

The Fractured Self: A Study of Iqbal Ramoowalia's *The Death of a Passport*

Mehak Bhola

Abstract

Although the different diasporic groups have been able to sustain transnational connections across borders, yet they endure estrangement accompanied by an incessant instinct of incongruity while they search for the necessary means to obtain settlement in their respective host lands. It is the constant reminder of being 'out of place' which never escapes an immigrant's subconscious. The realization of being an outsider, casted aside within a foreign setting achingly kindles diasporic restlessness. Even though the immigrant experience might not convey instances of explicit hostility, however, it definitely puts up with isolation. This estrangement is hidden as much as it is evident and exists in the form of cultural alienation. Punjabi diasporic fiction also deals with the issues of the loss of identity, social isolation and cultural shock and how such issues impact the diasporic experience. The present paper attempts to analyze the influence of similar socio-political estrangements upon troubled and anxious diasporic condition of immigrants resulting in the fragmentation of their identity as characterized in Iqbal Ramoowalia's narrative, *The Death of a Passport*.

Keywords: Cultural alienation; Diaspora; Identity crisis; Isolation; Migration.

Transnationalism, Diaspora and Transnational Feminism

There are varied definitions which aim to put forward a lucid set of images in order to construct a singular meaning of the term "transnationalism", however, it is only possible to comprehend the ideology located behind the concept of transnationalism by considering multiple set of emigration-al speculations together. Several researchers of migration studies have inferred upon how immigrants maintained parallel connections with their homelands while acquiring settlement in their respective host lands. Exchanges and interactions which travel across borders are a regular and sustained part of migrants' realities and activities. Transnationalism cre-

ates a greater degree of association between individuals, communities and societies across borders, bringing about change in the social, cultural, economic and political landscapes of societies of origin and destination. However, certain veterans of the theory of Transnational feminist studies such as Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Richa Nagar, Uma Narayan and many more have utilized the aforesaid term to draw integral conclusions about the positioning of immigrant women, especially third world women in a global context. Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr have argued about the significance of forming a transnational feminist solidarity in order to address and eventually resolve similar issues in their seminal text entitled as, *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. They allude to the findings of Grewal and Kaplan in order to contextualize the term “transnational” within Transnational Feminist studies as:

In a discussion of transnational sexuality studies, Grewal and Kaplan (2001) specify at least five kinds of foci where the term transnational has gained currency: (a) in theorizing migration as a transnational process; (b) to signal the demise or irrelevance of the nation-state in the current phase of globalization; (c) as a synonym for diasporic; (d) to designate a form of post colonialism; and (e) as an alternative to the problematic of the global and the international, articulated primarily by Western or Euro-American second-wave feminists as well as by multinational corporations, for which “becoming global” marks an expansion into new markets. (4)

The statement elicits a lucid emphasis upon the relation between transnationalism and diaspora as they seem to share a symbiotic relationship. However, the inherent presence of post colonialism seems to acquire a mendacious presence within the studies. Since, “transnational” appears to have been employed as synonymous with “diasporic” within Transnational Feminist studies, it becomes quite imperative to search for its semblance within diasporic literature.

Punjabi Indo-Canadian Diaspora

In his detailed cartographic study of the Punjabi diasporic community entitled as *The Sikh Diaspora: A Search for Statehood*, Darshan Singh Tatla mentions, “Of about a million Sikhs abroad, over three-quarters live in just three counties; namely, Britain, Canada and the United States. For a community of 16 million, the proportion of overseas Sikhs is strikingly high, far above any other group, except Gujaratis and Mirpuris” (Tatla 41). Therefore, the community has established a firm ground for them-

selves over the years and has been able to seek growth in various disparate fields irrespective of confronting unfavorable circumstances during their settlement. The arrival of South Asian groups in Canada and especially the East Indians sought initiation with the advent of the twentieth century. The period registered a proliferation in the arrival of Sikh immigrants as due to the rapid altercations emerging around the globe in terms of social, economic, cultural as well as political instabilities due to the growing insurgencies against imperialism. However, the partisan intervention of the state apparatus in espousing anti-immigrant sentiment to check further expansion of the Sikh community could be underlined through understanding the obtuse “continuous journey” clause, added as Order of Council in 1910. One of the initial procedures to manage the influx of Sikh immigrants was found in the establishment of such an antithetical clause that granted the immigration to only those migrants who travelled from their respective locations to Canada, having undergone a continuous journey without making any halts along the way. Amita Handa, an Indo-Canadian theorist and currently a professor at York University has been furnishing her inferences regarding the contemporary Punjabi diasporic population residing in Canada with her academic hypothesis and intellect. In her influential text, *Silk Saris and Mini Skirts: South Asian Women Walk the Tightrope of Culture* states:

The anxiety about new immigrants in Canada first surfaced at the turn of the century when, due to labor needs, British settlers in Canada began to recruit workers. South Asians first arrived in Canada in 1900. They were predominantly Punjabi Sikhs who settled in British Columbia. Most of them worked in the sawmills and lumberyards, at railway construction, mining, fishing, or as agricultural labourers...While little attention was paid to the first South Asian immigrants, their increase in numbers captured the province’s attention by 1906 (as demonstrated by the rise in anti-Asian sentiment); by 1908, there was a complete ban on South Asian immigrants. (Handa 46)

Handa also emphasizes upon the reasons which propelled the South Asians to mobilize themselves under the critical colonial circumstances in order to search for better employment as well as accommodation. Though their arrival in Canada largely remained unnoticed initially, however, the anti-Asian sentiment as pointed out by Handa led to a complete prohibition towards South Asian immigration in Canada until 1960s. As their population increased in the state, so did the white anxieties related to non-white folk arriving in the territory as they assumably became a threat in the white imagination in terms of immorality and delinquency which

eventually established the East-West dichotomy within the dominant discourse. Therefore, "The power struggle between East and West, and the construction of their respective identities, is based on their relationship to one another; the meaning of each is constructed through the marking out of symbolic boundaries. Women are central to this boundary" (Handa 57).

Several global diasporas have come forward with their distinct set of writings to express similar contradictions associated with the cultural battle between the East and West and how immigrant women experience its severity. Diasporic writers have come forward with the description of the brutal challenges which they confronted during their own journey. Amidst the wide umbrella of diasporic literature, Punjabi diasporic fiction holds a significant position, as far as dealing with various issues of conflicted migrant sensibilities is concerned. The characters evidently depict several instances where they are seen falling victims to cultural alienation, economic exploitation, social isolation leading to inflict psychological violence upon their sensitive condition which they come across at different levels during the process of settlement, along with the identity crisis which further pushes their subconscious into a state of uncertainty. As a result, the diasporic consciousness suffers from fragmentation which exerts a severe effect on the psyche of the displaced. "Therefore, the words *exile*, *diaspora*, *migration*, *dislocation*, *deracination* and *displacement* are the leading metaphors used to express not only the disorientation but also ideological and existential fragmentation", describes Mandal (40).

Culture and Identity Politics

Culture has been defined as the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. It is also the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group. This definition runs in coherent accordance with Williams' observations and consequently lays down the kinship amid culture and society. Also, it is equally noteworthy to analyze how identity is influenced by culture and in turn through society. Culture needs identity just as much as identity is helped formed by culture. There exists a symbiotic relationship between the two. The process of the formation of a cultural identity begins at a very early stage. It starts to exert its psychological imprint from childhood and continues to do the same until an individual approaches adulthood. It runs as a subconscious desire to live inside our groups, define ourselves through them and even belong to them. The sense of unity which arises out of a cultural congregation justified through belief, induces a sense of belonging with each other and at the

same time develops a state of psychological comfort with the collective consciousness of the group. Therefore, it is fairly evident that people are not born with culture, rather they are raised into it. These objectives can be easily traced within the Cultural Identity Theory. A renowned critic and professor of the same field of research, Myron Lustig argues that cultural identities “are central, dynamic and multifaceted component of one’s self-concept” (Lustig 133). Thus, it can be understood that the cultural practices of a particular society not only build intellectual kinship amongst its subjects but also run intimately with one’s concept of oneself. Although there are numerous other factors such as location, religious beliefs, ethnicity, cultural traditions etc. which blend in together resulting in the generation of a homogeneous cultural subconscious, yet there is one element in particular that holds a separate place in the construction of one’s conception of self. Language holds a rather substantial space as far as the composition of identity is concerned. It happens to be a contributing factor in chiseling an individual’s intellect. Language transcends its original purpose of serving communication and acquires a more profound region within one’s psyche the moment it begins to communicate expression. When language combines with emotion to beget expression, that is when it essentially begins to act as a contributing factor in strengthening one’s collective socio-cultural sensibility. As a result, it secures an inherent space amidst one’s cultural identity.

Keeping in mind, how closely one’s culture runs beside an individual’s conception of oneself, it becomes rather significant to explore the challenges which it encounters while seeking settlement in a transnationalist space. Initially, it is rather necessary to note that a transnationalist movement, be it voluntary or involuntary, begins with uprooting a native from his place of origin and later expecting one to easily situate himself/herself amidst a completely unfamiliar territory while establishing an accommodation for oneself. However, it is critical to observe the whole process of his settlement closely in order to bring out the severity hidden underneath his diasporic experience. Despite the various attempts carried out through globalization in blurring the boundaries across nations, yet the ground reality cannot be overlooked. The technological advancements have indeed brought comfort to the migrant population by providing countless mediums to seek a much more enhanced and accessible communication reaching back home, still they have only been able to somehow reduce the distance virtually. They are the varied mediums of ‘virtual’ communication. As a result, the immigrants continuously bear the unescapable weight of homeland nostalgia upon their psyche and endure homelessness. The entire network of the ‘world wide web’ has indeed brought many families closer to their migrated members and the efficient

means of digital communication have reduced the vast distance to a great extent, still an immigrant has been unable to overcome the inevitable 'homesickness'. In order to rise above this haunting sentiment of recurring homeland nostalgia, he/she undergoes a series of ordeals. It requires a resolute sense of determination in order to withstand the whole process of settlement. This is partially because the migrant's subconscious is hungover upon the memories of one's homeland in spite of securing easy access of communication. Although different diasporic groups have been able to easily sustain transnational connections with their native people across borders, nevertheless they endure estrangement and incongruity while they search for the necessary means to obtain settlement in their respective hostlands. It is the awareness of being 'out of place' which never escapes an immigrant's subconscious. The realization of being an outsider, casted aside within a foreign setting majorly kindles diasporic restlessness. Even though the diasporic experience might not convey instances of explicit hostility, however, it definitely puts up with isolation. This estrangement is hidden as much as it is evident and exits in the form of cultural alienation.

Diasporic Identity and Crisis

The issues and concerns pertaining to cultural alienation hold a major place amidst Punjabi diasporic literature as well as migrant studies. In order to comprehend the several reasons behind furnishing strong emphasis upon cultural estrangement, it is rather critical to position it within the context of Cultural Identity Theory. Here, the intimacy which an individual shares with his/her cultural identity acquires an advanced dynamic. Having established how one's native culture lies adjacent to his/her conception of self; it becomes significant to observe the reasons behind its breakdown as it comes in contact with an unfamiliar and indifferent culture. As culture turns out to be a defining tool in shaping one's identity, it is fathomable to encounter its fragmentation upon the loss of such a fundamental organ. The various practices, codes, conducts, ethics etc. which were actually the binding adhesive of a collective consciousness absorb a relentless blow as one migrates. Although the native community is affected after losing one of its member, yet it is the member who is affected the most. After landing across the border, it is the displaced who suffers more and the cultural differences which he/she observes here, disturb the migrant's already anxious psyche. He/she begins to look out for some essential means of survival in order to acquire settlement. During this whole process, the immigrants remain unable to comprehend the reason behind the incessant frustration which claws at their sanity. In the meanwhile, their subconscious is heavily burdened with the cultural loss and

as a result the diasporic identity breaks into fragments. Unable to identify with the host society and its strange culture, the migrant's psyche is pushed into a state of anxiety, a constant state of restlessness. Since he/she has lost such a significant aspect of "self-concept", the immigrant undergoes identity-crisis (Lustig 133). In his text, *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha explains the process of the construction of cultural hybridity as observed in the case of western transnationalist displacement. He argues that under such circumstances the presumptive binaries of colonizer and colonized, self and the other, East and West always runs underneath one's racial consciousness which especially becomes an area of conflict for an oriental immigrant seeking settlement in First world locations. The cultural identity in such a case thus becomes a fluid concept as it undergoes different frames of cultural arrangement and is expected to adapt itself according to its new environment. Amidst this whole conflicting arrangement, it is the diasporic sensibility which suffers the loss. Somdatta Mandal opines, "Living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from old and new cultures and homelands" (Mandal 41). Hence, the ruthless onslaughts endured by the diasporic identity in the form of social, cultural along with racial alienation forces it in the direction of crisis.

The Death of a Passport

Iqbal Ramoowalia, an Indo-Canadian writer of the Punjabi diasporic literature has established a prominent position within the prominent field. His fictional characters provide a deep insight into the intricate diasporic realities. He describes the gradual recession of a person's individuality after enduring the impact of displacement and takes the description to its farthest extent through his narrative imagination. Through the tragic narrative of his text, *The Death of a Passport*, he brings out the abject condition of various migrants attempting to find their own social positioning amidst the wide Western world. Iqbal Ramoowalia wishes to lay out the hidden reality which lies behind the sparkling image of the West. Essentially, it is through the protagonist of his novel Seema, that the author attempts to bring forward the adversity of dislocation. Ramoowalia outlines the narrative of a woman who has been disowned by her husband and is abandoned to find an accommodation of her own amidst a completely alien country. However, the instances depicting Seema's condition while she was living with her husband were equally onerous. She was forcibly married off to Anmol and sent to an entirely unfamiliar place to thrive on her own. Though she was well provided for, but never looked after. She never found content within her marital relationship and decided to leave

the wretched place for good instead of living a life surrounded by rejection and indifference. However, after this instant she only a catastrophic series of misfortunes. Seema knocks at the door of her only friend in Canada, Veena. Unfortunately, her husband's ill-intentions forced Seema to vacate the one place where she was beginning to acquire comfort. This seems as if it is only the inception of a series long struggle which will only worsen at every next step. Subsequently, she somehow comes in contact with Rajan Brar. He employs her in his warehouse under a great deal of risk as Seema has been characterized an illegal immigrant. The ferocity of Seema's growing anxiety depicts the egregious extent of her socio-economic exploitation as an immigrant woman, debilitated under the burden of being an illicit citizen in the state of Canada. The narrative recounts her as acutely troubled and entrapped between her pseudo identity, 'Reeta Gill' which she uses to shield her illegal status from the State and her own. Through such depiction, the author has attempted to bring forth the condition of a certain group of Punjabi women, who migrated from their homeland due to marital reasons as 'dependents' and under an inherent obligation towards familial systems. It manifests how immigrant women like Seema have been subjugated under the global capitalist system as soon as they become vulnerable and exposed to the hegemonic system which suppresses them not only on the basis of their racial identity but also their economic and sexual identities.

The divided psychological state leads which led her into a state of constant restlessness emerged from the complete absence of economic activity for her in the host society. Her anxiety was further fueled by Reeta's incessant threats to expose Seema before the police. As a result, she developed an uncanny solicitude. She was constantly on edge and kept thinking that she could get arrested any moment. This consistent restlessness was consuming her inside out. She was fretting physically as well as emotionally at all times as, "The frequent urge to run to the washroom kept her away from the desk most of the time. The water bottles had never run out that fast before. The serviette box on the table found itself depleted in just an hour, filling in the garbage can with sheets of napkins drenched in her cold sweats. Queer needles did not cease their onslaught: They continued to rise in her blood each time the phone rang" (Ramoowalia 104). The description makes her mental dilemma precisely evident. It is the fear of deportation which pushed her subconscious to the extent where she developed severe anxiety and panic. Through her condition, Ramoowalia describes the severity to which emigrational struggle can affect the very psyche of an individual. Seema gave into her overwhelming fear and such was the extent of her austerity that she fled from Rajan's warehouse. The phobia of deportation forced her to give up the haven which she inde-

pendently built for herself over the years. Seema's adverse condition and fragmented psyche becomes more than evident in the text and a consequence of her illegal status which restrains her from obtaining a decorous socio-economic position. Moreover, it becomes a relentless handicap which turns out to be the reason of her social, economic, psychological as well as sexual exploitation. Throughout the course of the novel, Seema engages herself in distinct economic activities in Toronto, however, only leading herself towards tragic and abusive circumstances every time. Her illegal status along with several other diasporic challenges in the form of culture shock, unemployment, racial subjugation and sexual abuse have been underlined as the reasons behind Seema's tragic transnational existence by the author to depict the troubling circumstances endured by immigrant women like her.

Ramoowalia has skillfully crafted another character in his text which initially appears as a secondary one, however, it is also through the analysis of this character the trauma of migration is realized. The tragedy which Sodhi undergoes is extremely unsettling. He came to Seema's rescue when she was subjected to deportation and suggested that she can only escape the inevitability of her circumstance if she agrees to marry him and subsequently turn a legal immigrant. It is through her observations that the reader learns about Sodhi's background. He turned an orphan at the age of seven and kept fiddling among different relatives thereafter. He executed petty crimes to somehow ensure his survival as he grew. Eventually, he landed in Canada and obtained the legal stamp through his survival techniques.

The detailed description of his past provides the reader with an insight into his conflicted psyche as the cultural estrangement and social rejection which he experienced post-migration seem to be responsible for engendering his angst. As Seema came to live with him, his lecherous motives become more explicit. However, the narrative gradually unfolds to depict that he is a victim of migration as much as she is. At several instances, the ethnocentric bias of the white imagination along with the racial restrictions turns quite apparent in the novel against the immigrant's condition. Even though Sodhi was a landed immigrant, he had to engineer his own accidents in order to draw money from his insurance so that he could ensure his survival. Notably, the author portrays the mercurial spiral which captures an immigrant's consciousness because of continually confronting an incessant inadequacy of economic activity due to his oriental descendancy, putatively rendering him/her subjected to various forms intersectional oppressions. The author eloquently displays the magnitude with which such racial, cultural and economic standards affect-

ed Sodhi's psychological state as all the conflicted emotions collided in his conscience and transfixed him into a fragmented state of mind. His final speech seems overwhelmingly incoherent where his anxiety overpowers him and he's thrown into hysteria. He turns unable to bear the solitude which was a counterpart of his exilic condition. Consequently, his diasporic identity was fractured as he gave himself to his overwhelming hysteria. His final speech appears to be laced with enmeshed emotions where he pleads before Seema to save him from arrest. Eventually, his fractured consciousness leads him towards suicide. Ramoowalia explores the farthest extent to which a migrant's diasporic condition drives him towards a fragmented self as his exilic condition decimated all his hopes and ambitions emerged as a consequence of the a ruthless social, economic and political hegemonic system which incessantly pushed him at a marginal social position.

Conclusion

Iqbal Ramoowalia has deconstructed the multiple layers of the diasporic struggle majorly through the characterization of Seema and Sodhi. Both of them depict an oriental immigrant's struggle in a Neo-Colonial era. In Seema's case, her gender identity along with her illegitimate status turns out to be her nemesis whereas Sodhi's strife illustrated the damage caused by the several organs of the global capitalist network and how it chases an immigrant till he forfeits. Ramoowalia's focus remains on foregrounding the damage caused to one's diasporic consciousness in the contemporary era. A constant victim of socio-cultural marginalization, the immigrant also experiences severe racial isolation. It is because of such hostile circumstances that he's unable to overcome homeland nostalgia. In addition, cultural alienation adds to his misery. It is due to this cultural shock which stabs the diasporic identity with such magnitude that it becomes incapable of recovering from the three-fold set of systemic oppression. It breaks into fissures and eventually fragments. The farthest extent of this fragmentation can be traced through the analysis of Sodhi's character. On one hand, Seema's anxiety illustrates the excessive burden which comes along an immigrant's illegal status, on the other Sodhi's hysteria accounts for the unbearable identity loss emerging out of social isolation, economic oppression and cultural alienation. Such characters establish the significance of one's cultural, racial as well as gender identity and exhibit its fragmentation to a certain extent after undergoing transnational migration. It is critical to note how such a loss directly affects one's individuality and injures it, resulting in its dissolution.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994.
- Handa, Amita. *Of Silk Saris and Mini-Skirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture*, Women's Press, 2003.
- Lustig, Myron., and Jolene Koester. *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication across Culture*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003.
- Mandal, Somdatta. "The Desh-Pradesh Syndrome: Texts and Contexts of Diasporic Indian Writing in English." *Contemporary Diasporic Literature: Writing History, Culture, Self*, Pencraft International, 2010, pp. 15-29.
- Nagar, Richa., and Amanda Lock Swarr. *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*, Sunny Press, 2010.
- Ramoowalia, Iqbal. *The Death of a Passport*, Ajanta Books International, 2003.
- Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society 1750-1950*, The Hogarth Press, 1958.