

An Elsewhere Space: Self and Society in Times of Transnationalism

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Abstract

The paper argues that migration is a defining feature of modernity by examining the after-effects of colonialism and imperialism in Asian, African and South-American countries. The exclusivist policies of imperial administrations resulted in the othering and alienating of native communities in all of these continents. It is important to retrieve the voices of the victims of traumatic experiences of imperial excesses, as demonstrated by authors such as John Breman and Yoshiaki Yoshimi. It is also important to distinguish between migration, diaspora and transnationalism from the perspective of the colonised people. The relations between nation, nation-state and migrant communities have been complicated by the economic and political aspects of globalisation. Through a discussion of some representative films and novels, it is argued that 'national' and 'transnational' are mutually constitutive. Transnational is a dynamic concept poised for major changes in the contemporary world as new power equations emerge between world powers.

Keywords: Migration, Modernity, Diaspora, Transnationalism, Globalisation, Cultural Mobility.

Migration has to be seen as one of the primary conditions of modernity. One may identify two major waves of modernity that began in Europe. Between 1492 and 1650, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies expanded their power into the continent of South America. This resulted in colonization of entire countries and cultures and assimilation of entire populations with the resultant erasure of indigenous languages and cultures. Beginning with

1650, another wave of conquest was initiated by countries such as England, France, the Netherlands and Germany shaping a new definition of modernity which was exclusivist in its claims.

The exclusion practised by European colonialism resulted in the creation of three excluded categories, namely, the Savage Other, the Black Other and the Oriental Other (Ommen 2005:2). Ommen says: “The habitat of the Savage Other was the New World, the Americas and Australia, that of the Black Other was Africa, the Dark Continent and the Oriental Other was located in Asia” (2). In the period of decolonization, the process of othering has been subjected to close historical examination. Inter-disciplinary subjects, such as Diaspora Studies, attempt to recover the forgotten histories of the excluded by documenting events and ideas that led to the erasure of cultural differences in colonial times. The uncivilized other which was constituted by the discourse of modernity permeates the epistemologies inherited by the post-colonial nations.

To illustrate how the new awareness about forgotten struggles is being brought back into the memory of the living present, one may recall an event of 2016. On 18th May 2016, the Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau offered a full apology before the House of Commons for the *Komagata Maru* incident. What was the incident which occasioned such an apology? *Komagata Maru* was the name of a ship in which 376 Indians (of which 340 were Sikhs), had set out from Hong Kong to immigrate to Canada. When they reached the Canadian coast, British Columbia refused to let the passengers disembark. We have to remember that, the British Empire extended to this part of the world as well, in the early part of the twentieth century. All attempts by Indians in Canada to offer help to them failed at the stiff opposition of the Canadian

government. The ship was forced to return to Calcutta where the British imperial police attempted to arrest the leaders. In the violence that followed, 19 passengers were killed and Gurdit Singh, the Hong Kong-based businessman, who had led the group, went into hiding. What makes the incident a dark chapter in racist violence against immigration is the fact that the British Columbian government used all its powers to deny the refugees the right to enter the country. Commenting on the apology tendered by the Canadian Prime Minister, Shiv Viswanathan comments that, “memory becomes critical here because it is the memory that keeps scars alive, and memory often waits like a phantom limb more real than the event itself” (Shiv Viswanathan 2016).

Large-scale displacements of populations initiated by the European imperial powers set in motion the economic and political consolidations of their power through coercive institutions which have survived into the postcolonial era. The boundaries shaped by these institutions were both internal and external; both across the land as well as language and culture. While it is easy to identify the presence of imperial vestiges in the postcolonial polity, their subliminal manifestations may remain intractable. With the introduction of English in India, a certain boundary came into existence in the very epistemological structures it set in motion. Amit Chaudhari has argued that at the core of modernity in India is the figure of the “inner exile”, a cosmopolitan who was not at-home in his own home (Chaudhuri 2009:96-99). The deep self-division that tormented writers like Tagore in India suggests that they were questioning monolithic modernity which was linear, rational and naturalist. They could see that the question of the secular-modern as interpreted by Europe was exclusivist and essentialist. The forced migration of people affected by famine, religious persecution and political oppression is a process that has continued unabated over many centuries, across continents.

The questions that agitate some of the largest democracies in the world now, whether it is the U.S with reference to Mexicans, Germany and France with reference to refugees from the Gulf nations or India with reference to religious minorities from the neighbouring countries, have a history that goes back to the beginning of European modernity in the seventeenth century. The issues have become more urgent because globalization has accelerated the scale and pace of the change rendering the nation-state a category that is besieged from within and without. The nation-state as an institution that embodies modernity at its most complex stage of evolution is increasingly at odds with the impulses let loose by migrations of the last two centuries. The fault lines that mark the individual identities of expatriates in the modern nations and the manner in which nation-states lose their legitimacy faced with conflicting demands of postcolonial nations have transformed the transnational and diasporic literature of the last few decades.

The figure of the 'inner exile' mentioned above was at odds with the hegemonic hold of nation and nation-state in matters of culture and human imagination in the twentieth century. Nationalism acquires theological connotations when it exhausts all the possibilities of identity for a human being in a globalized world. Stephen Greenblatt remarks in his book, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*:

We need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of identity and language, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy (2010:2).

Nationalism in its official version was complicit with colonialist epistemology. The global circulation of the population from the sixteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century exceeded 60 million people. The magnitude of displacement that accompanied the imperial conquest of the countries from the Third World has not been studied in detail. It is the movements of the Europeans to the rest of the world and the forced eviction of the black population to the New World that have received attention in critical studies of diaspora. But there have been large displacements within Asia, resulting in the traumatic experiences of millions of people. In his book, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*, John Breman shows how the Dutch colonial powers subjected the “coolies” hired to work on tobacco plantations in Sumatra to tortures of the worst kind. These “coolies” were indentured labourers brought from a number of Asian countries ranging from India to Cambodia, with the promise of high wages and comfortable living conditions. But they were reduced to slaves, once they landed on these plantations. Today, the descendants of these indentured labourers are still a part of many of these former colonies. Though their ancestors came to these countries in the early 19th century, they are a minority within many minorities, living on the margins as disenfranchised people. A large number of Korean women were used as sex slaves by the Japanese army during the Second World War (Yoshim 2000). There are forgotten histories within Asia which are yet to be recovered from oblivion.

The basic outlines of diasporic imaginary as defined by the West emphasize issues of homeland, memory, travel, nostalgia, divided identity and epiphanies of self-discovery and quest for relationships as can be seen in fictional representations from many postcolonial societies. The works of Hanif Kureishi, Jhumpa Lahiri, J.M.Coetzee, V.S.Naipaul, and Salman Rushdie

enact encounters of various kinds that point to the permanent state of disquiet that marks the exile's relation with his/her own self. However, the poignancy with which J.M. Coetzee and Tony Morrison capture the affective economy of the displaced on the margins of the first world has contributed to a widening of the very idea of diaspora with greater possibilities of empathy towards victims of imperial history. For instance, in the novel, *A Mercy* by Tony Morrison, we have an account of a Native American tracing the collective past of his people. Such collective voices have the power to expand our sense of history and see the Asian or Latin American experience as part of larger world history.

The contribution of the Humanities has been crucial in explicating the entanglements of nostalgia, memory and desire in the constitution of socio-political identities of migrant communities that constitute diasporas. Beyond the surface reality of political and social tensions are collective memories of shared sufferings and imagined anxieties about social marginalization and cultural isolation. The literature on migration and diaspora is a rich resource of contemporary culture which has implications beyond their immediate contexts for creating a new lexicon of contemporary cultural criticism. Beyond written words, it also involves the study of music, theatre, films, photographs, family histories, travel narratives, orality, story-telling traditions, letters, diaries and chronicles preserved by travellers, food, belief systems, rituals, clothes, paintings, sculptures and architecture and many other cultural artefacts in their moments of intersections with space and time. Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and James Clifford's *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* are path-breaking in the perspectives they offer towards rethinking some of the primary categories related to migration and diaspora studies.

How is 'transnational' as a category different from the diaspora? While a core ethnic identity defines a diasporic formation, a transnational community transcends such emotional categories and relies on larger professional or class interests. South Asian diaspora is transnational as it transcends national boundaries. But it splinters into several diaspora communities when it comes to relating to their homelands. South Asian diaspora has been termed as a 'complex diaspora' as it defies many of the norms associated with diasporas of the world. While South Asians share histories of colonialism and memories of resistance and subscribe to the commonality of perceptions in music, poetry, popular cinema, cuisine, fashion and even sports, they hold divergent loyalties, affiliations and commitments in their self-narratives of origin, ethnicity, religion and nationhood. Pnina Werbner comments:

The South Asian diaspora, seen as a regional diaspora of cultural consumptions, in no way determines either political loyalties and commitments or more focused exilic yearnings for a lost homeland. It is quite possible for people from a single cultural region to be locked in bitter national or religious conflicts as they are in South Asia (2004:903).

The internally differentiated South Asian diaspora cannot be understood in terms or categories produced in the globalized West. There are transnational narratives which also demonstrate the translational dimension of contemporary cultures in the making.

The terms 'migration', 'diaspora' and 'transnationalism' share certain common elements but also differ substantially in their orientations. Not all migrations result in the formation of diasporas. The myth of a homeland is central to the idea of a diaspora. The formation of an elite group among the migrants marks a stage of critical reflection on questions of their

existence and relations to the host and home countries. This is the point where a society of migrants sees themselves as part of a larger community called diaspora. As Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani in their Introduction to the Blackwell Companion to Diaspora and Transnational Studies, observe, “Diaspora space is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but, equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (Quayson:iv).

While ‘migration’ is a term that implies the movement of people, ‘transnationalism’ signifies global markets, the movement of multinational capital, technology, cultural artefacts and media. I will briefly mention Mira Nair’s *Mississippi Masala* to suggest the nature of border-crossings the Indian trans-national community has had to negotiate. In this film, with an international cast, Jay and Kinna, along with their daughter, Mina, are forced to flee Uganda after Idi Amin takes over the country. After a brief stay in England, they relocate to Mississippi where Jay joins the motel business of his relatives. He yearns to return to Kampala which he thinks is his home. Meanwhile, Mina has found local friends and is soon in love with Demetrius (Denzel Washington) who is a self-employed African American carpet cleaner. Her family and the Indian community as a whole are outraged by this inter-racial romantic relationship. Despite the fact that Jay has been exposed to racism in Uganda, he cannot accept an American black into his family. Mina and Demetrius run away from the city. Jay visits Kampala in connection with a court case and is horrified to see that the city has changed beyond his imagination. He can no longer identify with the new city. He returns to Mississippi as someone who has no place to call his own.

Indian migration to Africa happened during the colonial period. Mahatma Gandhi went to South Africa in 1893 as a

lawyer to defend an Indian businessman, on contract. The Hindi novel, *Pehla Girmitya* (translated as ‘Girmitya Saga’) by Giriraj Kishore traces Gandhi’s transformation from a contracted lawyer to a political thinker, leader of the masses and prophet of Ahimsa who rewrote the history of India. I use the term, “Elsewhere Space” in the title to suggest how our national histories are interwoven with many other histories that happened elsewhere. When Salman Rushdie said, “we are translated men” he was hinting at the transformative potential of transnational cultural encounters.

Migration studies and Diaspora Studies differ in their perception of the dynamics of nations and nation-states. Often the destiny of migrants is identified with the host country, the nation of their settlement. Their cultural and psychological relations to the host country and the problem of citizenship become the focus of the thematics of Migration Studies. In Diaspora Studies, nation and society are seen as separate entities since it is essentially a transnational category. The nation-state is seen merely as one agent in a set of global power centres. Migration studies often see the nation-state as a horizon that cannot be transcended. However, in Diaspora studies, circuits and circulations between multiple societies and communities make it possible to go beyond the boundaries of the nation-states.

However, we need to conceptualize migration in a transnational framework since migrants do not ‘leave behind’ their homelands. They are bound by several ties of longing and belonging with the past and present. Terms such as “circuits”, “networks”, “social fields”, and “social spaces” have been used to study how the migrant diasporas are embedded in socio-political and cultural processes. It has been pointed out that diasporas are “resolutely multilocal and polycentric, in that what happens to kin communities in other areas of dispersion

as well as in the homeland constantly matter to them” (Khachig Tololyan 2007:651). The current tensions in many parts of the world, including India, regarding policies and laws concerning refugees and citizenship, implicate indigenous communities as well, as they have ancestral rights to the places of their habitations. The demands for the inclusion of the migrant communities in the host country are often met with stiff resistance.

Diaspora studies now recognises that issues of political rights also intersect with questions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. In some of the recent Malayalam novels which are available in English translation, like Benyamin’s *Jasmin Days* and *Al Arabian Novel Factory*, we come across migrant communities caught in the political turmoil of fast-evolving global politics.

The idea of translation is central to both migration and modernity. In fact, in many Indian languages, the novel emerges through and in translation. The first Gujarati novel *Hindustan Madhyenu Ek Zunpadu* published in 1862 was the translation of an English novel, *The Indian Cottage*, which was the translation of a French novel, *La Chaimiere Indienne*, originally published in 1791. The French author, Henri Jacques Bernardin De St. Pierre (1737-1814) never visited India but had knowledge about its caste structure, philosophical system, topography and flora and fauna. Sohrabshah Dadabahi Munsafana, who translated *The English Cottage* into Gujarati, was a member of the Parsi community, who are part of one of the earliest diaspora communities who sought asylum in India due to religious persecution.

The first novel in Malayalam, *Ghatakavadham*, was the translation of a novel written by Mrs. Collins in English, titled, *The Slayer Slain*. Mrs. Collins modelled her novel closely on *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was about the emancipation of the

blacks in America. Hence, we need to reimagine the contact zones within a transnational circuit of culture to recover the translational dimensions implicit in the transnational.

Recent critical approaches caution us to be wary of the liberating potential of transnationalism as it can deepen and sustain differences, both economic and social. Paul Jay speaks of the university's complicity with the forces of global capital, in a context where uncritical euphoria about diversity and hybridity may conceal from view deeper fissures underneath. Now, there is a greater realization that transnationalism does not transcend the idea of the nation, as 'national' and 'transnational' are mutually constitutive. "As a relational concept, transnationalism encompasses entities that operate on a local level, as well as within a national, regional or supranational context" (4).

The literature available on transnationalism suggests that it is essentially a modernist construct located between nationalism and post-nationalism. Detailed investigations undertaken by thinkers like Jonardon Ganeri and Sanjay Subrahmanyam on the transnational traffic of ideas in early modern South Asia between India and Europe have reinvented the very idea of modernity and its relation to migration. We need to recognize that transnational linguistic areas are constituted by the inherent fluidity of language which enables it to cross boundaries. 'Nomadism' has been identified as a feature of contemporary literatures of the world, as seen in the works of the Argentinian writer Andres Neuman and the Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou (Amaury Dehoux 2019:28). Languages, even as they remain fluid, partake of dialectic between the 'local' and the 'global', subsuming multiple horizons of experience. An author like Kazuo Ishiguro, for instance, cannot be understood in terms of a single nation, and

this is why we need a literary theory that takes into account the fluidity of language as a condition of the present-day world.

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