

Contesting Cultures, Unsettling Geographies in Diaspora's Liminal Space

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Abstract

*Existing literary studies on migration and diaspora have mostly concentrated on issues affecting the homeland, questions of identity, memory, belonging and longing, and the politics of location across borders. Cross-sub continental comparison between south Asians and West African migrants' lived experiences seem to be less under the radar. However, since diaspora space represents an intersection of cultures, peoples, religions and psychic processes, this paper attempts to comparatively explore the processes that plunge migrants into an unsettling liminal space of unwelcome using Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* from South Asia and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* from West Africa. The engagement of these works from both divides is to explore the contours inherent when people are dislocated from their homeland attempting to navigate their ways in the new world. The impetus is to examine the geographical peculiarities that heighten the tension of migrants on one hand and the contest of cultural beliefs especially, religious practices that portend a distortion of identity, alienation and create tension between characters in the novels. The study divulges that the perception of the migrants about the flora and fauna from both subcontinents are similar and it heightens the feeling of alienation in diaspora on one hand and on the other, the differences in cultural systems create a tension especially among the characters of Islamic background. It is concluded that for Muslims living in the west, religio-cultural conflict is major signifier in the contests that are inherent in diaspora space.*

Key words: *Culture, Diaspora Space, Migrants, Cultural Tension, Geography*

Introduction

Literary works especially fictional narratives provide vantage positions from which diaspora prerogatives are viewed, reviewed, contested and questioned. This is because of the complex outlook of diaspora which evokes myriads of contested ideas and images. Diaspora encompasses numerous blends of languages, histories, people, places, memories and cultures. The process of achieving this blend or what is known as hybridization in human cultural life is fraught with what Michal Bakhtin refers to as the critical aspect of all hybrid creations – tension, according to Seth Surgan & Emily Abbey (2012). They opine that “a hybrid creation is not an easy or straightforward synthesis. There is an internal tension between form and function... this ‘internal’ tension produces an ‘external’ tension between the utterance and its audience” (153). The emphasis is on the tension, that is, the contest that exist in diaspora resulting in a third space.

In the main, the dispersal of peoples from various roots to other nations has resulted in the contriving of the term Diaspora. The Diaspora with the capital ‘D’ has been used to refer to a select set of peoples, each of which has been separated from, but connected to a historical homeland over many generations. This group of historical diasporas include the Jewish, Greek and Armenians. (Oliver Bakewell, 2008). They form the bedrock of diaspora studies, of which, most of these studies trace its history to the Jewish model. Scholars like Bakewell, Oguibe and others have made it clear that diaspora is the forced dispersal or displacement of a people. Since the 1960s, the term diaspora has expanded to include other groups who are scattered across the globe such that there now exist different types of diaspora like the Indian Diaspora, the African Diaspora and the like. This current diversity in the Diasporas is an upshot of the itinerant and cosmopolitan age, an increasing globalized world, where labour, capital and resources are passed fluidly from continent to continent, in which movement and relocation are as ubiquitous as they are inevitable. (Olu Oguibe, 2004; Christopher Zajchowski, 2007).

Milton Esman (1996:p316) defines diaspora as a minority ethnic group of migrant origin which:

Maintain sentimental or material links with its land of origin, either because of social exclusion, internal cohesion or other geopolitical factors. It is never assimilated into the whole society but in time develops a diasporic consciousness which carries out a collective sharing of space with others.

This definition implies that as the migrant arrives in the new world, there are either cultural, political or geographical factors that inhibit their total absorption. This results in their carrying a burden of a longing for their homeland.

In postmodernist and postcolonial discourses, diaspora ceases to be merely a description of a group of people (Alcid, M. 2008). It now refers to a ‘condition’ which arises from the experience of being from one place and of another (Clifford, 1994). This paradigm shift in the concept of diapora is popularized by Avtar Brah in her book titled *Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities* in 1996. To Brah, diaspora is not limited to a historical experience; rather it is a theoretical concept, a complicated imagined space of relation, and a discourse which attracts complex analysis of its

details. Brah's idea of diaspora as an illustrative lens to the underlying social, historical and economic conditions plaguing contemporary migration, diasporic identity formation and reformation, leads to the adoption of the concept "diaspora space".

According to Avtar Brah (1999) diaspora space is the location of complex interstitial space where an intersection of diaspora, border and the politics of dis/location are made immanent. This space is a location where boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of us and them are contested and are constructed in tandem with processes of racial formation, economic, psychic, cultural and political borders. It is a contested site of translocation, a space that imagines itself through creative spatial remapping of 'locatedness' and displacement to become a migratory space in-formation. Homi Bhabha (1994:1) also, in the examination of cultural formations in diaspora, defines the concept of the 'third space' as an in-between space that, "initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation". Within the third space, there is a circuitous movement of protagonists across spatial and cultural boundaries, reconfiguring notions of home and 'locatedness'. It is an interstitial space "where something begins its presencing" and "profound process of redefinition" of the self, culture and identity begins.

Judging from the contorted nature and the complexity of diaspora space, the impetus is to examine cultural borders and the contest of cultures within this liminal space. In the main, the unwelcoming geography of the new world is examined as this first impresses on the migrant the impending crises on arrival. Then, the contest between the culture and cultural practices already absorbed at home with that to be adopted in the new world standing in opposition to each other and the migrant struggling to merge them. The literary representations of this concept is examined using fictions of canonical writers from South Asia and West Africa. Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* from South Asia and Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* from West Africa, shall form the literary context for the examination of the contest of cultures and the unwelcome of geographical conditions within diaspora space causing the unsettling feeling in this liminal space.

Although, myriads of existing literatures abound in the study of migration, diaspora and cultural miscegenation in diasporic situations, the impetus of this paper is to attempt a comparative critiquing of the portraiture of cultures in contest and how these writers have creatively, overtly or covertly, presented the unhomeliness experienced by immigrants especially as a result of the atmospheric conditions in the new destination.

Unsettling geographies in diaspora space

Edward Said (1978) in his classic work *Orientalism* suggests that in the examination of orientalist ideologies in a literary work, the dynamics that construct the vacuums both in nature and social situations should constitute the context of the study. This implies a scrutiny of the landscape, the physical space – the sight, the smells, the sounds and the features of the landscape, of the flora and fauna, as these appear in the perception of the characters both of/in the original homeland and the adoptive land, that instigate the change in the migrant who attempt to redefine themselves when they take up their lives in the new location.

The general atmospheric conditions of the new world place the characters in an unsettling third space in their existence in the adoptive land. The sense of estrangement from their homeland of origin is obvious in their reaction to their environment. The environing landscape operates dualistically as a place of exile or as a place of nurture and acceptance (Highland, M. 2011). Carter (1992:9) resonates the same idea that “the meaning and significance attributed to our life are closely bound up with the sense of place and places and spaces ... (which) gives us a sense of orientation”. This is exactly the case with the characters in both novels. Their sense of place gives them an unsettling and unwelcoming orientation. There is a sense of displacement from the environing conditions of the new space. In *Maps...* Kaukab and other migrants in the novel become lost in the space of the environment which is manifest in the difference in time zones and seasons of the year. “...when they arrived in England some of the migrants had become confused by the concept of time zones and had wondered if the months were the same at any given time in various continents...” (15-16). Their confusion foretells the plunging into a space where the migrant is lost in-between. The novel itself is divided into four seasons obtainable in British geography. This is in contrast with that of Pakistan which has five seasons. The loss of the season, of a structuring part of year, a part that marks the passing of time, reflects the stasis of the migrant in the new world and a loss like that of the loss of the lovers. Something is missing from the migrant experience, and this absence manifests itself in profound alienation. The narrator comments on this from the experience of Shamas who mourns the seasons in England, thus:

Among the innumerable other losses, to come to England was to lose a season, because in the part of Pakistan that he is from, there are five seasons in a year, not four...winter, spring, summer, monsoon and autumn...(5)

This great loss is a constant reminder that the novel embodies an all-encompassing, a space and vacuum that cannot be filled. Shamas attempts to fill this void by greeting the weather, thus:

A habit as old as his arrival in this country, he has always greeted the season's first snow in this manner, the flakes losing their whiteness on the palm of his hand to become clear wafers of ice before melting to water – crystals of snow transformed into monsoon raindrop (5)

Edward Said (1999) points out that a life of exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Upon arrival in England, the migrants “become confused by the concept of the time zones, and had wondered if the months too were the same at any given time in various continents” (16). This reflects the confused state of the migrant conjured by the disparities in the landscape and geography.

Furthermore, the renaming of the streets and landmarks within the neighborhood as a result of the migrants' finding of the English names of the town, its streets, and landmarks difficult to pronounce is a cry of despair, disillusion and an occupying of a social in-between space. The renaming is an appropriation of social space. They are in a community, a place, but not of that place. Hence, they rename the unnamed British town Dasht-e-Tanhaii meaning ‘The wilderness of

solitude' or 'The Desert of Loneliness' (29). The significance of this geographical naming is not far-fetched as it is exposed in the experiences of the inhabitants. The migrants in *Maps...* feel claustrophobic in the geographical enclave; they are "full of apprehension concerning the white race and uncomfortable with people of another subcontinent, religion or regrouping" (32); "no one makes a sound in case it draws attention. No one speaks. No one breathes" (45). Suraya's husband declares thus:

This country may be rich but it is too different from ours... we have to go back. A person can't do anything here that he can freely over there. A dog was asked by another why he was fleeing a rich house-hold where they fed him meat every day. "they feed me meat, yes, but I am not allowed to bark" (202-203)

This claustrophobic atmosphere created in the novel forces the characters to live their lives in isolation; there is a psychological grounding in the space. It is important to note that the names given to streets and landmarks are rechristened at the arrival of a new set of migrant, but "only one name has been accepted by every group, remaining unchanged. It's the name of the town itself. Dansht-e-Tanhaii" (29). This is because they all feel the same loss and navigate through similar spaces in the location.

Adichie's *Americanah* embodies what Pandurang identifies in his essay titled "Understanding departure – A study of Pre-Migration female Subjectives" judging from the experience of Ifemelu on her departure to America. Pandurang asserts that:

Negotiating processes between estrangement and comfort are already in motion before departure with migrants often repudiating the changing geographies of the sending culture for the freedom and opportunities offered by the receiving society (2007:p24)

The negotiating process of Ifemelu into the Diaspora space of the geography started from her shopping preparation at Tejuosho market in Nigeria prior to her departure where "she bought the thickest sweater she could find" (*Americanah* p103) ... because she has been overpowered by "her illusions so strong they could not be fended off by reason" (p103). The first disappointment of her migration is the "sweltering heat". The landscape of her imagination fails her:

She stared at buildings and cars and signboards all of them disappointingly matt; in the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shone gloss...she had never felt so hot... the street below was poorly lit, bordered not by leafy trees but by closely parked cars, nothing like the pretty street on *The Cosby Show*. (104-106)

She becomes overwhelmed by the contrasts of her expectations, the flatness and strangeness – “a kindling starkness without... the familiar landmarks that made her who she was” (p111).

In addition to the heat, Ifemelu is welcomed to Aunt Uju’s small one bedroom apartment, where she sleeps on the floor with cockroaches short of her expectations about America. This reminds her of her visits to her grandmother where she had to sleep on the floor. No difference between the America of her dreams and the Nigeria she so much loathes. The sweltering heat foreshadows the untold hardship she encounters in her early days in America equivalent, or perhaps, worse than what is obtainable in Nigeria. The long month and weeks of job search, overdue rent, frustration and disappointments make her physically and emotionally disoriented.

The description of the landscape in America when Ifemelu meets with the coach who advertises for a female personal assistant during her job-hunting days is suggestive of how the landscape projects the migrant’s existence in a space, a third space where the migrant gyrates against the first world and bleeds. The tennis coach intends to hire Ifemelu as an assistant, not at the office but at home, where her job is to help him relax after the day’s stressful activities. He offers her a huge sum of money in return. Ifemelu, tempted by this offer but angered by the fact that she has no other choice but to concede because she had her rent and her tuition to settle, succumbs to the pressures of immigrant life. The flora and fauna feel sordidness as:

The trees were awash with color, red and yellow leaves tinted the air golden... the crisp air, fragrant and dry... she felt like a small ball, adrift and alone...she was bloodless, detached, floating in a world where darkness descended too soon and everyone walked around burdened by coats, and flattened by the absence of light (155)

The sudden descent of darkness and the slowness incurred by the snowing atmosphere is a harbinger of the hard luck experienced by Ifemelu.

Obinze in London undergoes a similar aura of the flora and fauna when the anxieties of migration creep on him steadily. He lives as an undocumented migrant, changed his name to Vincent in the face of hardship and seeks for a sham marriage to possess resident visa in a bid to legalize his migrant status. The weather contributes to his sadness, “deepening his anxieties” (227) and floating in the world of migration. Like the case of Ifemelu in America, in “London, night came too, it hung on the morning air like a threat, and then in the afternoon a blue-grey dusk descended, and the Victorian buildings all wore a mournful air” (227). Obinze’s perception of the environment reorients him that “the universe will not bend according to his will” (232) as he descends stealthily into the space fraught with ambiguities and austerity.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that the landscape, the trees, the streets, the air, seasons and the overall geography, as perceived and encountered by migrant protagonists, contribute to the incursion into the Diasporic space; alienate the migrant to a large extent and mark the process of “deterritorialisation” and “displacement”. This is made apparent by the movement and shifting

from a ground sense of place to an unfamiliar and strange place. Social situations, on the other hand, necessitating migration and the eventual discovery of worse social situations, plunge the migrant into a greater aloofness, floating and drifting in strange geographical spaces.

Contesting cultures in diaspora space

In the process of the redefinition of diasporic identities, religion tends to become a major component of ethnic identity. The religious identity of the migrant becomes diluted as ethno – religious practices are mutated within the new home, resulting in a state of never completely ‘here’ and most definitely, not ‘there’. The tension of religious identification within diaspora is usually exacerbating with Islamic adherents living in the west. Aslam’s *Maps for lost lovers* is replete with what Salman Rushdie refers to as the “old deep mistrusts” that frustrate “attempts to build new better relations and creating much bad blood” (2003:324) among Muslim communities living in the west.

The conflict in *Map...* is as a result of the attempts of some of the migrants to imbue certain strictures of the European cultural stances which are termed abominable in Islamic religious practices and rituals. This could be seen in the murder of Jugnu and Chanda. They are both children of migrants who crave for incursion into the system of the Western culture they have come to become familiar with as they reside in the environment. Bound by the strangling dictates of strict religious tenet and burdened by the need to bridge the gap between such injunctions and the new world culture, the protagonists become stuck in an inbetween space where they are outcasts on both sides of the cultural divide. Their curiosity for the western ways of life and their acculturation strategy lead to their untimely death. Chanda finds herself at a religious crossroad after being married to someone she has been betrothed to as a child; he divorces her and she is by pity to a cousin afterwards. The disappearance of her third husband and her eventual search for measures to liberate herself from the bound of the husband to the arms of a loving man proves abortive; hence, she decides to take a hold of love and move in with Jugnu. This earns her scorn from the Islamic community. She becomes “the immoral, deviant and despicable daughter who was nothing less than a wanton whore in most people’s- eyes as she was in Allah’s – for setting up a home with man she wasn’t married to” (15)

Jugnu’s house is labelled the house of fornication as children as children peep through the door knob to see if Jugnu’s ‘place of urine’ is glowing in the dark like his hand (62). This obscenity is as a result of “the corrupting influence of western society”, and this repels Chanda’s brothers who declare that as far as they are concerned “that little whore died the day she moved in with him” (65). In Islamic culture, a woman is not to live with a man she is not married to but the migrants have been influenced by the freedom of the western world.

Apart from the termed sacrilegious relationship between Chanda and Jugnu, the relationship between Asians and the whites is usually abhorred and reinforces antagonistic perceptions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This tension is created because of the contest between the cultures when two people from the two divides meet. Kaukab’s son, Charag who is sent to England to receive university education, comes home with the news that his girlfriend, not only white but pregnant,

is visiting, sends a spiral of repulse down Kaukab's spine. Kaukab's repugnance is born out of the fact that she doesn't want any of her children to get involved with the white 'other'. During the conversation between Charag, the white girl and Kaukab, Charag makes a statement that shocks his mother:

The fact of the matter is that had I lived in the time of Muhammad, and he came to me his heavenly message, I would have walked away... I trust what science says about the universe because I see the result of scientific methods around me. I cannot be expected to believe what an illiterate merchant-turned-opportunistic-preacher-for he was no systemic theologian – in seventh-century Arabian desert had to say about the origin of life (38-39)

Kaukab is stunned on hearing this and comments that the presence of the white girl in the house is what has propelled and emboldened him to make this statement, "he may have thought these things before, but the white person enabled him to say them out loud" (38). This creates a kind of bad blood between the whites and the Muslims from the subcontinent. The character of Kaukab is worth examining along the lines of the four fold classification of assimilation strategy adopted by minority cultures. According to Sunil Bhatia (2012) "acculturation strategies refer to the plan or method that individuals use in responding to stress-inducing new cultural contexts. A fourfold classification is proposed which includes 'assimilation', 'integration', 'separation' and 'marginalization'." (117). Kaukab decides to pursue a separation strategy because she places premium value by holding on to her original culture, seeking no contact with the dominant group while her children are in contact with the dominant group. This heightens the cultural tension.

Relating this to Ifemelu's relationship with Curt in *Americanah*, it becomes clear that the assertion of Rushdie is valid about the Muslims living in the west. For the Christian migrant, though black, a relationship with the other is generally accepted by their friends and family alike so much as when Ifemelu cheats on him and the relationship crumbles, she is criticized and regarded as "a self-sabotager who thinks she doesn't deserve happiness (287). The relationship between the Islamic world and the West according to Rushdie (2003), "seems to be living through one of the famous interregnums defined by Antonio Gramsci, in which the old refuses to die, so that the new cannot be born, and all manner of morbid symptoms arise...." (324). The character of Kaukab represents the old world that has refused to die for a new world of Islam in the west to be born, keeping the other migrants in a state of cultural tension and frustrating attempts to build better relations.

Furthermore, observing critically the children of Kaukab calls a reminder to the opinion of Roger and Catherine Ballard (1997), that the children of South Asian immigrants are often seen by their pre-dominantly 'native' teachers, community leaders and parents as entrenched in a state of 'culture conflict' and their subsequent cultural exhibitions which seem like a blend of Islam and western culture is perceived as rebellious against the oppressive culture of the parent generation. Kaukab's three children are rebellious to Islamic tenets; Charag impregnates a white girl while in

school; Ujala has refused to speak to his mother, accusing her of being inhuman, moribund and lifeless, while Jugnu lives in the sin of fornication with a girl he is not married according to Islamic culture. Kaukab's only daughter, Mah-Jabin, is at log-a-head with her for not giving her the freedom to choose and marry the man she loves, rather she is shipped off to Pakistan to be married to a first cousin in accordance to "that organized crime called arranged marriages" (108). She accuses her mother delivering her into the same kind of life that she was delivered into.

Kaukab becomes lonely and frustrated, turned into 'a pillar of salt' as she is continually haunted by the homeland as foreshadowed by Rushdie (1982) since she resisted mutation within the new world. Bhaba (1982:38) affirms Kaukab's state as that of the "native intellectual who identifies the people with the true national culture will be disappointed. The people are now the very principle of 'dialectical reorganization'...". They have reorganized their language, dressing and perception of life into 'the liberatory signs of a free people' (38). Hence, Kaukab becomes an epitome of disappointment because in the contest of cultures in diaspora space, there is the tendency of a dilution of the imported culture as western culture overshadows the culture of the immigrants. Kaukab's disillusionment is heightened by the fact that she is atrophied in her home culture and constantly reminiscences Pakistan and the practices of Islam as opposed to what is obtainable in England. She constantly laments:

It's my fault for having bought my children here: no one would need reminding in Pakistan when Eid is, or Ramadam...Everyday- I relieve the day I came to this country where I have nothing but pain...there is nothing on this planet I loathe more than this country, but I won't go to live in Pakistan as long as my children are here. This accursed land has taken my children away from me...each time they went out they returned with a new layer of stranger-ness until finally I didn't recognize them anymore (101, 103, 149)

All these irredeemable losses, especially that of her children, plunge her in a space, a religious/cultural space that has come to live with since she cannot go back to Pakistan leaving her children behind. She tends to bottle up some her knee-jacking religious idiosyncrasies for fear of being labelled inhuman. She is in a border land, in the words of Gloria Anzaldua's in *La Frontera*, which is "an open wound where the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture.

Conclusion

The attempt to interpret the multiple processes at work in the diaspora space has been at the center of this study. All the protagonists and characters like Kaukab, Chanda, Jugnu, Charag, Ifemelu and Obinze examined in this study are laden with multiple pulls and allegiances manifested in shifts of perspectives. There is a formation of new identities from the experiences of the landscape, cultural signs and rituals as a result of operating within a society with the presence of two cultures

but this formation produces tensions because of contest of the cultures. The characters are poised at differing positions in relation to their cultural allegiances, contending with different degrees of transformations resulting in a mosaic rather than a formulaic configuration.

More interestingly, in the contest of cultures, it is more intense for the Muslim migrant in the west as the practices of western libertinism stand at variance with Islamic tenets considering the tragedy that befall Chanda for living with a man she is not married to. She is brutally murdered. Considering Ifemelu on the other hand, her relationship with Curt is totally accepted as normal. Suffice to say that the unsettling geographical situations and are the same for all the migrants and this heightens their alienation in diaspora space.

More so, the similarity in the narrative process of both novels which involve a moving/ travelling back and forth, the constant use of flashbacks, reminiscences and forecasting indicates that the experience of the migrant negotiating the third space is not a lucid, homologous, linear tale, rather it is laden with ambiguities, in a constant state of unrest and instability- never completely 'here' definitely not 'there'. It is pertinent to note that the point of divergence in the narratives lies in the authors' handling of religious practices and tenets. Aslam's characters are sensitive to those religious practices that inhibit their belonging and plunge them deeper into diaspora space while Adichie is silent in her treatment of religion.

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