

Constructing Diasporic Identity: A Study of Gender and Sexuality in Select Diasporic Women Poets.

Thesis submitted to

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kalady

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the Award of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English Language and Literature

By

SOYA V. N.

Reg. No. En. 04/10



Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages

SREE SANKARACHARYA UNIVERSITY OF SANSKRIT KALADY

NOVEMBER 2020

Conclusion

The movement of people from one location to other leads to the formation of multiple affiliations and plural identities. In the contemporary globalised world, construction of diasporic identities is intricately connected to displacement, dislocation and relocation of people who reimagine their identity and subjectivity. At the core of diasporic experience, individuals revisit the idea of home and present a range of renewed, hybrid identities evolving within the convergence of diverse cultures which they encounter. People living in the diasporic space tend to negotiate their identities through a set of markers like race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality and so on. Therefore, diaspora is ontologically presented as a liminal space where individuals attempt to reinvent themselves by undergoing at once a cultural regression to an imagined past and a cultural progression to a negotiated present.

The liminal space of cultural/ national inbetweenness suggests the possibility of negotiated identities in the context of cultural hybridity that the diaspora subject undergoes. It is a contested space where diverse cultures intersect to produce a new cultural identity as a discourse of difference. The in-betweenness of diasporic identity suggests the existence of a double consciousness where the subject at once belongs to the home culture and host culture. The diaspora is neither here nor there when interrogated from the perspective of cultural reality.

It is difficult to maintain a singular self when the self is assimilated to an alien, unfamiliar host culture. The self undergoes the cultural dynamics of domestication.

The members of a diasporic community, who hail from the same home country, share the same cultural memory and history. They form an imagined community in which the members are cohered together by the bonds of culture. The individual members are connected together by certain forms of alternate histories like myths, legends and memories along with language, landscape and cultural practices. The distinction between high culture and popular culture tend to vanish in such communities. In this context, art or literature constitutes cultural relics which invoke identical responses from the members of the cultural community.

In the context of how they are treated in the host nations, diasporic subjects are seen as displaced populations who usually stay in subordinate positions with reference to hierarchical social structures like racial exclusion or low ethnic status in the new land. Diasporas establish a collective symbolic community in the hostland through their affiliation to the homeland, cultural traditions and shared history of displacement. Such a convergence enables them in consolidating identities and thus contributing to cultural solidarities. By adopting a collective diasporic identity, these communities can appreciate or critique their past, interrogating their history and rethinking their position vis-à-vis their political nationality and cultural ancestry. The diasporic identity is circumscribed by

adaptive strategies and the need for continued renewal which necessitate attempts in the direction of acculturation. Diasporic identity is often characterized by the strategies of struggle and survival which mark the way they are recognized in the host society. The acculturation of the diasporas are conditioned or judged racially and ethnographically. When an immigrant is judged or treated in the society with respect to the place of his/her origin or ancestry, there is a sense of cultural prejudice that stems from racial superiority and consequent stereotyping. The stereotyping culminates in the denial of equity and autonomy to the diasporic individual. This constrains the formation of diasporic identities which constantly produce and reproduce themselves anew, through transformation and difference.

Diaspora constitutes a marginalized space due to the subordinate position the diasporic subject occupies. The marginalized diasporic space can be appropriated as a site of power or resistance as they open up new possibilities to critique the restraints of identity politics. The new space allows the diaspora to speak their languages, retrieve their histories, reconstruct their roots and reinvent themselves. The diasporic identity formed as a result of such retrospection and reimagining embodies the variation and transformation of ethnic identification, constantly reconstituting itself. Therefore, in a diasporic space, these identities are capable of reorienting a cultural space where their histories are rediscovered and their deflated languages are retrieved. Thus, the diasporic self finds a negotiated cultural space to articulate itself, its subjectivity, history and identity.

The increasing complexity of the relationship between the local and the global as well as its impact on the ideas of nationhood and native identity is one of the most distinctive features of diasporic experience in transnational contexts. Cultural identities are never static and stable; rather, they are in a flux, constantly changing or evolving, transcending the limitations of national boundaries. Under these circumstances, one needs to understand the complexities of globalization that intersect with the constructions of national identities of the natives. The local communities simultaneously undergo transformation of themselves to respond to and engage in transnationalism. It offers them a context for negotiating, constructing, and reinventing their subjectivities and identities. Diaspora studies deconstructs the geographical boundaries of the nation-states, inventing a non-Western model of identity formation. The diasporic “in-betweenness” moves beyond the binary construction of the colonized and the colonizer, the centre and the periphery, or the home culture and host culture , to serve as a model for resisting the hegemony of the Western modernity.

The notion of diasporic identity addresses a few complex questions. It challenges the views of conventional identity formations and unravels the impact of ideology on identity formation. It offers a context to seek and find alternatives to ideological and epistemological structures that circumscribe identity formations. Diaspora has become a site of intervention and re-articulation of the politics of home. The construction of cultural identity emerges historically and politically from various disciplines. The processes of globalization and transnationalism are

factors that impact the theorization of cultural identity. Transnationalism and globalization challenge and/or reinvent the traditional way of understanding identity. The traditional paradigms of identity have to be compared with a diasporic theorization of cultural identity from an interdisciplinary postcolonial perspective. In this way, the study can expand the scholarly dialogues on theorizing identity as a site of struggle and resistance in the postcolonial and transnational contexts. The imperialistic implication of the globalized commodification of culture can be neutralized by including such perspectives in the critique of cultural identity. Diaspora studies, therefore, offers a context to review the notions of identity, subjectivity, articulation of ideology and representation of resistance. It offers a space to negotiate the meanings of the self and Otherness and reinvent cultural values and native knowledge in the backdrop of race, ethnicity and nationality.

The significance of gender and sexuality in diasporic experience is advanced to counter the traditional notion that the diaspora is essentially a masculinist space. Gender and sexuality play important roles in the construction of diasporic identities in the globalized context. The ever burgeoning interrogations on diaspora have necessitated academia to consider how diasporic identities are constructed under globalization which accelerates the momentum of migration and travel. Diasporic identity cannot be analysed in isolation from the impact of gender and sexuality. It is critically productive to view how gender/sexuality qualifies the diasporic identity. Gender in diaspora points to the fact that individual experiences

of travel and migration are rooted in particular contexts of personhood. It is often argued that no theory would adequately reflect the complexities of gendered diaspora in the contemporary context. The conventional academic approach to gender would not suffice such a study. The study should include a diasporic way of looking and understanding gender, sexuality and the queer life.

The performance of gender and sexuality takes a changing pattern in diaspora. The privilege of being away from the homeland acts as an impetus for unravelling the reality which might have been kept hidden from the discussions on subjectivity and identity. The diasporic space opens numerous avenues for the expressions of gender and sexuality which are in fact unhindered by the class differences existing among the diasporic subjects. For a diasporic person belonging to a privileged background, diaspora acts as a free and democratic site for self expression. For the underprivileged, the change or shift in the space they occupy may barely contribute any sense of freedom for coming out. However, gender and sexuality have become domains of resistance among the inhabitants of diasporic spaces. People use the new found experiences of their body, desire or sexuality as a prerogative that they have achieved in a far away land. Women in diaspora use their views on gender and sexuality to articulate their dissent to the patriarchal norms that continue to oppress and withhold them from stating who they are.

The construction of diasporic identity by select female poets reflects a wider range of experiences related to gender and sexuality. Despite the different sets of circumstances, issues and political stands, the female poets echo identical

concerns, apprehensions and anxieties. Though these poets have chosen different nations as their abodes, a patterned similarity of thoughts and emotions are visible in their poems under perusal. The resemblance of some of their experiences such as racial prejudice, gender discrimination, patriarchal/religious hegemony and outspoken views on sexuality make the poets respond identically to the hostile situations which makes their poetic output essentially political and counter cultural. Undoubtedly, the four poets analyzed in this study have their personal approaches and individual points of view on the question of gender and sexuality being adopted as a perspective to articulate their subjectivity from a diasporic position. But a study of these poets does not offer a monolithic theory on how gendered diasporic identities are created, recreated, erased and appropriated. The poets have clearly established the possibility of having as many points of view on these subjects as there are diasporic women writers, voicing their concerns, experiences, memories and resistances through their writings. In spite of the differences, the four poets analyzed in the study provide a context to observe from distinctive perspectives the problematic of writing from an ever-fluctuating position of gendered diaspora. The remarkable differences in their poetic expressions have emerged from the deeply embedded thoughts and priorities these poets maintain in the metaphors of their experiences and the paradoxes of poetic language. These differences do not eclipse the essential similarity in their portrayals of the gendered diasporic self.

The works of Himani Bannerji, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz Dharker certainly draw attention to the essential dilemmas or the miserable predicament of the South Asian diaspora from the combined perspective of race, gender and sexuality. These writers also underline that there is no need to resolve the conflicts originating from such complex subject positions in order to give prominence to one or other aspect of one's fragmented identity. Constituting a homogeneous diasporic identity is not an ideal way to represent the problematic of gendered experiences of diasporic life. These writers have invented a method of accepting the ambiguity and ambivalence of diasporic existence. By remaining in the third space or the liminal space of diaspora, they challenge the conventional assumptions about gendered and sexual identities, diasporic location, home-host differences and the inescapable inbetweenness of cultural/national hybridity.

In her poems, Himani Bannerji directly addresses the dissociation of sensibility that Asian women encounter in Canada both as “visible minorities” and gendered subalterns, particularly their experiences of cultural “Othering.” Bannerji’s poems are emblematic of her resistance to racism and sexism. The realization of racial prejudice, xenophobia, restricted social mobility, patriarchal regulation of the female body and sexuality, and phallocentric organization of power structures in the west are reflected in her collection of poems titled *Doing Time*. Her poems explore the relation between politics and culture, the interlocking systems of gender, race and class in the context of the structured power of the

empire. Her resistance to the atrocities practiced in the west takes the tone of militancy and activism.

Meena Alexander's personae transcend spatio-temporal constraints and display a manifestly all-inclusive identity. Her protagonists are seen negotiating the multifaceted diasporic self. They subvert the oppressive structures of race, gender and nation that divide and segregate people. Her poetry is an alternate strategy to undermine the systematic hegemony that restricts the social/ cultural mobility of people. Alexander's poems are distinctly preoccupied with the questions pertaining to the origin, identity, loss, alienation, memory and homesickness. Her poems probe into the pangs of the self caught between the conflicting desire to belong to nowhere and everywhere. The perception of diasporic ethos expressed in her poems pertinently challenges the social and religious hierarchies, rectifies the stereotypes of diasporic identities and subverts the homogenizing tendencies of the host nations. Her global identity gives her the privilege of becoming the spokesperson for everyone without an anchorage or solid existence in any place. The multicultural diasporic self endorsed by the poet resists all types of oppressions in her writings. Thus, she has appropriated the diasporic space as a site of agency and resistance.

As a writer with an inimitable desire and courage to be unconventional, outspoken and unapologetic, Sunuti Namjoshi has espoused a rather elusive, yet sharp technique of writing. She has continuously tested herself as a creator by travelling from one country to another, exposing her to differing cultural milieu,

experimenting with genres, subverting oppression and fragmenting the conception of the self. By questioning a single anchorage and refusing to accept homogeneity, she has challenged the contours of diasporic and feministic writings. Namjoshi resists conventional definitions and attempts at leveling the difference or homogenization. The fluid self of the poet playfully challenges history, fairytales and myths in order to put forth questions on gender and sexuality. The poems speak of the ways in which gender is explored, performed, reproduced, communicated and validated within the diasporic imaginary which allows for the exploration of alternate sexualities. Her writings are marked by the elements of explicit sexuality evident in them. Her status as a queer diasporic poet, writing from the west, questioning the essentialist nature of gender/sexual roles of women in India is pertinently problematized through the subversive narrative techniques and retelling of already familiar fairy tales and myths. Her lesbian/ alternate sexual identity makes her stand distinctly different from other poets included in the study.

Imtiaz Dharker explores the social and historical context of the modern day slavery of women through her poems. In doing this, she has used her views of the female body and sexuality in the perspective of multiple departures and arrivals. In the process, she has also rechristened the veiled life of Muslim diaspora in literature. She has carefully assorted religious symbols like Purdah, veil, Satan, hijab and so on to speak of the numerous ways through which women are being subjugated. She has repeatedly engaged the image of the body to speak about

barriers of all kinds: geographical, religious, racial, social and above all emotional and psychological. All the while Dharker expresses the agonies of migrant women, her poetry also manifests the unflinching desire to move beyond such oppressions. She does this by manifesting a position that challenges absolutist and essentialist constructs of power structures that oppress women. She exposes the injustice and violence that are involved in the formation of such hegemonic structures maintained through the collusion of patriarchy and religion. For Dharker, diaspora is a way to freedom and a site to practice her resistance to patriarchy and religious fundamentalism. Her poetry stands out as a caustic criticism of the terrifying excesses of both religion and patriarchy.

One of the significant findings of the study is that the South Asian diasporic poets have drawn their poetic impetus from the unrest, tumult, pain and conflicts of diasporic experience. Though the intensity of alienation, Othering and racial discrimination experienced by these poets differ due to the privileged positions they occupy in the host countries, their writings showcase the inner turmoil that erupts from the predicament of being caught up in a diaspora. Their privileged positions testify that diaspora is a choice rather than a destiny for them whereas it is the opposite in the case of most of the people. Their positions ensure that their poetic voice will be heard while the complaints of the diaspora will remain unheeded. Most of their poems often deal with human rights violations, wars, nostalgia, troubling memories and resistance either set in the real world or in

a fantasyland. These poets find a way to work with the harsh and painful materials of their daily lives through their writings.

The manifold cultural experiences of diasporic women poets spring from “split-self” mostly due to the multiple points of view: geographical as well as gender/ sexual perspective. These poets deserve to be analyzed for their intrinsic cultural ambiguities. The displaced woman poets battling with fragmented identities and allegiances use the diasporic space as a site of self-actualization, a space for overt expression of one’s subjectivity. They represent a wide range of exclusively female experiences: coloured third world woman, coloured lesbian, coloured, religion-enslaved woman. Through varying modes of representation, they make use of their privilege to criticize the inhuman ways of the world. The poets under study explore the plight of women, the misery of racial and sexual minorities, the predicament of the outcasts, the suffering of the indentured, gender stereotyping, religious fundamentalism and terror as material for their poetic composition. The plurality of meanings the poetic texts produced stand as an emblem of the fluid and contingent nature of the identities of these poets discovered in the privileged location of the diaspora. As a matter of fact, the refusal to assign single definitive or determinate meanings to their texts is one thing that Banerji, Alexander, Namjoshi and Dharker share as poets. They reject the practice of fixing stable and rigid meanings to the texts and thus restricting the signifying process of meaning construction.

Bannerji, Alexander, Namjoshi and Dharker have contributed to the study of diaspora by theorizing gender and sexuality in diasporic context. As writers working as academics, they have incorporated different aspects of their composite identities into their writings. Hailing from the same subcontinent makes their writings unique in certain ways whereas the individual take on diaspora, gender and sexuality make them vibrantly different as well as distinctively insightful. The theoretical orientation provided by their profession and their personal experiences as coloured and gendered diaspora are mutually complementary. Their poetry bears testimony to the fact that professional experiences always enrich creative writing and vice versa.

The diasporic women writers cultivate and explore a few strategies to unravel the intricacies of their shifting positions in the diasporic space. One of the strategies is to find alliances in other writers who also cross the barriers of nationality, race, gender, sexuality, religion, and so on. As a converging point, the writers under consideration share a situation of marginality caused by displacement and dislocation. However, a more noticeable trait is their ability to transform themselves into dissenting voices which appropriate the freedom of expression offered by the cultural space of the host nation to critique both the home and host cultures. What Himani Banerji, Meena Alexander, Suniti Namjoshi and Imtiaz Dharker offer in common may be termed “precarious affiliations,” something that is close to Spivak's concept of “strategic essentialism.” But they have aesthetically modified it through the characteristic

ambivalence that these poets introduce in their poetic art. Alliances in this case are precarious in the sense that they are continuously made and broken. For instance, in her poems Bannerji underlines the subversive potential inherent in women and exhorts her to voice her anger and protest towards all hegemonic structures. By representing the voice of both men and women in diaspora, she transcends gender roles and stereotypes that every Indian woman has to encounter. The diasporic space gives Alexander a voice to expose and discuss the sexual assaults she had to experience as a child in India. She also defiantly speaks against the violence inflicted by religious fundamentalists in Godhra. For Namjoshi, the diaspora is a space of self evolution where she has inculcated her ability and sensibility to question the essentialist ways of practicing gender and sexual roles in India. The diaspora offers her a space to life of her sexual choice, where she lives as she is- a diasporic lesbian of colour. Dharker also uses her shrill voice to aggressively interrogate the horrors imposed by religion and culture on individual expressions of gender and sexuality. Thus, for all the poets, the diaspora is a space of privileges, amidst all its limitations and imposing power structures functioning covertly within. It is also to be noted that the poets included in the study represent a class of educated, privileged and qualified professionals and academicians. Notwithstanding their diasporic identities, they stand out as a class apart. Their writings do not necessarily voice the concerns and anxieties of those people who have to go and live elsewhere as a means of

survival. That is, their poetry need not reflect the experiences of the people for whom diaspora is a way to make a better living, a destiny of domesticity.

However, the study of diasporic women poets is certainly important in terms of their reflections on the perception of race/ nation *vis-à-vis* gender and sexuality. Any discussion of diasporic identity need be addressed for a more nuanced and complex assessment in the context of gender/ sexuality in the contemporary world. In spite of the difference of class represented by the poets selected for study, it is imperative that the multiple issues are at least voiced out. For example, the study of the poems of Suniti Namjoshi – a writer with a complex position as an Indian lesbian living in the west – further enriches the quality of diasporic studies. She makes possible an intersectionality of gender and diaspora, and brings sexuality and queer studies into the domain of postcolonial feminism and diasporic studies. In other words, dislocated women writers should not be overlooked only as a way to put white feminists and postcolonialists in communication, but they need be studied and evaluated for the sake of their art and politics.

While referring to the women writers from the Indian subcontinent, one always needs to remember that traditionally women are expected to be the bearers of cultural values in these places. The women writers who expose personal matters like body, desire and sexuality or who make a public debate of their femininity are harshly judged and ill-treated. Incidentally, this could be the reason why many of the writings by the select female poets under the study were

not published in India for many years. In India, more than in any other Third-World countries, women are forced to be the preservers of traditional values that end up conflating with those of nationalism and anti-colonialism in order to highlight the moral difference with the former colonizers and with the Western world. Many scholars also concur that it is desirable for Third-World countries to achieve modernization and innovation through a path which is different from that leading to neo-colonization and hyper-globalization. This can never be done if gender/sexuality as well as other markers of difference or marginality is included in the process of innovation. In other words, their views on alternate and counter-hegemonic practices or choices of gender/ sexuality are of great significance for the formation of the new multi- layered and multivalent identities.

The select diasporic women poets have discursively constructed a complex diasporic identity conditioned by the experiences of gender and sexuality in addition to the common experiences related to race and nation which every diaspora, irrespective of gender, encounters. Their personae articulate their resentment and anger towards the interlocking structures of patriarchal and religious hegemony. Their speakers are disenchanted with their domesticity and step into the public sphere, transforming their life into an endless saga of struggle and resistance. These poets have created a space marked by dissent and resistance, fighting against oppressions pervasive in society and thereby inspiring generations of women to be vocal about the predicament they are in.

Converging their revolting voices with the artful pronouncement in poetry, these women poets have innovatively expressed their ideology without limiting their poetry to nostalgic retrospections of home.