

The Problematic of Rootlessness and Belonging in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*

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Abstract

Homelessness and rootlessness are the common issues faced by the majority of the people in the contemporary world. Though one uses different terms and conditions like transnationalism, globalisation and border crossings, the ultimatum of this is migration which results in rootlessness. Migration may happen due to various reasons and based on the reasons for it, different terms are used to denote different conditions like exile, expatriate, diaspora and traveller/explorer. Diaspora studies was a buzz word in the end of the 20th century and in the first decade of the 21st century. It included both voluntary and non-voluntary migration. But one of its basic conditions is a sense of belonging with the homeland and rootlessness /non-belonging in the host country. Though the diaspora community lived for many years in the host country, they fondly address the land they left several years back as home. In the case of second-generation diaspora community, they experience in between position. They are born and brought up in the host country, which they consider as their home country. When they were treated as a foreigner or a migrant, they experience identity crises. The hypothesis of the present paper is to analyse select diaspora characters from the novel *Obasan* to project the problem of rootlessness. The study also attempts to present different aspects of belonging experience by the different generations of the diaspora characters in the select novel.

Key Words: Diaspora, belonging, rootlessness, identity, migration.

In the globalisation era, movement of humans is a wont. Humans move from their hometown/country for various reasons. Based on the reasons for movement, different terms like exile, expatriate, diaspora and immigrant are used. Exile happens due to forceful migration from the home country. In the case of other movements it can be either forced or voluntary but vary in its characteristics. Ramraj in his article "Diaspora and Multiculturalism" discusses the difference among immigrant, exile and expatriate writing. According to him "exile and expatriate writing is more immersed in the situation at home and the circumstance that prolong the individual's exile or expatriation" more than with "the emigre's or emigre's community's relationship with the dominant society" (229). Therefore according to him diaspora writing is often about "people who are linked by common histories

of uprooting and dispersal, common homelands, and common cultural heritages”, but due to the political and cultural particularities of the society, on the other hand it develops different cultural and historical identities (229).

The diaspora community differ from other types of movements with regard to the emotional attachment with the home country. Though they live as citizens of a settled land, they carry the land they left as their home land for many generations. Thus the diaspora community shares an emotional attachment with the homeland. Moreover they try to maintain their ethnic, religious and cultural identities in the new land with a desire to return home in the future. Though diaspora communities cannot be homogenised, they share some basic characteristics. William Safran in his article, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” gives six characteristics as the collective experiences of diaspora people:

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (83-84).

People belonging to the condition of diaspora, most often are oscillating between the land that they inhabit and the land that they had forgone. As a result of this they live in a constant state of rootlessness and continuously strive to return to their home countries. This kind of situation, problematic of belonging and rootlessness has been put down as a sense of doubleness filled with “nostalgia, filial piety and credulity” (47) by Dayal

Diaspora literature is an offshoot of the diasporas who have access to education and literacy. It characteristically focuses on discrimination, nostalgia, identity and a sense of belonging. Moreover it emphasizes on the writings of and by the diaspora community, wherein, writers convey their ambivalent position and their oscillating condition between the homeland and the settled land. Many of the works discuss the individual/communities attachment to the homeland and the urge to belong in the settled land that results in their hybrid existence. Regarding this Lau states thus,

They are people who are as multi-cultural as they are multi-lingual. They do not regard themselves as fully belonging in either culture, and have practically evolved a sub-culture peculiar to themselves. They try to take the best from both worlds, but suffer the sense of hybridity and cultural entanglement (241).

The main issue experienced by the diaspora community, in particular by the first generation diaspora community, is the feeling of nostalgia (belonging) and dislocation (rootlessness). Rushdie shares the same view and states that migrants, “are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars, of salt” (76). He further mentions while discussing the diaspora group, “that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (76). It leads to the understanding of the plights of the diaspora community.

Diaspora writing, mostly becomes a response to the lost homes and to issues such as dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, and identity. Almost all the diaspora works deal at least with one of these issues. Dislocation is one of the first feelings that haunt a diaspora community. As mentioned earlier dislocation happens due to voluntary and non-voluntary movements. In the case of voluntary movements, it can occur for i) educational need and ii) economical need. On the other hand, non-voluntary movements occur due to political compulsions and war. When diaspora people find themselves dislocated from the home society, they come out of their anguish through remembering and locating themselves in a nostalgic past. They try to escape from the reality of life in the settled land through nostalgia:

Nostalgia, by its very nature, often produces a romanticized perspective of the homeland. Indulgence in these illusions evoke a pseudo comfort and security which sustain the individual away from home...the motherland reconfigures into a phantom of displaced paradise (Sheik: 189).

Feeling of loneliness and alienation in the new country prevent the first generation diaspora community from mingling with others in the settled society. Even when they attempt to blend, most of the time it becomes problematic as they find that they are being discriminated. Diaspora people find complexity in getting out of the feelings of alienation, loneliness and loss which leads to the issue of rootlessness. Facing external problems like discrimination and identity crisis is easier for them than facing their inner problems like loneliness and alienation as it causes more suffering.

The present paper analysis Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* with the idea of rootlessness and belonging. Joy Kogawa is a Japanese-Canadian writer, who was born at Vancouver, British-Colombia in 1935. During the World War II, the Canadian government shifted the Japanese-Canadians to internment camps and has confiscated their properties. Consequently, Kogawa and her family members were forced to move to different parts of Canada and faced several difficulties. *Obasan* is a semi-autobiographical novel written by Kogawa based on the injustice faced by the Japanese-Canadians during and after the World War II. Turcotte states the novel’s “‘re-animating’ a history of oppression” that ultimately “forced Canadians to confront their own suppressed and unacknowledged violent history” (126). The novel’s plot is narrated through Naomi, the protagonist. Naomi through her family history explains the trials and tribulations of the Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. Naomi’s family was fragmented due to the discrimination of the Canadian government. Stephen and Naomi are left with their aunt Obasan and uncle as the other members of the family die in the

turmoil. The novel focuses on issues of rootlessness and identity of the Japanese diaspora community in Canada.

The diaspora community, initially try to adjust with the new culture and society into which they have moved. However, they are not willing to follow the new land's culture completely. Moreover, in spite of living for a longer period in the settled land, they still consider it as another country. This feel of rootlessness becomes stronger when they face discrimination in the settled land. Discrimination may happen due to various reasons. The settled country may feel offended by the oscillating condition of the diaspora community and it may create threat to its own culture. This view is shared by Wieviorka thus, "Under such circumstances the national majority considers migrants to be the root of its difficulties, and draws on racial definitions that combine the idea of natural race and the idea of culture in order to make them scapegoats" (71). Diaspora community is greatly discriminated based on various reasons like culture, nation and religion. Unfriendly relationship with a country may lead the settled land to exhibit its anger on immigrants from that particular country. This results in feel/ fear of rootlessness for the migrans. In *Obasan*, the Japanese-Canadian diaspora community in spite of living for many years as citizens of Canada, were discriminated after the Pearl Harbor incident. Before the Pearl Harbor incident, the Japanese Canadian diaspora community lived comfortable and luxurious life. Naomi recollects the comfort and luxury of this period,

When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. If I am weary, every place is a bet. No food that is distasteful must be eaten and there is neither praise nor blame for the body's natural functions. A need to urinate is to be heeded whether in public or visiting friends. A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if there is pain there is care simultaneously (56).

Later after World War II, the attitude of the Canadian government changed the life of the Japanese Canadian diaspora community. Japanese-Canadians were looked with suspicious eye by the Canadians and it considered all the Japanese-Canadians as spies of the Japanese government. Hence the Canadians decided to erase the Japanese community from Canada. The rejection by the Canadian government caused much pain to the Japanese-Canadians.

In one breath we are damned for being "inassimilable" and the next there's fear that we'll assimilate. One reporter points to those among us who are living in poverty and says, "No British subject would live in such conditions". Then if we improve our lot, another says, "There is danger that they will enter our better neighborhoods". If we are educated the complaint is that we will cease being the "ideal servant". It makes me choke. The diseases, the crippling, the twisting of our souls is still to come (87).

The Japanese-Canadians were forced to leave their house and property which were later confiscated by the Canadians. The family members were forced to relocate themselves in abandoned town or in mining settlements and forced to do difficult jobs. Naomi's grandparents were sent to Slocan, which is described as a ghost town. Naomi and her brother Stephen were separated from their parents and lived with their aunt and uncle. After some years Naomi's family was relocated from Slocan to Alberta, where children were allowed to

attend schools which were meant for the Japanese-Canadian family. Such experiences resulted in the confusion of identity among the second generation of diaspora community. Much later even in her adulthood, Naomi felt uncomfortable to think about the past. She states,

I am tired, I suppose, because I want to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words. I want to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness. I am tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum, unable to shout or sing or dance, unable to scream or swear, unable to laugh, unable to breathe out loud (183).

On the other hand Aunt Emily continuously talk about the past as she feels that past is future. She advised Naomi that, “You are your history. If you cut any of it off you’re an amputee. Don’t deny the past. Remember everything. If you’re bitter, be bitter. Cry it out! Scream!” (49-50). Aunt Emily’s diaries were short historical accounts of the discriminations experienced by the Japanese-Canadians. Emily’s narration discloses the buried historical and political facts of the Japanese-Canadian’s internment and her indictment against the covered-up crimes and euphemised language of the official letters and the documents released by the government. (6) The discrimination faced by the community stands as a permanent wound in their heart. Naomi states, “The tension everywhere was not clear to me then and is not much clearer today. Time has solved few mysteries. War and rumors of wars, racial hatreds and fears are with us still” (77-78). The Japanese- Canadians lived with the sense of rootlessness and in the condition of trishanku.

In the case of discrimination, the first and the second generation of the diaspora community have different reactions. The first generation accepts it in normal way, though it was painful, but the second and further generations, who believe the land as their home country are affected psychologically. Therefore, when they face discrimination, it hurts them and raises questions regarding their belonging. Moreover it makes them to be separated from the settled society and it raises predicament with regard to identity. Consequently, the second and the later generations of the diaspora community display a dual identity. Kwame Dawes’ words as quoted in Weedon’s article “Migration, Identity, and Belonging in British Black and South Asian Women’s Writing” substantiates this issue, ““They were born there or have grown up there all their life. They are uncomfortable with the notion of a home elsewhere for they have no sense of exile. Their sole exile is the exile within their own home country”” (28). In *Obasan*, when the Canadian government showed its discrimination against Japanese, it affected the Japanese-Canadians psychologically. Japanese-Canadians, who belonged to the second and the third generations, suffer more than the first generation people. As they are born and brought up in Canada, they consider it as their home country. When their own country people discriminated them, they were unable to understand it. Stephen and Naomi in *Obasan* could not understand the real situation and their condition when they were young. Their friends, without any reason changed as their enemies. For Stephen their condition was a riddle, “We are both the enemy and not the enemy” (70). At school Stephen and Naomi suffer because of racism. Once in school a girl said to Stephen, “All the Jap kids at school are going

to be sent away and they're bad and you're a Jap" (70). Therefore, most of the second generations in their adolescence begin to search their place of belonging.

From the above given analysis it is clear that the problematic of rootlessness is unavoidable for the first generation diaspora community as they leave their roots in the home country and try to pass their life with nostalgic feeling of their home country. In the case of the second and the further generations of the diaspora community, their plight of belonging is inevitable as they consider the nation in which they are born as their home country; but their appearances (in most of the cases) and cultural practices (parents' homeland) project them as different. This study indicates that the problem of rootlessness and belonging are unavoidable in diaspora literature.

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