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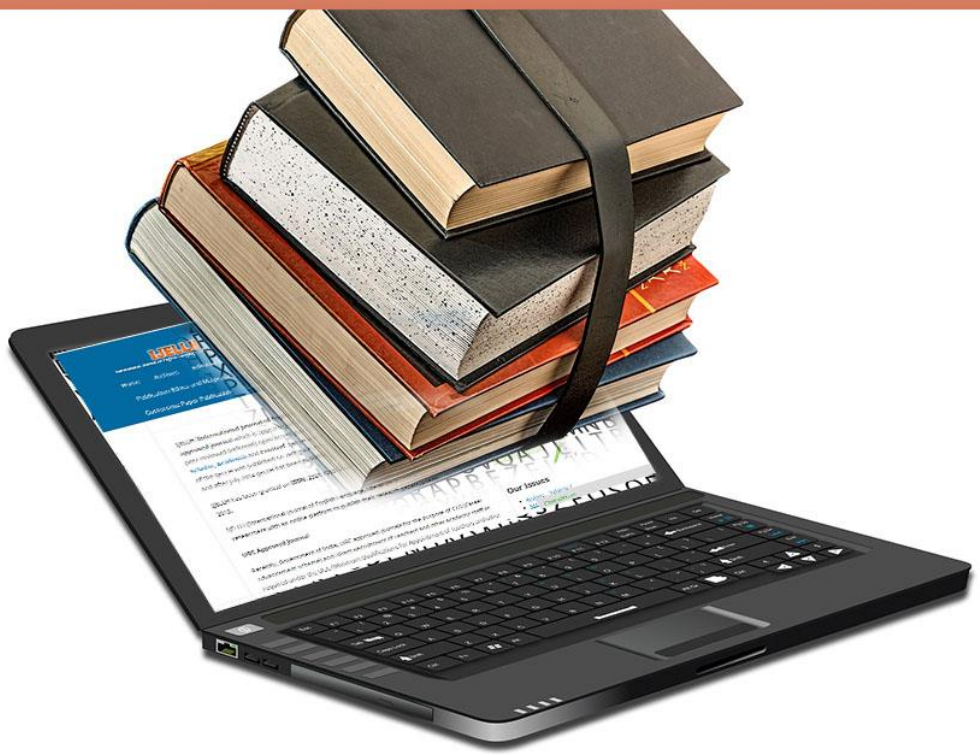

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The Concept of Diaspora: A Brief Study

Abstract

The present research paper deals with the concept of diaspora. This concept has emerged as a very popular area of research. How to define diaspora has been the subject of ongoing debate. To make its meaning clear, the present paper sketches the spread of the term 'diaspora' through a number of disciplines, pointing to some prominent examples.

The notion of diaspora has emerged as a significant area of study in the departments of literature and social sciences. It is presently being used in both scholastic and popular discussion with a mounting rate of recurrence and wideness. Yet this increase does not necessarily reflect a universal understanding of the term.

How to define diaspora has been the topic of ongoing debate. While some scholars have argued in support of identifying a closed set of attributes, others have preferred to use the term in the broader sense of human scattering. For example, Safran maintains that diaspora is that section of people living outside homeland. Docker describes diaspora as "a sense of belonging to more than one history, to more than one time and place, to more than one past and future."[1] The work of Brah on diaspora locates diaspora space in the intersectionality of diaspora, border and dislocation as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychological process. Gilroy uses the concept of diaspora to argue against ethnic absolutism and unitary

ethnic culture. Stuart Hall uses diaspora to emphasize the hybrid identity formation and the processes, experiences and practices that result from displacements and cultural shifts. The term trans-national community is also used as synonym of diaspora and the two-terms/ concepts frequently collapse into one. Phil Cohen is of the view that this word has become one of the buzzwords of the post-modern age. Clearly, a working definition of diaspora is in order. To make its meaning clear, it is essential to sketch the spread of the term 'diaspora' through a number of disciplines, pointing to some prominent examples.

Etymologically, the term 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek word 'dia' and 'speiro'. 'Dia' means 'through' and 'speiro' means to 'scatter'. The literal meaning of diaspora is 'scattering' or 'dispersion'. The word 'diaspora' was initially used by the ancient Greeks to describe their spreading all over the then known world. For them this term signified migration and colonization. It has often been used to describe the original dispersion of the Jews in the 6th century B.C. or to refer particularly to the Jews living outside Palestine among people of non-Jewish faith. "For Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians diaspora signifies a collective trauma where one dreams of home while living in exile."[2]

Today the term diaspora has made a dynamic comeback in the debates around ethnicity, nationality and nationhood, boundaries and identity. It has returned to address and assist the understanding of migration, post migration and re-territorialization, people's multiple sense of belonging and loyalties beyond national boundaries. More recently, and with increasing frequency, this term is being used to encompass the dispersal of any group or community outside country of their origin. It implies that particular cultures survive, transform and remain relevant even when members of an ethnic community have not lived in the original homeland.

In present parlance, the above-mentioned word is applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates, expellees, refugees, alien residents, immigrants, displaced communities and ethnic minorities. It has also been used to explain the experience of dislocation and to examine

the social, cultural and political formation that results from this dislocation. This word refers also to the work of exile and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential or metaphorical levels. Emmanuel Nelson has used this concept to examine emigrant writing.

The expression diaspora has currently attained the full-fledged status of a concept. Nowadays scholars and activists from diverse fields are often using it to explain such categories as "immigrants, guest workers, ethnic and racial minorities, refugees, expatriates and travellers."[3] At present it has emerged to be a helpful notion to examine the relationship between place and identity and the ways cultures and literatures interact. Though diaspora has assumed diverse meanings and interpretations, since its early uses, it is now employed to imply a wide variety of contexts, from dispersion to trade diaspora and worker/migrant diaspora. In the present day literary studies it has achieved great significance. According to this concept, different responses to migration are articulated in literature produced in the places where diasporic communities exist. Apparently a metaphorical application of the term is prevalent, encompassing a wide range of phenomenon under the very notion.

For the last four decades, many dispersed communities, those once known as minorities, ethnic groups, migrants, exiles etc. have now been renamed as diasporas either by scholars or academicians. Up to 1960, the term diaspora was confined to the extensive studies on three classical or traditional Diasporas viz. Jewish, Armenian and Greek, of which the ideal case was the first. The disciplinary application of the diaspora term to non-Jewish and non-Christian peoples and their exile situation seems to have first been undertaken within African studies. In a now classic paper, George Shepperson spoke of the African Diaspora at a conference of African historians held in Dar es Salaam in 1965-66. Analogous to the expulsion of Jew in early times, the dispersion of sub-Saharan Africans through colonial slave trade was called an

enforced expatriation, accompanied by a longing to return to the homeland. It was about a decade later that a proliferation of publications gained momentum.

Since the mid-1970s, African historians deliberately employ diaspora as a concept and topic within African studies. As Harris summarises, the African diaspora concept subsumes [....] the global dispersion [voluntary or involuntary] of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. As the term took of within African studies, it also became applied within social sciences. The seminal article 'Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas' by John Armstrong in 1976 investigates in general perspective migrant groups with regard to their socio-economic position and the range of tolerance or repression they faced in multiethnic states.

Various scholars within Sociology and Political Sciences took up Armstrong's approach and usage. For example, various authors in Gabriel Sheffer's by now classic volume *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* explicitly refer back to Armstrong's study. Daniel J. Elazar regarded diaspora as ethno-religious communities, which as a catalytic minority would influence the host society. And Esman specified in his working definition that a diaspora is a minority ethnic group of migrant origin, which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin. Where as the ethnic factor according to Sheffer, is decisive, the religious ingredients would only help to strengthen some ideological, cultural and emotional identification and relation with former home country.

It would be impractical to list all the authors in disciplines such as linguistics, history or anthropology etc. who during the 1990s took up the term in order to relate it to expatriate, national, ethnic or religious cultural groups. It is interesting to note that the early 1990s witnessed the conceptualisation and systematisation of this term. In 1991 Khachig Tololyan launched a journal named *Diaspora*. As an editor of this journal, he said:

> We use Diaspora provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meaning with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugees, guest workers, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.[4]

In the 1991 inaugural issue of the journal, *Diaspora*, William Safran has attempted a kind of 'ideal type' representation of diaspora. In his popular article 'Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return' he has suggested six key characteristics of diaspora and compared a wide range of diaspora situations and related homeland myths. According to William Safran, the concept of diaspora can be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics:

- they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original 'centre' to two or more 'peripheral', or foreign regions;
- they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland -- its physical location, history, and achievements;
- they believe that they are not -- and perhaps cannot be -- fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulted from it;
- 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 condition are appropriate;
- they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and

- 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.[5]

Scholar like Robin Cohen has also used the same perspective formula of constructing an ideal type of a diaspora. He proposes that perhaps these features need to be adjusted and some other elements should be added to the list proposed by Safran.

Cohen has clearly attempted to move the debate forward. His emphasis on 'strong links to the past' pushes the debate decisively forward. Such attempt to define diaspora undoubtedly offers useful insights and correctly reflects the formative influence of a sense of loss and displacement and the primacy of the relationship of diaspora with a homeland.

James Clifford suggests that members of a diaspora maintain such characteristics as: 'dispersal from one centre to at least two peripheries; a memory of the homeland; a belief that they will never be fully accepted in the host country; a belief in returning to their ancestral home, a commitment to the maintenance of their homeland and; group consciousness and solidarity'.[6]

Van Hear proposes more minimal criteria of diaspora. According to him they are:

> The population has been dispersed from their homeland to two or more other territories; the presence abroad is enduring, although exile is not necessarily permanent and may include movement between the homeland and the host country and that there is social, economic, political and cultural exchange between or among spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora.[7]

Marienstrass is of the view that the concept of diaspora is used today to describe any community, which in one way or the other has a history of migration. Peters points out that

diaspora implies a decentralised relation to ethnicity, real or imagined relations between scattered people who sustain a sense of community through various forms of communication and contact and who do not necessarily depend on returning to distant homeland.

It is clear from this brief survey that the notion of diaspora is used to refer a wide range of historical and contemporary phenomena. This brief survey offers an opportunity to push the debate forward. In fact, a diaspora exists and reproduced by relying on everything that creates a bond in a place among those who want to group together and maintain, from a distance, relations with other groups, installed in other places but having the same identity. This bond can come in different forms, such as family, community, religious bonds or shared memory of a catastrophe or trauma suffered by members of the diaspora or the forebears. A diaspora has a symbolic and iconographic capital that enables it to reproduce and overcome the obstacle of distance separating its communities. Diaspora areas and territories must be gauged first in the host country, where the community bond plays the essential role, then in the country or territory of origin -- a pole of attraction -- through memory. Thus the term diaspora has more of a metaphorical than an instrumental role. On this basis exile, alienation memory, diasporic consciousness and longing for return can be identified as common characteristics of all the diaspora.

All these characteristics find unique articulation in the literary writings of diaspora writers. While languages, customs and traditions are distinct, all diasporic experiences share a similar sense of displacement, of seeking a sense of belonging. These experiences influence literary imagination and map literary texts. Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with exile, memory, diasporic consciousness, longing for return, alienation, nostalgia, search for identity and sense of belonging.

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