

GEOGRAPHICAL DISPLACEMENT, DISTANCE, AND DIFFERENCES: THE MIGRANT'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Recent times have seen a global increase in the collective displacement of population for a variety of reasons (Shami and McCann). Instead of being considered as a phase of social evolution, political event, or natural force, geographical displacement should be seen as a phenomenon in its own right that needs direct investigation and explanation. 'Geographical displacement' as a term, does not only mean geographical shift; rather when one migrates from one's country, one carries one's culture, traditions, language as well as one's entire way of life to the place of resettlement. Thus, human migration experience is essentially a product of geographical displacement, distance between the homeland and the host nation, and the differences that exist between the migrants and the natives. This paper analyses the aspects of distance and differences which the migrants face in the process of geographical displacement and resettlement from select South Asian female migrant narratives of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Key Words: *Migration, Displacement, Distance, Geography, South Asian Literature*

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Introduction

Human migration can be viewed as a part of general evolutionary process (Pryor 35). The evolution of each new culture roots back to the assimilation of spatially displaced individuals (migrants) who shared a particular space at a particular juncture of time. Thus, every new culture is a constructive by-product of the process of migration. Hence, culture as a “strategy of survival” is transnational by nature (Tiwari 19-21). The contemporary cultural discourses, thus, are rooted in the spatiotemporal histories of cultural displacements.

When individuals or a group of individuals willingly migrate to settle in another part of the globe, they choose the geographical displacement with a purpose that fosters dreams in their minds -- dreams of a better life, dreams of a place that would magically change their state of survival and give them a better identity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni showcases this migrant dream in her magic realistic novel *The Mistress of Spices*, where several immigrant characters come to her protagonist *Tilo* - the ‘architect of the immigrant dream’ (28), for magical recipes in the form of blend of spices that promise to heal their worries and help them fulfil their dreams. These dreams have a lot to do with the perception of the migrants about the host country. Their fantasies and imaginations emerge from the lack of the prospects and opportunities in their parent country.

Geographical distance makes migrants rediscover themselves in the newness in order to find a mental space to settle in. In the words of Geographers Kenneth D Madsen and Ton van Naerssen: ‘In this type of multiethnic and multi-cultural society, the idea that state borders constitute membership and loyalty to a “national” community clashes with an indigenous sense of belonging to communities that cross those borders.’ (65)

Hence, the feeling of being an outsider is one of the major setbacks that migrants face in the initial phase of resettlement. Sidhwa describes her character Feroza’s experience with the immigrant officers at the airport in America where she is grilled up to the level of humiliation with questions regarding her identity: ‘It was Feroza’s first moment of realization – she was in a strange country amidst strangers.’ (Sidhwa 54-55) These kinds of experiences slow down the process of cultural assimilation as the

migrants feel as if they are in a transit, disconnected from their lives. In *The Namesake*, Ganguly family also feels the same when they come back to America: 'Though they are home they are disconcerted by the space, by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. They still feel somehow in transit, still disconnected from their lives, bound up in an alternative schedule, an intimacy only the four of them can share.' (Lahiri 87) Hence, it takes time for migrants to fit in to a 'new' culture.

Discussion

According to Geographer Andrew Jones: 'Differences between places shape how the nature of how things develop.' (3) When people migrate through that geographical distance, the first thing they feel is the geographical difference between the locations of the host country and their own. When Feroza's mother Zareen sees the aerial view of America from the aeroplane before landing, she realises how different the scene was 'from the crowded vistas of her flights over Lahore and Rawalpindi . . . Even from the sky, she could see that this was an extraordinarily clean part of the planet.' (Sidhwa 273) Whereas, in *The Lowland*, Shubash finds startling geographical similarities between Rhode Island and Calcutta, which helps him to come in terms with his displacement:

Certain physical aspects of the Rhode Island—a state so small within the context of America that on some maps its landmass was indicated only by a narrow pointing to its location—corresponded roughly to those of Calcutta, within India. Mountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of land to the south and west. Both places were close to the sea level, with estuaries where fresh and salt water combined. As Tollygunge, in a previous era, had been flooded by the sea, all of Rhode Island, he learned, had once been covered with sheets of ice (Lahiri 34).

The aspect of geographical displacement is evident not just in the differences and similarities between the geographical arrangement of places but also in the plants, animals, and birds the migrants see in the new land. When Lahiri's character Subhash arrives at Rhode Island, he finds the cultivated grass on his college fields 'nicer' than the grass back in 'Calcutta':

The university had begun as an agricultural school. A land grant college still surrounded by greenhouses, orchards, fields of corn. On the outskirts were lush pastures of scientifically cultivated grass, routinely irrigated and fertilized and trimmed. Nicer than the grass that grew inside the walls of the Tolly Club. But he was no longer in Tollygunge. He had stepped out of it

as he had stepped so many mornings out of dreams, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaninglessness in the light of day (Lahiri, *The Lowland*, 34).

In *An American Brat*, 'Zareen found the quiet in her strange surroundings in Denver eerie.' (Sidhwa 282) She compared it with the pitch dark night in Lahore that would be 'alive with a cacophony of insect and mammal noises.' (ibid) In a similar way, Subhash, in *The Lowland*, also discovers the shrill of crickets and chirps of new birds during his stay at Rhode Island: 'At night he heard the precise ticking of an alarm clock at the side of his bed. And in the background, like an ongoing alarm itself, the shrill thrum of crickets. New birds woke him in the morning, small birds with delicate chirps that ruptured sleep nevertheless.' (Lahiri 35)

The geographical differences make migrants feel their displacement in a stronger manner. The change in lifestyles makes them feel that they 'don't belong'. The feeling of being an outsider remains with them even after they migrate back to their homelands. In *The Namesake*, when Gogol and Shonali go to India for a short visit, 'their cousins and aunts and uncles ask them about their life in America, about what they eat for breakfast, about their friends at school. They look at pictures of their house on Pemberton Road' and are surprised to see 'carpets in the bathroom' (Lahiri 83). When the Gangulis visit Agra, it feels 'foreign' to them. Like tourists they stay in a 'hotel with a swimming pool, sipping bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, paying by credit card' and are surprised to find a mini America inside the hotel and restaurants where 'they are the only Indians apart from the serving staff' (Lahiri 84-85). This experience of cultural difference makes them stand in between belongingness and unbelongingness in their own country.

As migration is 'the permanent or semi-permanent change of residence of an individual or group of people over a significant distance' (Husain 150); along with the differences, the distance which migrants travel, both geographical and psychological, make migrants isolated. With time, they find the distance in every aspect of their present lives, so much so that even in the lecture on 'bridge construction' Lahiri's character Subhash finds relations to distance between India and America: 'He had learned from one of his professors about the bridge's construction. End to end, he was told, the wires of all the suspended cables would span just over eight thousand miles. It was the distance between America and India; the distance that now separated him from his family.' (Lahiri, *The Lowland*, 65) Just as 'distance' becomes a significant factor of association in human mind; similarly, mind also has the tendency of associating melodies with memories.

Migrants often get reminded of the distance when they listen to certain melodies from homeland which their brains are associated with. Divakaruni and Sidhwa very clearly state this aspect in their novels:

Noise from the karaoke bar below hits me in sudden blasts as guests enter and exit. Bollywood songs, nostalgic old favourites, the immigrant's longing to capture home. In India, I never cared for this kind of music, but now as I hear it, homesickness twists my insides...I am far from my loved ones as it is possible to be while still remaining on this planet. Loneliness falls on me like snow over an empty field (Divakaruni, *Oleander Girl: A Novel*, 97).

May it be the characters Korobi or Feroza, every migrant occasionally goes through this experience in the process of accepting the distance, while staying in a foreign land. Lahiri's character Korobi feels homesick and lonely after listening to Bollywood songs which she did not pay a heed to in India; and Sidhwa's character Feroza is moved by the blow of trumpet, a commonly used musical instrument in India and Pakistan: 'A trumpet note, loud and pure, spun into the air to greet the fading light, committing the evening to pleasure and beauty. The guitar, in a subtle transition, carried the note where the trumpet left off. Feroza had never expected the melody of an alien music to move her so deeply' (Sidhwa 106)

Apart from music, languages play a significant part in the formation of one's identity for they are the bearers of thought. They serve as one of the significant carriers of culture. In a foreign land, when someone looks at anything written in their mother tongue, they feel the touch of homeland that lingers in their hearts. Ashima just like any other migrant finds herself at comfort in America when she touches the printed alphabets in her mother tongue – 'The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to touch, are a perpetual comfort to her.' (Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 6)

Conclusion

'Geographical displacement' as a term, does not only mean geographical shift; rather when one migrates from one's country, one carries one's culture, traditions, 'language' as well as one's entire way of life to the place of resettlement (Goozé and Lander 101-120). In the process of expatriation, a migrant crosses political, social, and cultural boundaries along with the geographical ones; due to which the migrant faces psychological and cultural disintegration. On the contrary, when considered from a constructive point of view, displacement can bring together societies and cultures through the idea of transculturalism thereby strengthening cross-cultural and

transnational bonds towards a peaceful co-existence of human beings beyond differences and diversities.

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