

Summary of “Redefining Diaspora”

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The term diaspora has recently expanded to include the experiences of minority communities that have migrated to new countries, alongside the more commonly associated ones – Jewish, Armenian and African. Connotations of Suffering, forced migration and victimhood were the defining characteristics of any diasporic experience until very late into the twentieth century and Cohen sets out to discredit this narrow understanding of diasporic experience, as it does not take into consideration the voluntary and semi-voluntary dispersions. To overcome the monopoly of narratives of victimhood and coercion in diasporic experiences, Cohen comes up with a list of categories like labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas. But, even though such categorization is helpful in a better understanding of the diasporic experience, it still remains problematic since experiences of any community are too varied and diverse to be straitjacketed in any single category.

Cohen posits certain conditions which a community needs to meet to be called diasporic – migration should happen to more than one place, the community should maintain “a strong collective identity” by sharing particular narrative traditions about their origin and experience of migration, a problem in assimilation in the new country – and these distinguish a diasporic subject from an immigrant. Aisha Khan moves from the theoretical to exemplary – Indo-Trinidadians of the Caribbean. For her, retaining a historical consciousness about the act of getting uprooted is the most essential condition to consider a community diasporic. Memorialization of the Lhasa Uprising by the Tibetans serves as the unifying factor for them and their individual diasporic selves. Khan is focusing on exactly this type of acute historical awareness of the act of being uprooted. However, there is a sharp contrast between these two communities in how they create their imaginary homelands in their narratives, how they interact with the natives of host country (a term that is problematic as it is because it emphasizes the outsider status of the settlers), and their politics – regional or international. These two cases serve to highlight the complex nature of Diaspora which forces the theoreticians to re-develop and reconsider its definition to include the myriad facets of diasporic experience.

Redefining Diaspora

The term Diaspora emerges from the Greek word “diasperein”, which refers to the botanical concept of the fruitful scattering and sowing of seeds. Collins English Dictionary describes Diaspora primarily as “the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian and Roman conquests of Palestine”; however over the course of the last two decades of the twentieth century the term has come to encompass experiences of various communities other than the traditionally considered diasporic ones like Jewish, Armenians and Africans. The term is now generally used to refer to minority communities of migrant origins in a nation-state; they or their ancestors might have resettled in the new land. However, it was not always so.

After the destruction of the Jewish temple in 586 B.C., the Jewish people migrated to Babylon which “subsequently became a codeword among Jews...for the afflictions, isolations, and insecurity of living in a foreign place...oppressed by an alien ruling class” (Cohen 3). The emphasis of various theorists, till very late in the twentieth century, had been on this catastrophic origin of the Jewish diaspora and it was understood to be the norm for any diasporic experience, so much so that the term had come to symbolize forced and involuntary migratory practice only. But as Cohen goes on to show in his book, this type of reading is not merely restrictive but also reductive since it fails to incorporate numerous types of voluntary cultural and ethnic dispersions that are to be found in the modern-day world. He even creates a typology of various diasporic communities, classifying them according to the dominant narrative in their experience of migration - “victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas” (Cohen x) – effectively bringing to an end the centrality of the

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trope of victimhood in any discourse about diasporas, which used to be the case previously. The nature of diasporic activity as being traumatic and violent is encountered only in specific traditions, not all. It might or might not be forced. Its nature cannot be generalized. Cohen, at the very outset of his book asserts this fact when he says that “the idea of a diaspora thus varies greatly”. (ix)

However, categorizing any particular set of people together as a group and fixing its identity in a rigid manner is impossible because all these distinctions and categories are way more fluid than their names would suggest. The experiences went through by any particular community are too varied and numerous to be straitjacketed into any particular category. And because of the cosmopolitan nature of the cities in the modern-day world, it is becoming more and more difficult to do so. Therefore his classification is merely indicative than descriptive. Even then it helps him and other theorists like him in extracting the term Diaspora out of the “exclusive purchase” (Anand 213) which the victim tradition of the Jewish history used to have over the term. Theorists like him seek to move away from the erstwhile privileged status of the word as referring specifically to Jewish history – it could include people moving for voluntary or semi-voluntary reasons and not just be limited to only those who were forced or coerced into migrating.

Emma Patchett points out that “The Jewish model can be useful when attempting to map or put into perspective particular diasporic group trajectories in the context of alternative historical Diasporas”. In a similar vein, Cohen admits to the usefulness of centrality of the Jewish tradition in any formulation of a diasporic study, as is also attested to by other scholars, but he acknowledges the need to transcend it “without making [it] a definitive model” (qtd. in Cohen 2), to include various other diasporic narratives and experiences of various other diasporic communities and to present the concept of Diaspora as it is “travelling in new global conditions” (qtd. in Cohen 2). Cohen says in another essay:

Safran was strongly influenced by the underlying paradigmatic case of the Jewish diaspora, but correctly perceived that many other ethnic groups were experiencing analogous circumstances...in their places of settlement. (Solid 2)

Deriving from William Safran, Cohen develops his own consolidated list of the common characteristics which, according to him, are shared by any and every diasporic community. He places special currency on Safran’s conceptualization of Diaspora but modifies it to make it more in tune with the recent migratory exercises of various communities. Dispersal of the members of a particular community to more than one foreign land seems to be an important condition for Cohen for him to consider a community a diaspora. In most of the cases, the communities are seen to migrate in order to have access to better living conditions, especially in the times of Globalization which has “enhanced the practical, economic and affective roles of diasporas” (Cohen xii). This is not to take away from the suffering of many other diasporic communities who were made to migrate involuntarily. However, in majority of the cases, what appears to be a voluntary reason to migrate from one’s homeland is judged as less disturbing and qualitatively different from one’s being compelled out of one’s native country. These two experiences may not be as different from each other because the former might be an equally potent reason as the latter to leave off one’s own country in search for more welcoming places. Nonetheless, a community could be considered a diaspora only if the people belonging to it have been successful in maintaining a “strong collective identit(y)” (Cohen ix), that is they share particular narrative traditions regarding their homelands, the process of their migration and the problems, if any, faced in the country and memorialize these traditions, either orally or in written form. “A strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future must exist in order to permit a diasporic consciousness to emerge or be retained” (Cohen 24) and those who have been able to forego their older identities and get mixed into the new country could not, and very appropriately so, be considered a part of a diasporic community. Every immigrant is not always a diasporic entity. As is very aptly demonstrated by the example of the South African woman in Aisha Khan’s essay, the diasporic consciousness also waxes and wanes over time. The South African woman, whose mother had migrated from India, refuses to acknowledge any connection whatsoever with the country and is even dismissive about it. The

question of when a diaspora ceases to be diaspora arises here. Since the woman in question is hardly aware of the process of the migration her mother had to go through, is it even fair to consider her a diasporic subject? As Cohen points out “there is frequently a considerable reluctance by those who have achieved national social mobility to accept too close a link with a despised or low status ethnic group abroad” (25). Attachment to native homeland is there in most of the diasporic communities but Khan seeks to move ahead of that.

Like Dibyesh Anand, Aisha Khan also moves away from the general discussion about diaspora, something which Cohen is concerned with, to the particular case of Indo-Trinidadians living in the Caribbean. She looks at diaspora as an essentially historical phenomenon in that she gives privilege to the act of being uprooted, experienced by the migrants, over any other factor as essentially informing the diasporic consciousness. Cohen, in the Introduction to his book, had mentioned “an inescapable link with past migration history” (ix) in the memory of a diasporic entity which he did not elaborate upon. It is this link that Khan goes on to explore and makes the focal point of her essay. According to her the migrant populations which have retained the common consciousness of this act of uprooting so much so that it informs their sense of self could only be said to have a diasporic identity. The reason of movement could be just or unjust but only a retention of this memory, rooted in the historical act of getting uprooted, makes a community diaspora. Theorization about the particular act of displacement and a “shared ideology of displacement...[and] consciously interpreting one’s culture as indelibly marked for all time by the experience of being uprooted” (Khan 148) is what makes a community a diaspora. Let us consider the example of Mohajids, the Urdu-speaking Muslims who had migrated from Indian states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar etc. and settled in urban provinces of Sindh in Pakistan. Their subsequent generations do not consider India their ancestral homeland but they have retained a cultural consciousness of the act of being uprooted. Memorialization of the specific act of uprooting and migration is, according to Dibyesh Anand also, the most prominent feature of any diasporic community. As is to be seen in the example given by Anand, the Tibetans’ identity is crucially marked by the one particular event of the Lhasa Uprising of 10 March 1959 which is the common factor that brings them all together in their diasporic experiences. The memory of the traumatic event of Chinese Invasion actually acted as a uniting force which brought together various different groups who previously discriminated among themselves as individual groups. This brings us to another crucial aspect of a diasporic community – Creation of an imagined homeland and creation of not just the homeland but also the identity as the natives of that homeland.

Diasporas are actively involved in not just the creation of their homelands but also the preservation of it, however different the real homeland might be from their imagined versions. Robin Cohen’s point of an imagined homeland “that only resembles the original history and geography of the diaspora’s natality in the remotest way” (23) is very pertinent in the case of a pan-Tibetan identity as an allegiance to an overarching state structure of Tibet, an “idealized, hyper-realized homeland” (Anand 218), even an acceptance of the Dalai Lama as the leader of the nation is all part of the post-exile politics which is in direct contrast to the local identities that previously marked the region of Tibet. This is very much in keeping with Vijay Mishra’s diagnosis of the diasporas – “[They] construct homelands in ways that are very different from people of the homelands themselves” (424). Taking cue from Cohen’s list of characteristics of Diaspora, this creation of an imagined homeland, accompanied by an anxiety to preserve the Tibetan culture points to us to an acute diasporic consciousness among the Tibetans. In a very similar fashion, the diasporic consciousness of the Indian immigrants in the Caribbean which is informed by the “allegorical narratives that represent vulnerability through ignorance” is of a very political nature. But their political struggle is different than that of the Tibetans as theirs is an “insistence on the presence, the visibility, of their communities within the nation state” (Khan 143) while Tibetan community, by and large, itself cultivates a distance from the people of the new country which Anand refers to as “communal border patrolling” (215), a feature which is also echoed by Mishra when he talks about the anxiety of “racial purity” (424) Hindus exhibit against the Muslims in the

original homelands and in extension is exhibited by Hindu diaspora for whom the “conservative politics of the homeland may be presented as the desirable norm” (424). Coming back to the point, the Indo-Trinidadians’ “thematic reiteration of betrayal” (Khan 143) is a strategy employed to bring together the members of the community in an “ethnic group competition” (143) against the Afro-Trinidadians, the majority group. Diasporic Consciousness therefore is not merely “a defense mechanism against slights committed by the host country against the minority” (qtd. in Khan 147) but also a medium of mobilizing people into coming together. The insistence on a collective identity is also brought forth through an emphasis on proper observance of rituals. The “kuttha” among Hindus and “kutbah” among Muslims are the main agencies through which religious knowledge is imparted. But they also work as important political mechanisms which keep a diasporic community united. Such intellectual arming of one’s people through propagation of one’s cultural values is to be seen in the Tibetan diaspora as well.

Tibetan diaspora also shows that Diasporas have international implications as well as is to be seen in the case of “Tibetan exiles...highlighting the case of Tibet as a problem of international politics” (Anand 217). The Tibetan community is very well knit and as Anand points out:

The long-term movement of Tibetans from this region to the Western world is discouraged unless it is considered favorable to the wider goal of not only preserving but also spreading specific aspects of Tibetan culture. (215)

We see Tibetan community as a very politically and ideologically influential one, having a lot of international support for their cause, which they have engendered with their tireless machinations and strategies. Hence it comes as no surprise that “No visit of senior Chinese state officials abroad is complete without pro-Tibetan protests” (Anand 217).

Considering these facts, there is no doubt that the word Diaspora has developed and mutated. Anand points out the fact that the term diaspora has only recently been attached to the experiences of the Tibetans living in South Asia, therefore giving another proof of how the term is expanding and “travelling”. However, Anand warns at the very beginning that the term should not be considered synonymous to “exiles or refugees” (211), and very rightly so. Although an obvious overlap between diaspora and exile is the act of migration from one’s native place, the key difference is that the term exile could be used for an individual as well as collective whereas the term diaspora could be applied only to a collective experience. Anand also points at the privileging of diasporic narratives coming out of the West – Europe and America – in favor of the versions like that of Tibet, therefore exhorting for a re-examination of the word Diaspora and its definitions. He avers that Tibetan diaspora narrative could have “constitutive influence on its present day meanings” (213), as a reconsideration of other narratives would too. However, one should beware of diluting the concept too much and heed the advice of Khachig Tololyan against making the term “promiscuously capacious”.

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