07

MAPPING DIASPORA AT THE CROSSROADS:
READING MOHSIN HAMID'S EXIT WEST

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Abstract:
The emerging dimensions of diaspora in the contemporary global and cultural scenario have found a new space with respect to mobility of people to different places and nations. Juan Flores points out the present scenario of the trans-nation(s) and calls it “new diaspora”. This new transnational sensibility on the one hand addresses migration as a more globalised experience but on the other hand, technological advancements are also creating a kind of challenge for diaspora. Our conventional understanding of diaspora has been challenged. Transnationalism as a new promising face of diaspora allows a frequent mobility and offers a virtual arrangement to gratify diasporic emotions which has its own pitfalls. Theoretically it conceptualizes a new appearance of identity in a multicultural society but this also seems like a cosmopolitan fallacy in Milan Kundera’s words. This multi-cultural frame is a single-sided face of society. While discussing globalization and blending it with local, one may find this picture incomplete. Be it inter or intra national migration, these spaces can be identified with only some big and metropolitan cities or developed Western countries. Also, it raises a question that though technology has become a helping hand for survival in a different land for those who can afford it but, does it really address the refugee issues or nomad migration in the rest of the world?

Keywords: Diaspora, Transnationalism, globalization, cosmopolitan.

The emerging dimensions of diaspora known as “Transnationalism” in the contemporary global and cultural scenario have found a new space with respect to the mobility of people to different places and nations. Juan Flores specifies the present scenario of the trans-nation(s) and calls it “new diaspora”. But as the world experiences a big number of displaced people on record and debates rage around that who is worthy enough to open doors for, challenges are also observed with new possibilities. This paper attempts to have an understanding of the ‘new transnational space and sensibility’ while exploring Mohsin Hamid’s novel Exit West. The novel features human migration, transformations, nativism, and immigrant threats and envisions the world as a transnational space with porous borders.

Diaspora as an old notion is constituted out of migration experiences. It centers upon 'Home'/ 'Homeland', the belonging and exile where the sense of loss is continued along with seeking plantations in a host land. A new realization that diasporas are not fixed state of social being but about processes which begin and develop over time lead us to a relatively new idea transnationalism that helps us to organize an understanding of nations, migration and identity in today’s global world. Suman Gupta quotes Anthony Giddens’s definition of globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa”. Stanley J. Tambiah explains that this era of globalization concerns the diaspora studies with respect to economic migration and it pays attention to transnational movements for various reasons: in search of employment in the more prosperous industrializing countries as a guest worker or as immigrant or as a result of forced displacement of people. The term is exclusively applied to the post 1990s international migration, shows people located at multiple places and engaged in various activities. Transnational community encompasses frequent cross border mobility. Today, people have been flowing
between the different points of the migration and they maintain parallel lives in two or more nations-states. It claims to blur the line between home and exile with a frequent visit to home and host countries.

In the twentieth century, through air travel more people live transnational life and the technological component makes the transmission and circulation of the transnational experiences more immediate. More often than in the past modern has meant of transportation to move back and forth between places. But air travel might have cut short the time, not the distance. Home visits are numbered for an ordinary. Similarly, communication technologies have created a whole range of virtual emotions and a deep diasporic insight has only found a shelter with the available options. This indicates diaspora passing through a different phase and though it is not always easy to make a clear distinction between diaspora and transnationalism, a few shifts can be marked and questioned as well. Transnationalism as suggested is an attempt to move away from studying migration as a linear and assimilation process and transnational migration theories have often defined transnational studies as those which cross multiple national borders' (Ramji 2006: 646).

Migrant literature is literature by authors whose work does not really belong to a specific national literature or at least they have often been so treated although there are signs of a change in their approach. Migrant writers and bicultural writers speak from a place between cultures. They give a foreign voice to local material and historically they have made seminal contribution to both the formal inventive and the historical-descriptive aspect of literature. Contemporary transnationalism presents new circumstances among the new migrant groups and therefore definitely needs a new approach. The contemporary migrant writers share the experience of globalization as a process of evolving diaspora but are not without doubt. They see a flipside of the coin.

To this context, Mohsin Hamid’s novel Exit West shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize, can be observed for its themes of refugee crisis and a clear border society. Hamid is a British Pakistani author associates himself with transnational literature and calls himself a ‘multi-territorialized’. Hamid divides his time between Pakistan and abroad: lives between Lahore, New York, London, Italy and Greece which to him is carrying a sense of belonging to multi-territories.

The narrative is about a young couple, Saeed and Nadia, who live in an unnamed city undergoing civil war between the national government and militants and finally have to flee, using a system of fictitious doors, which lead to different locations around the globe. While they journey from one portal to another, from the Greek island of Mykonos, to London, to Marin, California, their love, like their homeland, is challenged by the ordeal of refuge hood and civil war. It's a novel that imagines a world where people can suddenly move beyond their borders but the novel does not hesitate to reveal another ground reality that borders too are seen as places of brutality and under threat. At one point Hamid expresses “when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind” (Exit West, 94) While passing through the doors where in the process of feeling variously relieved, frightened, outraged and threatened, they plunge more deeply into the questions of identity and nationhood. “In this group [on the island],” Hamid says, “everyone was foreigner, and so, in a sense, no one was” (EW, 100) preparing us for an ideal of integration that his characters find variously attractive and difficult to achieve. When they leave the island by passing through another door to Germany, and then another that leads them to London, they enter a city that is rapidly “filling up with [the] tents and rough shelters” of other refugees, where every form of homogeneity is perceived to be under threat. A major part of Hamid’s novel shows how profoundly social damage will injure private lives by hampering the ability to construct any sort of life outside their sphere of influence. As Saeed and Nadia try to develop their own true selves, external pressures underlines their different attitudes to sex, to worship, to how they view their homeland.

Often transnational literature is concerned with evading an implicit border of belonging. And very often the question: Does one have the right to be where one is or where one wishes to be? But a similar question is that whether an idea of a nation without borders can be executed? The doors in this
novel, serve an imagined space without borders, but the contemporary world directly confronts the refugee problems. While these doors lead a safe haven for immigrants, they are also a nightmare for natives. In fact, these doors can open anywhere are considered, “a major global crisis”. This makes the novel timely. Especially for the West after the US Presidential election, who seems to have discovered the treachery of borders and thinking of closing doors for ‘others’. The title of the novel exhibits this ambiguity of time that whether Exit to West or Exit from West? Peter Morey states that “conditions for alienation and active Islamophobic discrimination after 9/11, linked to global economic inequality and exploitation”. The novel notices the challenges faced in terms of negotiating the place.

Exit West: at once strongly evokes contemporary condition of being a refugee and their life during wartime. As Hamid catalogues, “regions pulling away from regions and cities pulling away from hinterlands, and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart. Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory and people were questioning what role they had to play... the nation was like a person with multiple personalities... whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup full of other people whose skin were likewise dissolving” (*EW*, 155).

Saeed and Nadia’s journey portrays a constant fear of eviction given that migrants are always inching closer, using the same doors that the refugees are taking, and the law enforcement forces in the West, which generally support the nativists, are coming to clean migrant ghettos. The ideas of nationalism and purity threaten the existence of immigrants and Hamid’s *Exit West* depicts refugee crisis and the rise of nativism. Hamid’s own status as a cosmopolitan writer results into a particular sense of self-consciousness at work. With a constant influx of refugees, “Exit West’s” London gets divided: dark London inhabited by refugees and light London inhabited by Brits. The locals are further divided: nativists “advocating wholesale slaughter” of refugees to “reclaim Britain for Britain” and “volunteers delivering food and medicine” to new arrivals. Saeed and Nadia heard it said that native extremists were forming their own groups with a support from the authorities. All that brought to make a final decision for Saeed and Nadia: whether to stay or to go. In the wake of such circumstances theorists have to give a fresh look to the elasticity of societies and their self-imagining as transcending national boundaries in global frameworks. This question of treating migrants as ‘other’ has been addressed by Lion P. who analyses “the post 9/11 fiction by Rushdie, Kunzru, Monika Ali and Hamid acknowledges existence of other people, culture societies and create alternatives to Western narcissism and American imperialism that have appeared to dominate post 9/11 mainstream discourse”. In light of this argument the present text also thinks upon the power relations between terrorism and counterterrorism which results in to anti-immigration movement, ethnic cleansing and global capitalism.

Although, the novel is an encouragement to the world to put aside its fears of migrants and to open its arms to the right of unhindered movement of peoples, one cannot overlook irony of migration. The flow of migration is from low to high. Means, all migration is westward or from developing to developed countries. The post-colonial nations are adopting ideologies or social models from the western world despite resolving their own basic problems and that is why the international migration is rapidly increasing towards the west. The natives of the host countries are lacking a mutual harmony. Such emerging realities reveal the plight of imagining transnational spaces. Crossing over the national boundaries in last two centuries contributed to the creation of large number of people “out of place” but it is still in need of more human interaction and making transnational social fields. Victor Roudometof states that people from different ethnic groups and languages construct a larger transnational social structure and it has become a routine practice with the help of technological access but then we have some instances like Rohingya issues (mass migration) or Baloch diaspora which make us think again. It is said that transnational networks are even developed among people who have not necessarily stepped out their respective nation borders but they are exposed to other cultures through media, tourists, immigrants or commercial cultural establishments in their locality like McDonalds, Subway, but again these are urban locations.
Transnational cosmopolitanism has a troubled relationship. Milan Kundera does not approve these terms as a universal phenomenon. He finds them class and region oriented and calls it a 'cosmopolitan fallacy'. Illegal migration especially in case of refugees is a challenge for Transnationalism. Cosmopolitanism in its current form is not as viable a picture for postcolonial nations and it captures a few selected urban spaces in developing countries; so the very idea itself seems a fancy. Thus, the theory of transnational spaces is ideal to imagine a shared-common-social field for all but as soon as it happens to reality, there are equal number of arguments exist on an individual's identity in the context of minorities discourses or tribal issues or marginality discussions. In order to secure an individual 'self', identity, it always knocks doors of ethnicity. It has further created certain challenges to conceptualize the term when observed at the flip of the coin. Diaspora can be re-imagined in terms of home and identity with the coming advancement of communicative technology, but it has shaken our conventional feeling of nostalgia and belongingness. A kind of superficiality of diasporic sensibility has been emerged as a result of this new virtual world. There is one question on the return diaspora too. Whether the migrants really want to return from their prosperous host lands to the homeland? Probably no, and there 'homing desire' seems mere a leisurely expression to construct a diasporic identity. Avtar Brah also points it out as 'a site for diaspora identity politics'.

Though, Hamid has an optimistic approach to migrants revealing that “…everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives” (209) and the novel arrives at the maxim. “We are all migrants through time.” It is a constant reminder that everything is transitional or on the move and the world has yet to stepthroughdoors and embrace differences.

Works Cited: