

Search For Diasporic Identity In The Novels Of Salman Rushdie

*Dr. B. C. Dash¹, Kironmoy Chetia²,

¹Associate Professor Department of English Assam University, Diphu Campus

²Assistant Professor Department of English C.K.B.Commerce College, Jorhat Assam.

Corresponding Author: *Dr. B. C. Dash¹

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I. INTRODUCAION

Quest for identity and home constitutes a significant factor in diasporic discourse in so far as it involves the movement of people across national boundaries resulting in cultural confrontation and identity crisis. Diasporic identity is a complex but dynamic concept which in the recent years has become a subject of constant debate in the aftermath of globalization and postcolonial migration. The moment one becomes an expatriate, he/she needs to define himself/herself in the alien environment that compels him to search for his/her identity. In this attempt for self definition and quest for identity, one may either search for identity in the host country with a desire for negotiation/assimilation thereby breaking all the relationships with the native country, or may see the people around him/her as 'the other'. While oscillating between cultural assimilation and 'cultural alienation', the diasporic writer/person tries to adjust and in turn experiences a confusion of life and living, loss of values, fellow feeling and trust and surrenders to the new environment by adopting the strategy of 'excessive belonging'. Traditionally viewed, identity, location and citizenship are considered to be static and fixed. But in the present diasporic context, it is not a fixed essence; it is rather articulated from a particular space and time. In other words, given the postcolonial and postmodern condition, identity and home are subjected to a constant process of 'becoming' rather than remaining as 'being'. At the same time, identity is based on transformation in different situations and under changing circumstances. Stuart Hall(1993) rightly states, 'Identity becomes a 'moveable feast'; formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in postmodern societies'.(Hall,120)

In this regard, hybridity constitutes an important concept in post-colonial discourse because it is celebrated as a kind of superior cultural representation owing to the advantage of in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the resulting ability to negotiate the difference. In Bhabha's discussion of cultural hybridity, he has developed it from literary and cultural theory to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism and inequity. According to him, hybridity 'is the 'third place' which enables other positions to emerge. This third place displaces the histories that constitute it' (Bhabha *Third Space* 211). For Bhabha, hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority undertakes to translate the identity of the colonised (the *other*) within a singular universal framework, but then fails producing something familiar but new. He contends that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and the colonised while challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity. In this way, hybridity is positioned as an antidote to essentialism. In postcolonial discourse, the notion that any culture or identity is pure or essential is disputable. Bhabha himself is aware of the dangers of fixity and fetishism of identities within binary colonial thinking and argues that "all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (Bhabha *Third Space* 211).

In diasporic discourse, identity and home are inseparable and home involves spatial politics, physical and cultural displacement and also the politics of both exclusion and inclusion. At the same time, home is also associated with emotions, feelings, sentiments and intimacy which are strongly tied to the roots of the diasporic persons. The concept of 'home' is no longer restricted to fixed geographical boundary and space, even though the term 'root' refers to an original homeland from which people are dispersed and to which people aspire to return. Significantly, the etymological meaning of the word 'diaspora' points to dispersal of seeds and also Jews from their homeland. In the modern and postmodern context, where there is international migration, the notion of 'home' is a key factor associated with 'original home'. The dispersed diaspora retains a collective vision or a shared myth about their original homeland which embodies its physical location, history and achievement. At the same time, they are haunted by a constant fear that they will not be fully accepted by their host society and that their culture will not be accepted in the host land.

The consideration of the ancestral homeland as an ideal archetype of 'home' keeps alive their hopes of eventual return as and when conditions are conducive and appropriate. Their belief in the collective commitment

of restoring their homeland makes them long for their homeland in their writings in one way or another. And while doing so, their authentic communal consciousness gives birth to a temporal solidarity based on their mutual relationship which is reminiscent of what Homi K. Bhabha called 'shared culture' (1994). The creation of a minority community marks an important feature of the diasporic consciousness in the alien land. This is all the more true in case of the Indian diasporic writers and people for whom a minority 'little India' is created in the foreign land. While searching for identity as well as trying to adjust themselves in the adopted culture, the Indian diasporas oscillate between original culture and the culture of the land of adoption and obviously then their diasporic consciousness negotiates with diversity, hybridity and difference.

The diaspora faces three types of crisis – crisis of home, identity and culture. He/She finds himself to be an altogether different person in the new land and is constantly haunted by a sense of loss – loss of his/her home, identity and original culture which reared him/her so far when he was in his homeland. He/She starts realizing that he/she is not given the due position in the foreign land, and his/her identity in the original land of location also gets damaged as he/she is delocated physically in his/her search for economic and political security, and in the process of relocation, a new identity is formed and a new space is secured. At this point, he faces the crisis of identity and more predominantly, the cultural dilemma as to which culture he should take. The diaspora in quest of identity goes into a state of confusion, being unable to position himself/herself in a particular culture, being unable to position himself/herself in a particular culture, being surrounded by different cultures. Any discourse on diaspora therefore inevitably starts with crisis of identity caused by dislocation of culture. A diaspora then traverses the complex process of location, dislocation and relocation, and in his/her search for identity and secured home, a diaspora is metamorphosed into an exile and finally after a series of suffering in the purgatory of the host land, he/ she becomes a diaspora 'reborn'.

The feeling of being in exile arises in the mind of diasporic people/writers, out of alienation and a sense of dislocation. The phenomena of exile, diaspora and migration are further associated with trauma, culture and longing for the lost Paradise. In the event of a large scale displacement and dispersal of population across the world following decolonization and globalization, immigration has become, of late, a self-imposed exile pursued by the social and economic considerations. In the contemporary world of transcultural networks, flow of the people is no longer an exile in the real sense of the term. Identities and cultures get transformed and delocalized across space and time; yet the immigrants are haunted by the memories of the past places and times. This is all the more true in case of the Indian diaspora as well where the idea of return is not physical, but more predominantly a cultural phenomenon. Ingredients concerning rootedness, home, ethnic identity, language, food, religion, costumes and rituals link them with the home country. Diasporic writers like Stephen Gill, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaram, Jhumpa Lahiri and M.G. Vassanji have developed their diasporic consciousness in their works by problematizing these points. The real experiences in the life of V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie add considerable amount of fidelity and genuine diasporical feeling.

Salman Rushdie experienced the feeling of banishment throughout his life. His root in a country greatly influenced by British rule and his migration to England have helped develop to a double perspective/ consciousness which gave him "stereoscopic vision" (*Imaginary Homelands*, 1991). Rushdie portrays the plight of estrangement and alienation of the migrants who do not have any future. They have the freedom of wandering to wherever they wish to, but should not have any emotional attachment to these places. Rushdie himself experienced the feeling of banishment because he grew up in a country greatly influenced by British rule. He also attended British schools and migrated to England. He admits that postcolonial Indian writers who have migrated away from India "are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective : because they, we, are at the one and same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of "whole sight." (I H, 19) Rushdie states, "When the Indian who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." (I.H., 11) The multiple backgrounds and experiences, make them feel at home nowhere, ultimately creating a sense of isolation. The cultural displacement of the diaspora creates a double identity for them which are at the same time singular, plural and partial. In 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie writes : "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other time we fall between two stools. But however, ambiguous and shifting this ground may be it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy." (I.H., 15)

The present paper is an attempt to trace the diasporic identity of characters presented by Salman Rushdie in his novels.

In *Grimus* (1975), Rushdie narrates the story of an immortal American Indian in quest of his identity. The first part of the novel is about Flapping Eagle, who embarks on Calf Island in the hope of establishing his identity in this land ruled by Grimus. He is in search of Bird-Dog his sister, who has vanished after giving him the elixir of life. In the second part of the book, with Virgil Jones as his guide, Flapping eagle and Virgil Jones climb Calf

Mountain, overcoming numerous impediments on their journey. In the final part, Flapping Eagle understands the reason behind the existence of Calf Island and gradually discovers himself. The novel presents Rushdie's notions of mysterious parentage, displacement and exile, unstable personal and national identity, the colonial legacy and his attitude towards cultural hybridity.

Transcultural identities are described by Rushdie as being at once plural and partial, the identities of both Grimus and Flapping Eagle are characterized by their hybridity. To start with, Grimus is described as a semi-semitic Middle European, a description which is a perfect illustration both of partiality and of duality. As for Flapping Eagle, he is an Amerindian, a term which sets him between two cultures. Even though his choosing of his name as Flapping Eagle at the age of twenty-one from his earlier name of Joe-Sue conveys a measure of coherence, but it is at the surface level only :

He was the leopard who chanced his spots, he was the worm that turned. He was the shifting sands and the ebbing tide. He was moody as the sky, circular as the seasons, nameless as glass. He was chameleon, changeling, all things to all men and nothing to any man. He had become his enemies and eaten his friends. He was all of them and none of them. (G 31)

Flapping Eagle is but an empty man, 'a Shell without a Form' (G 192), an empty envelope that can host many different identities. That specific property enables him to function as a link between the different worlds within the fiction.

In *Midnight's Children* (1981), Rushdie has made Saleem Sinai an archetype, the microcosm of all diasporic generations who were given 'venomous treatment' in the newly inhabited territories. Saleem's story is a representation of plural identities of India which resulted from the feeling of being in exile and consequently there is a fragmented search for identity through memory. Through him, the novelist tries to restore a link between the migrants and their original homeland through narration and description and through their desire for 'home' with an effort to establish their identity. They constantly negotiate their identities within the borders of their adopted home as well as across borders with their homeland.

Saleem Sinai wanders among three countries i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh with fluid identity. Along with Saleem, all the other *Midnight's Children* - Shiva, Padma, Parvati face identity crisis, geographical as well as cultural dislocation. In his first migrated country Saleem becomes a dog; a member of the Cutia Unit. Consequently, his body has gone fully numb, the only sense active being his sense of smell, "anaesthetized against feeling as well as memories" (MC, 353). His fellow soldiers start calling him 'Buddha' because there hung around him an air of great antiquity" (MC, 349), though he is twenty four year old at that juncture. Saleem tries to establish his identity through his memory by linking his self to the national history.

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively.(MC, 278)

He points to the inevitable gaps and errors in memory, fills them with his imagination and shapes his history in a manner that provides him with an identity, drawing the reader's attention to the necessity of re-imagining history, in order to have a concept of one's own past:

Does one error invalidate the entire fabric? Am I so far gone, in my desperate need for meaning, that I'm prepared to distort everything to re-write the whole history of my times purely in order to place myself in a central role? Today, in my confusion, I can't judge. I'll have to leave it to others. (MC,230)

Saleem's view of history is fraught with uncertainties and doubts. Throughout the novel, he questions official history and its being representative of identity of people or a culture.

In Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), we find the theme of identity crisis resulting from leaving one's home and a country as well. From his childhood, Omar Khayyam faces identity crisis because his parenthood is unknown. His complicated parenthood is because of his bringing up by his mother and her sisters, who bears the pains of pregnancy together, in such a way that he is unable to distinguish his real mother and starts considering all of them to be his mothers. Moreover, the features of these mothers are so confusing that he is unable to find out the eldest and the youngest amongst them. He describes them in the following way,

In the chaos of their regeneration the wrong heads ended up on wrong bodies; they become psychological centaurs, fish-women, hybrids; and of course this confused separation of personalities carried with it the implication that they were not discrete, because they could only be comprehended if you took them as a whole."(Shame, 40.)

Omar Khayyam leaves his mothers' house, which is demarked from the rest of the world and where different rules apply, for which he is despised and at the end killed by his mothers. But he is not fit for living in the other world because his mothers forbid him to feel the shame which makes him culturally different. In addition to it, he is illegitimate and his mothers are not respectable women. He is not accepted well by the new world. At the very first time he appears outside the house he is humiliated through a "necklace of shoes". During the remaining part of his life he receives bad reputation of a shameless person and people treat him as if there

was something wrong with him. His misadventure becomes a symbol of the life of an emigrant torn apart between two worlds neither of them being his home. As such the part of the novel which describes Omar's birth, early years and his departure from home to establish a new identity is called Escapes from the Mother Country. On the other hand, Sufia Zinobia's double nature in *Shame*, is a parallel to situations. Asian immigrants in England and she, too, is a product of something typical for the Indian (or Muslim) culture. She serves as a metaphor helping Rushdie to explain the western reader something which would otherwise be inexplicable. The various transformations of identities, whether they turn into something else, dramatically change their personality, appearance and their name, or they lose the notion of their selves can be understood as a metaphor for the search of identity of the post-colonial world. It is also a mirror of the shocking and dramatic experience with emigration which has influenced Rushdie as well as the other Asian immigrants. It can also express many other things. For example the effect of humiliation of a helpless person is described in the character Sufia Zinobia, which can allude to the situation of the emigrants again, because they frequently face humiliation, but it can also be understood more generally as simply describing the effect of violence on its innocent victims.

In spite of the tragedies and miseries that are being faced by the diaspora, the most commendable outcome of this wandering is that, the existing boundaries between the countries are demolished. Their transnational movements give them a hybrid and fluid identity. They never feel comfortable in their newly occupied home/country and create imaginary homelands. They live, "in between two geographical cultural locations, which is often perilous and marginalizing," and these "in between places provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood singular or communal—that initiates new signs of identity" (Bhabha, 17). This can be very well traced in the characters of Flapping Eagle, Saleem, Omar Khayyam and Sufia Zinobia as presented by Salman Rushdie in his novels *Grimus*, *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. Their identity and home are subjected to a constant process of 'becoming' rather than remaining as 'being'. They are always found to live in Bhabha's 'in-between space' and 'hybridity', thereby giving them an ambivalent position.

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