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‘DISPLACEMENT’ AND ITS AFTERMATH IN DIASPORA: A STUDY ON MIRA NAIR’S FILMS *MISSISSIPPI MASALA* AND *THE NAMESAKE*

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Abstract

Diaspora, one of the major disciplines in post-colonial studies, extensively deals with migration, displacement and its consequences. The idea of displacement tells that it may occur in two ways voluntary and involuntary. While involuntary (forced) displacement happens due to the natural calamities, political, social, religious turmoil and what not, voluntary displacement, more over psychologically, takes place due to mainly aspiration for better life, globalization and its offshoots. Though the displacement helped to have developments in all fields to the diasporic people as well as the people in homeland, it creates immeasurable problems physically and psychologically such as assaults from host community, identity crises, cross-cultural conflict, alienation, home and host issues, trauma of uprooting and re-rooting, gender problems etc. in diasporic people. The study tries to find out the major issues in the hostland after displacement and how do diasporic people respond to it. Taking examples for voluntary and involuntary displacement from Indian Diasporic director Mira Nair's movies *The namesake* (2006) and *Mississippi Masala* (1991), the study aims to understand the consequences of displacement and psychological issues of the diaspora. Some of the theoretical concepts like identity, home, alienation will be applying to analyse their lives in hostland and bring broad understanding of the migrants.

Keywords: Diaspora; Mira Nair's Films; Mississippi Masala; The Namesake.

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1. Introduction

Bringing positive and negative influences in the life of human being, displacement and dislocation made unprecedented changes in the historical documentation. The globalization and capitalism ensued in the extensive migration which brought economic and social developments

in the nook and corners of the world. But, on other hand, physical as well as cultural dislocation of the 'home' and relocation of the same in the 'host' made sometimes unfavorable effect. In broader sense, it caused to the uncertainty of identity and the creation of 'third space'. The identity discourse in the postcolonial studies is much debatable one and, in that context, theories of displacement too supported it much extend. Once the migrant displaces from home, the transformation in the very notion of identity is visibly operating. Apart from the identity issues, the displacement results in other diasporic matters also like longing and belonging, cultural conflict, here-ness and otherness, national feeling, boarder less notions, alienation et cetera which can be seen physically and psychologically in the displaced people. Based on this, the relevance of Indian American diasporic director cum producer Mira Nair's films *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *The Namesake* (2006) stands out separated and it highlights the problems of diasporic people.

Both movies delve into the major issues of displacement and how it affects in diasporic people and their identity. While *Mississippi Masala* discusses the 'involuntary' or forced displacement from Uganda due to the political turbulence, *The Namesake* issues 'voluntary' displacement for the standard of living. How and why does portray this dilemma in the movies and how does this diasporic people become disposed to the problems are major objective of this study. The study uses the theories like identity, home, cultural conflict and alienation to describe the aftermath of displacement in diaspora.

What is displacement and how it is related to diaspora studies? As displacement is the direct opposite of place, Cambridge dictionary defines 'the situation in which people are forced to leave the place where they normally live' ("displacement"). Though the force in the earlier time was natural or political, the present day, with the advent of modernity and globalization, witnesses the psychological force to have growth in life. While interpreting displacement, Sociological guide corroborates with this idea that 'people get uprooted from their traditional moorings due to various reasons' and its mode may change as per the time and situation. According to Angelika Bammer displacement is "the separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture" (Bammer, xi). In explaining Bammer's definition, Long Le construing it in the article *Theorizing and Conceptualizing Displacement in the Vietnamese Context* where he described it in two broad categories. In the first category, he puts those emigrants who are physically dislocated either "voluntary" or who are "forced"; that is not due to colonizing imposition of a foreign culture" per se, but rather by the country's own internal socioeconomic and political factors. The second is those who are physically dislocated by the "colonizing imposition of a foreign culture," which results in either their displacement from their native land/culture or their displacement within their native land/culture (Le, 2).

The first category of displacement is visibly clear in two movies though the elements of second category are indirectly engaging. Both movies represent voluntary and involuntary migration respectively, but displacement from or within the culture and native land can also be seen there. The movie *The Namesake* beautifully depicts voluntary migration of Ashok Ganguly, an aspiring engineer and his wife Ashima, a trained singer from Calcutta to US and their problems in host countries, and cultural conflicts in between them and their offspring. The life of Jammu Bhai and

his family are uprooted from Uganda due to Idi Amin's Law of ethnic cleansing in 1972 and transplantation in England and the USA are portrayed as forced displacement in the movie *Mississippi Masala*.

Based on experience and dependence in the degree of estrangement, notion of displacement may vary according to Smadar Lavie and Swedenburg who point out that displacement "is not experienced in precisely the same way across time and space, and does not unfold in a uniform fashion" (Lavie, 4) and in their opinion, "there is a range of positionings of Others in relation to the forces of domination and vis-à-vis other Others" (*Ibid.* 4). The feeling of displacement is to be decided in relation to the dominant one culturally and physically and its perceptions may be differentiated as per the experience. Apart from lingering on its physical dislocation, the post-colonial version of displacement focuses on its cultural dimensions as Bammer mentioned "how one's ancestral culture or the culture of the birthplace has been dislocated, transformed, rejected, or replaced by a new one, one of "cross-connections, not roots" (Bammer, xv) while he or she gets displaced from own land. It can be construed that displacement paves the way to have changes in the way of life and culture per se.

Displacement in twenty first century is identified in four forms: physical/spatial displacement, cultural displacement, psychological/affective displacement, and intellectual displacement of the immigrant, the refugee, the exile, the expatriate (Anderson, 11), and all of these elements can be attributed to the characters of the selected films. In relating the theory of 'place' and 'displacement' to diaspora, it is asserted that migration is the root cause of diaspora and it is directly connected to those theories. Diaspora theorists like William Safran, Robin Cohen, Avtar Brah keep the opinion that migration, diaspora and displacement are closely related constructions because they signal a sense of dislocation, exile, translation and transfiguration. The ensued problems of 'displacement' can be dragged out from the lights of experience of these movies and could be possible to explain in this paper under the title of home and homeland, identity issues, cultural conflict and alienation.

2. Home and Homeland

While introducing diaspora, theorists and writers like Avtar Brah, Benedict Anderson and Salman Rushdie asserted that diasporic people keep nostalgic feeling, and to describe it in a proper sense, they coined this feeling like 'homing desire' and 'imaginary homeland' et cetera. Describing the narrative production of 'Home', Dorinne Kondo paraphrased Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1987) in the book *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity* "Home" as "that which one cannot not want. It stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community; more problematically, it can elicit a nostalgia for a past golden age that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference" (Kondo, 97). Home for migrants is ever nostalgic and identity marker. Though migrants are displaced or dislocated from 'home' physically, they feel imaginary and mythical homeland in 'host' countries. Karen Leonard (1999) opined that diasporic people create identity and home in host countries with 'linking their evocations of familiar landscapes and resemblances to their "old homes"'. From the memories and imaginations, they ascribe meaning to places as philosopher Martin Heidegger said that people hold a "lived relationship with places and assign meanings to them" (Heidegger, 1993). Characters from both movies have longing for

home and homeland and they feel sense of belonging through imagination and real experience as it theorized here. It is very visibly portrayed through the persona of Ashima (*The Namesake*) and Jay Bhai (*Mississippi Masala*) respectively.

Apart from delineating the cross-cultural conflict and multicultural problems, the movie *The Namesake* sumptuously discusses the home feelings of the characters. Ashima, protagonist in the movie, sticks on her Indian traditional and ancestral culture after she moved from Calcutta to the USA succeeding her marriage. Following her familiar home culture completely, she becomes worried for her offspring who absorbed host culture and push them to be with Indianess due to her sense of home, homeland and belonging. Her husband Ashok, aspiring engineer in America, also tightly holds the Indian culture. Their American born child was named Gogol due to the home feeling of Ashok by remembering the narrow escape from the train accident when he was in India and he was found not died as he caught in his favorite novel '*The Overcoat*' by Nikolai Gogol. Ashima decides to live six months in India and six months in America respectively after the death of her husband Ashok later shows her feeling of home and belonging in both places. In the last part of the movie, the assimilated son Gogol got impressed with Indian culture and tradition though he mocked first his name itself and Indian way of life. His inner subjectivity towards home and homeland draws him to follow his ancestor's culture, custom, tradition and religion even though he is part of the second generation.

Being the movie *Mississippi Masala* is real exemplary for the involuntary or forced displacement, it extensively rises the issue of place and displace. Third president of Uganda, Idi Amin's, law of ethnic cleansing in 1972 forced the Indians in Uganda to displace from there. The central character of the movie Jay Bhai protested and asked "why should I go? Uganda is my home" (Nair, *Mississippi Masala*). Having uncomfortable life in Uganda and England as well, he moved to the USA later on. While he is in America, he always feels worried by thinking of his home and homeland. By seeing his inner urging for going back and sobbing for that his beloved wife Kinnu says "You are going to be mad" (Ibid) because of the deep thinking on the homeland. While Jay bhai and his wife imagining on Ugandan homeland, their beloved daughter Mina fantasies on Mississippi as she is virtually assimilated. She feels home in Mississippi and longing for that, and it is obvious from her voice 'I am crazy about this place and I cannot leave Mississippi' (Ibid). Jammubhai, the other major character in the movie, expressed his home feeling in the marriage ceremony of his son Anil and said, "though we are in the US, we shouldn't forget Indian ways and it should be followed" (Ibid). So, both movies try to say that diasporic people have affiliation to their homeland and keep it up through pursuing and exhorting others to be with it though they are displaced from there.

3. Identity Crises

Robin Cohen, Sura P Rath and Homi.K.Bhaba pointed out that diasporic people are in 'Third world' and locating their identities are little problematic and uncertain. Being they are in 'in-betweenness' and in the state of hybridity, defining themselves in a specific culture is questionable. Though they are constructing identity in the third world, it is being hyphenated by the dominant power, culture and tradition. When diasporic people try to form their identity in 'third space', somewhere they become confused and looking both (host and home) from its borders not entering inside as Jan Muhammad rightly pointed out 'specular border intellectual'.

As crisis of identity is one of the hot debatable topics in post-colonial studies, these both diasporic movies also demonstrate the same very much interestingly.

Almost all characters of the movie *The Namesake* are undergone to identity crisis. Not only Gogol but also his parents, sister Sonia, wife Maushumi are becoming subject to it. Crisis apparently comes out in the movie with the name of Gogol, which is the springboard of all of his problems. He was named Gogol impromptu by father with the recollection of friendless, suicidal, Russian author Nikolai Gogol. With this name, he feels humiliated and gets bullied in the school, pub and wherever he goes. Though he conveniently changes into Nick to have American identity, it did not work as he expect and could locate his identity nowhere. The other concern over this name is that as it doesn't belong to either American or Indian name, it comes in the third position in category of naming child. Nevertheless, Ashima and Ashok consider both cultures ('specular border intellectual' in one sense), they also feel separated and couldn't reconstruct as well as locate identity though they try to fix it in India.

Mississippi Masala picturises the condition of Uganda in 1972 where Indians were expelled and they became transnational people who could not station their identity elsewhere. Indo-Ugandan Jay Bhai, the protagonist, understands that he is being thrown out from there and could no longer relocate his identity in Uganda. He was displaced from there to England and he moved to Mississippi, America. From the situation of living condition of America, he feels crisis in his identity. Though he is an Indo-Ugandan origin and having Indian friends in America, he feels isolated there. People around him started to disturb and backbite him indirectly and his family, he says his wife "we are unwanted here", where he could not locate his identity or it did not satisfy him. Tensions and discussions about India and Africa between Mina and her lover Demetrius' family while she attends the birth day party of his grandpa hints also the problems of identity crises of Blacks and Indians in American context. The movies brilliantly point out that though the diasporic people construct and reconstruct their identity in 'third space', it is being subordinated by the hegemonic one and still they live in identity crisis.

4. Cultural Conflict

Discussions on culture plays crucial and critical role in all post-colonial struggles and studies, and, as a new paradigm in the literary field, diasporic writings and its celluloid representations are supporting it in full strength. The deliberations on continuous displacement and mind-set changes from generation to generation are hot discussable topics of diaspora which mainly concentrates on the cultural perpetuations, and its conflicts between generations in one sense. Culture is the markers and defining point of identity as cultural theorist Stuart Hall said, "cultural identities are the points of identification" (Hall, 227) and it works in diasporic people profusely because they are not physically attached with original or home culture. After the displacement of people from home and homeland whether it is in voluntary or involuntary, a few only stick on their culture completely but others try to assimilate in one way or the other.

Both movies are developed by describing the cross-cultural and multi-cultural issues which helps the audience to understand the cultural conflict between generations. The movie *The Namesake* itself thematised internal and external conflict between first generation and second generation of diasporic people. It discusses the issues of traditional culture versus American culture through its

followers. While Ashima and Ashok supports the Indian culture in America, Gogol and Sonia sticks on American way of life, and they mock their ancestor's culture too. Ashima got scared of American uncontrolled way of life style and exhorts cautiously her children to pursue Indian culture. But the American born Indian child could not cope up with exotic life style and started denying it and quarrelling with its followers. The admirably depicted *Mississippi Masala* also brings cultural conflict through the characters. As Jay Bhai and Kinnu are the third generation of Indian family, they are liberal, and do not obviously following Indian culture as Ashima tries to practice in the other one. But Mina, who is in the fourth generation shows contradictory to Indian culture and way of life during the marriage ceremony of Anil. While everybody is busy with practises of Indian culture, she goes to the pub and having fun there. Despite Jammu bhai's advice to follow Indianness during the marriage function, she is questioning the Indian culture through her deeds in one sense. Disobeying family and going out of home arrogantly, Mina's character points out that there is inner cultural conflict between generations. Somewhere in the last part of the movie, Kinnu and Jay Bhai made indirect quarrel due to the inner cultural conflict between them as he wants to go back original land while she needs to be there only. So, these diasporic movies prove that displacement may ensue in the cultural strife between generations.

5. Alienation

Alienation is the ultimate results of displacement and it may cause feeling that one way or another as they are out of the original and ancestral place. The displacement itself is the alienation or separation from one's native country which gives him a desirable identity to a person. But in diaspora, people get mixed up and hyphenated that led them to be alienated and excluded from mainstream society. Being the diasporic people are estranged from familiar places and community they are in 'in between-ness' and living in others place. Alienation is somewhat living in other's domain as Julia M Wright pointed out that "Alienation refers to living in a system established by somebody else and is being made isolated from the communities, be it the native and the host country (Wright, 2004). The same described alienation can be seen in the two movies as it depicts the consequences of displacement too.

Ashima, diasporic persona who is a strict follower of traditional culture, was pictured as alienated one in the movie *The Namesake*. When she holds tightly the ancestral ways, she was mocked by the society and even by her children. Struggling with the dominated culture by not assimilating to it make her worried as this alienation is a psychological process too. Keeping and supporting Ashima, Ashok also feels alienated and becomes a person who was unnoticed by others. The other one Gogol and Maushumi also are subjected to feel mentally that they are not worthy in dominated culture and situations and become alienated in displaced conditions. *The Mississippi Masala* depicts the alienated circumstances of Jay bhai and his family. Being he is not an African in Uganda, he could not assimilate with them and felt that he was alienated. When he was forcefully thrown out or displaced from Uganda, he feels as fuelling to the fire due to his severe alienated conditions. The American life is also in very much trouble for Jay Bhai because he does not have real friends there and feeling of alienation and separation in between them though he lives with some Indians. Even though these characters are voluntarily or involuntarily displaced from their original home land, they could not cope up with others or they are not received by the dominant one being they are newcomers. So, they are meted out to be alienated in diasporic land.

6. Conclusion

The displacement paves the way to clashes between tradition and modernity and psychological issues of the migrants as it elaborately discussed in both movies through the character of Ashima, Gogol and Jay Bhai and Mina respectively. It seems both movies' director Mira Nair and screen play writer Sooni Taraporevala are trying to bring out the problems of diasporic people in the public after people's displacement from original homeland. Though displacement led to the economic benefits in one sense, it creates immense problems in these people psychologically and physically like assaults of host people, alienation, fear of assimilation and acculturation, nostalgia, feeling of belonging, cross-cultural and multi-cultural issues, identity problems and what not. In general, while relocating in the host country after dislocation, most people are tended to be assimilated in one way or other though they are susceptible to different issues. But, still some are keeping their touch with own nation through physically or imaginarily irrespective of border notions.

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