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Re-Defining Diasporic Consciousness

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Abstract: *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* defines the term Diaspora as one that is derived from the Greek word *speiro* which denotes 'to sow' and the preposition *dia* signifying 'over' or 'across' (Braakman 49). It was originally used to define the expansion of the Greeks to the entire world. Robin Cohen asserts in his seminal work *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, the Jewish exile has often been cited as the archetypal example to actualize the conception of 'Diaspora'. However, Cohen warns against such an unsophisticated and simplistic definition of the same. He asserts the need to transcend the reductive and one-dimensional interpretation of the 'Diaspora' and view diasporic communities not only as homogenous units in themselves but a dynamic category composed of diverse meanings. This paper attempts to explore the Afghan experience(s) of dispersion and the interpretation(s) of the same by the people of the land. It also scrutinizes the Afghan diasporic consciousness and the negotiation with ideas of 'homeland' (*watan*), space and place for the Afghan community living outside their motherland.

Keywords: Diaspora, Afghan, Homeland, Dispersion, Identity, Reminiscence, Return.

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Diaspora Studies essentially constitutes of namely three aspects: Firstly, the critical engagement with the issue of dispersion of ethnic populations from their respective homelands; Secondly, the factors that have led to the dispersion(s); Thirdly, the evaluation of the experience(s) of dispersion(s) by the dispersed communities respectively. In recent times, the Afghan diaspora has been the subject of extensive research in academic circles across the world. This paper is broadly divided into three sections. Section one furnishes a historical backdrop that enumerates on the factors responsible for the dispersal of the Afghan population, forced as well as voluntary, from their native land. Section two of this paper highlights the diasporic consciousness of the Afghans living in foreign lands and their conflicting impression(s) of the ideas of 'home' and 'homeland'. Section three delves into the significance of diasporic literature and how it enables its readers to develop and privilege a critical understanding of the issues of dispersion over a generic oversimplified perception of the same. I would be elucidating on the above mentioned arguments of the paper by providing illustrations from a couple of short stories on the Afghan diasporic life. In order to aid a detailed understanding of the above mentioned concepts, I would be referring to essays by theorists who have extensively engaged with the concept of diaspora such as Edward Said, Robin Cohen and Dibyesh Anand.

I

The nation-state of Afghanistan, recognized as being located in Central Asia on the world map, has been witness to numerous atrocities. It was invaded by the U.S.S.R. in 1979 and more than half the native population of Afghanistan were forced out of their land into Pakistan and Iran, where they were received with hostility. Various paramilitary groups arose and assembled together to counter the Soviet forces. These groups referred to themselves as the *mujahedeen* and claimed to be fighting the 'Holy War' so as to restore Afghanistan to its former 'glory' (Braakman 14). The relentless military retaliations from the Afghan frontiers compelled the Soviet forces to retract from the land of Afghanistan in 1989. The apparent scenario of restoration encouraged more than one million Afghans to return to their native land in the early-nineties. However, the land of Afghanistan had also witnessed voluntary emigration to Western countries such as Europe, Germany, Canada and parts of North-America even prior to the Russian invasion. These migrations were made by a select few – mostly well-travelled and well-educated elites, due to severe resistance to the Marxist revolution in the mid-1970 by orthodox Islamic factions that opposed the attempts of the Marxist revolutionaries. The revolutionaries had attempted to radicalize the formal education system of Afghanistan and offered prospects of a more liberal model of the same along with

championing the need for women's emancipation (Braakman 14). The political clashes between the Marxist radicals and the orthodox groups coincided with the Russian invasion and the scenario of immense social unrest forced the elite intelligentsia who primarily belonged to urban spaces and were groomed in Western education and ideas, to settle abroad. It is this type of migration that Robin Cohen describes as "voluntary" (Cohen 23). A diasporic community does not only constitute of a collective experience of exile or forceful deportment from the homeland of a community, but also one where few members of the community have opted for wilful migration to the other parts of the world (Cohen 23). In the Afghan scenario, the bourgeois had the resources, financial and otherwise, to 'escape' the volatile and explosive state of affairs in Afghanistan. After the departure of Soviet forces from the land of Afghanistan, internal wars ensued between the various *mujahedeen* groups in the next two decades, which once again led the citizens of the land to settle elsewhere abroad. Then emerged the Taliban around 1994 with the promise to end violence and refurbish harmony. The people welcomed the Taliban as the sole alternative which could offer them respite from the then current situation. However, their presumptions and hopes were almost immediately frustrated as the Taliban managed to destroy the *mujahedeen* forces through extreme forms of violence and assumed power in the Afghan land instantaneously thereafter establishing itself as the sole authority on civic affairs of the land. Soon followed a string of 'laws' and diktats, the observation of which were made mandatory and any kind of disobedience was met with severe persecution. Unable to cope with the violent autocratic rule of the Taliban as well as their religious fanaticism, many Afghans once again left their country and moved to the West. For many Afghans, Germany was the natural choice for seeking refuge in as the respective governments of Germany and Afghanistan had shared excellent bilateral ties with one another since the 1920 (Braakman 19). However, many members of the Afghan community also scattered across North America and Canada.

II

The Afghan culture can be defined as one that constitutes of a closely knit community which relies on the relationship amongst its people for its sustenance. In Afghan society, the community is an extension of one's immediate family (Braakman 51). The idea of 'home' or *khana* as it is referred to in Dari, is central to the cultural sensibilities of the Afghans. The Afghans make a clear distinction between the 'house' and the 'home'. For the Afghan community, 'house' denotes a physical space built up of concrete that offers a roof above one's head. On the other hand, they define 'home' as a sacrosanct space which is invested with meaning, which in turn is derived from the lived experiences and memories of people dwelling within a shared space (Braakman, 52). The collective sense of identity as born by the members of the Afghan community is securely tied to *this* sacrosanct space (emphasis mine). As Marije Braakman asserts in her thesis, '*Roots and Routes: Questions of Home, Belonging and Return in an Afghan Diaspora*', "the house and the family are not only the smallest, but also often the most essential level of identification" (Braakman 17). Avtar Brah in her book *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* defines the understanding of home for the diasporic consciousness as "the lived experience of locality, its sounds and smells." Rootedness is the characteristic quality that defines the Afghan society. However, the meaning of 'home' also has an emblematic connotation for the Afghans. The *khana* or 'home' merges into the broader framework of the Pashto words *watan* or *qaum*, symbolizing 'homeland'. The 'homeland', in the Afghan worldview is a convergence between the

individual life that one lives, the familial life as well as the interpersonal relationships forged with the other members of the same community living in the same area (Brah 76). All these units which are the infrastructural elements for the construction of a society finally merge into the broader idea of the 'fatherland' where one's ancestors have lived and one has been born and brought up. Thus, the *watan* constitutes an expansion of the microcosmic *khana*.

Braakman asserts, "The awareness of *watan* is activated by the experience or awareness of the non-watan, the unfamiliar" (Braakman, 66). This seems particularly true when we assess the relationship of any diasporic community with its country of settlement. Edward Said in his essay "Reflections on Exile" discusses the idea of homeland in relation to nationalism. According to Said, nationalism and exile almost function as antonyms. Said writes in his essay:

> Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and in doing so it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. Indeed, the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other (Said, 176).

Said further adds -"And just beyond the frontier between "us" and the "outsiders" is the perilous territory of not-belonging…" (Said, 177). Diasporic communities often define the land of settlement in oppositional, antithetical terms as against their own culture, which is celebrated as the utopic in collective consciousness. This results in the generation of a rejection of the 'alien' land which they have been 'placed' in. Cohen points out, that most diasporic experiences are accompanied by nostalgia and reminiscence, which stems from a collective memory of a traumatic event that had pushed them out of their native homeland (Cohen 26). Now 'stuck' on 'alien' soil the diasporic communities constantly nurture the dream of return. However, most displaced communities realize that the dream to return to their native land if at all does get materialized will do so only in a distant future. This enables the collective consciousness of the communities to whip up myths about the native land of their origin.

III

The act of mythmaking is an important indicator of the relationship of the diasporic group with its native homeland as after being dispersed from the homeland, the dispersed community attempts to return to it via the mode of imagination. Life in the homeland is romanticized as well as represented as an ideal utopic space. The oral reiteration of this imagined homeland which is transmitted across generations almost renders it an appearance of the 'real'(Cohen 23). British author of Afghan origin Saira Shah documents this transmission of myths about one's homeland from one generation to another, in her novel '*The Storyteller's Daughter*' where the narrator reports her personal account as thus:

> I am three years old. I am sitting on my father's knee. He is telling me of a magical place: the fairytale landscape you enter in dreams. Fountains fling diamond droplets into mosaic pools. Coloured birds sing in the fruit-laden orchards…On three sides of the plateau majestic mountains tower, capped with snow. The fourth side overlooks a sunny valley where, gleaming far below, sprawls a city of villas and minarets. And here is the best part of the story: it is true. The garden is in Paghman…The jewel-like city it overlooks is the Afghan capital, Kabul. The people of Paghman call the capital Kabul jan: beloved Kabul. We call it that too, for this is where we belong.

> "Whatever outside appearances may be, no matter who tells you otherwise, this garden, this country, these are your origin. This is where you are truly from. Keep it in your heart, Saira *jan*. Never forget." (Shah 3-4)

Although the diasporic consciousness is often associated with the idea of return to one's homeland as a general desire which runs through all diasporic subjects, historian James Clifford interprets the idea of 'return' to the native land somewhat differently. Clifford's book – *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, stresses that diasporic consciousness might not be regulated by an intense desire for a physical return to one's homeland, but a desire to appropriate the land of settlement for themselves, more so by the subsequent generations of the displaced community. Dibyesh Anand draws upon Clifford in his essay "A Contemporary Story of "Diaspora": The Tibetan Version" and translates the idea of return into "re-turn" which implies returning to the 'idea' of homeland and re-defining it from the individual subject positions of the members of the diasporic community (Anand 227). Also, diasporic communities are not single homogenous units in themselves (Cohen 21) and therefore we cannot homogenize or generalize diasporic experiences and what they mean to the dispersed community, presuming all members of the community think and feel alike. In fact, many members of a dispersed community, might experience a dilemma in determining their identities and classifying them into strict binaries of 'either' identifying with one's roots (such as 'being' Afghan) 'or' identifying with the country where one has been brought up (such as 'being' German or American). This state of flux is prominently visible in the subsequent generations of the dispersed community as well as individuals who have left their motherland as children. These individuals negotiate their national identity in hyphenated terms such as Afghan-American or German-Afghan and acknowledge themselves as culturally hybrid. Hence, an individual can refer to multiple places as home. However, many of the second generation immigrants do acknowledge their origin and psychologically trace their geographical roots down to where their ancestry is historically located (Zewari 8). The conflicting views on 'return' is evident as many displaced Afghans do not want to go back to their homeland since there is no 'home' to go back to (Braakman 227) as most of the inhabitants of the land have had to sell their homes to buy a ticket to abroad and those who had not sold their homes, too have nothing to resort back to as most of the towns in and around Kabul have been ruined by Taliban attacks.

Robin Cohen does not discount the positives of the issue of migration and interprets it as one that is "creative" and "enriching" as it enables one to attain a fusion of experiences, to interpret their identity in new light and acquire multiplicity of perspective (Cohen 25). This is where diasporic literature can be positioned.

The heterogeneity in Afghan experience is reflected in the literary works of Afghan diasporic writers. Helena Zewari mentions in *Generating the Collective through Text: Afghan American Writings on Belonging and the Homeland* - "The act of writing itself must be seen as a particularly political exercise…" as there is no single model of Afghan diasporic experience (Zewari 7). The evidence for the same can be found in anthologies of short stories by Afghan diasporic writers like the one edited by Zohra Saed and Sahar Murad titled, *Afsanah Sesanah, One Story, Thirty Stories: A Contemporary Anthology of Afghan American Literature*. This anthology is a conglomerate of the variegated diasporic experiences of the Afghans and their individual responses to the same. Diasporic literature documents the collective experience of dispersion and enables the readers to appreciate that cultural identity of any community is not a seamless singular unit but rather a complex coalesce of many

factors such as race, class, tribe gender (Zewari 4). Afghan diasporic literature records the multiplicity of voices which contribute to the construction of the idea of not a single monolithic Afghanistan but a pastiche of diverse meanings that the Afghans associate with their homeland. The anthology, *Afsanah Sesanah, One Story, Thirty Stories: A Contemporary Anthology of Afghan American Literature* constitutes of short stories, poetry and essays. The structure of the anthology itself highlights the dynamic nature of the collective diasporic experiences of the Afghans. As Said points out, the production of exile literature is an act of preserving the cultural identity of a diasporic community (Said 174). Since the trope of 'memory' is implicit within both 'nationalism' and 'exile', it gets reflected in almost all literary creations of the Afghan diaspora. Most Afghan narratives are strewn with experiences of departure and the 'last memories' of their homeland. In the short story "Ariana" written by Adeeba Rashid, the narrator recounts the last memories of Kabul as they head towards Pakistan, away from the bombings by the Sovient forces. As her cab drives past her "old school", the narrator bids "goodbye to the streets of Kabul…goodbye to the only home she knew for 25 years…goodbye to Afghanistan" (Rashid 6). The trope of 'memory' often converges with the trope of 'journey' in diasporic literature (Said 174). Thus, the authors often tend to facilitate a complicated understanding of both departure from the homeland as well as arrival into the land of settlement.

Hence, 'Afghanness' constitutes of not only being seamlessly merged into one's cultural roots but also interpreting the roots in new light. Over the years 'Diaspora' has emerged as constantly in evolution and thus, extremely protean and multi-dimensional. It is the process of constant revision and re-evaluation of the term, which has yoked the feature of fluidity to the same.

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