
when we set fire to flesh.
Who would have guessed
you'd be stubborn in death? (27)

For whole span of life, a diasporic person that doesn't cared for his family, homeland, and friends. Ali used diasporic imagination with death and memories of homeland in the poem cremation. His dead body could not catch fire due to the stress and tension about present status and future of Kashmir. He believed in Kashmiriyat, cuisine, people, their culture, and music in the valley of Kashmir. Here, poet suggests that Cremation won't work to dissolve this body into nature. Symbolically poem talks about burial of culture in the valley.

Conclusion:

Thus, migration from one geographical space to another exposes migrant to the new culture, new language, new society, new norms which might be different as well as contradictory to his homeland. This encounter and conflict cause identity crisis. Agha Shahid Ali has brilliantly underscored the vivid identities and impending crisis. His poetry is meticulous expression of fractured identities and its pain.

References

- Alcoff, Linda Martin. 'Who's Afraid of Identity Politics'. *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and Predicament of Postmodernism*, edited by Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-Garcia, Orient Longman Private Limited., 2001.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. *A Nostalgist's Map of America*. W.W. Norton and company, 1991.
- Ali, Agha Shahid. *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Wesleyan University Press, 1987.
- Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, (Eds). *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial studies*. Routledge, 1998.
- Chaliand, Gerard and Jean Pierre Rageau, *The Penguin Atlas of Diasporas*. Viking Books, 1995.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: an introduction*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2008.
www.taylorfrancis.com/books
- Cohen, Robin. 'Social identities and creolization'. *Diasporas: concepts, intersections, identities*, edited by Kim Knott and Sean McLoughlin, Rawat Publications, 2011.
- Dhruvrajan, Vanaja. 'Second-Generation Indo-Canadians: Change, Resistance and Adaptation'. *Fractured Identity*, edited by Sushma J. Varma and Radhika Seshan, Rawat Publications, 2003.
- Knott, Kim and Sean McLoughlin. *Diasporas: concepts, intersections, identities*. Rawat Publications, 2011.
- Stewart, S. M. "Citizenship and Belonging: Local Expression of Political and Economic Restructuring". Transnational Communities Programme, 2001. <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/wwwroot/stewart.htm>.
- Vertovec, S. "Three meanings of 'Diaspora' Exemplified among South Asian Religions". *Diaspora*. Oxford University Press, 6: 1997.