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The Question of Diasporic Existence in the Second Generation Immigrant Writers: A Reading on Meera Sayal's *Anita and Me* and Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*

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Abstract:

There is no doubt that immigrant life is hard, but the life of immigrant children is even harder. The last two decades is witnessing the boom of narratives and fictions among such writers many are second generation diasporics who are born and brought up in alien culture and as such they have no in-depth familiarity with the concept of 'home' or 'nation'. The fictions they write, speak of, from and across migrant identities even when they have not witnessed the trauma and turmoil of displacement or dislocation or even migration in the strictest sense of the term, being second generation diasporics. This paper aims at exploring how it influences the writers' creative urge and find its reflection in the portrayal of characters. It seeks to examine Meera Sayal's *Anita and Me* which is about a young Asian girl, who goes through many experiences to be accepted into English society and Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* is a story of an immigrant who turned to perennial diasporic hero, whose 'everlasting no' deployed unyielding refusal.

Keywords: Identity, Homeland, Diaspora, Generation, Host-land, Memory, Culture.

Let's begin the paper with a short note on Diaspora – exactly where the term stands now. At present diaspora has become a buzzword, a catch-all phrase to denote all kinds of movements, theorisations of hybridity, displacement of ethnic culture. Leading to this, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur warned us about the uncritical and unreflexive use of the term to all the context of global movements or displacements. As a result of the multipurpose use of the term we all become diasporic in this globalized world claimed by Stuart Hall. However, Rogers Brubaker states that the term diaspora itself become "diaspora" diaspora – a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space. It appeared that the word 'diaspora', like the word 'immigrant', is no longer being used to refer the first generation and continues to be used when making reference to the second generation and beyond. Though scholars like William Safran, James Clifford, Robin Cohen constructed a working definition of diaspora in terms of 'ideal type' but that is useful when characterising first-generation migrants, for second-generation individuals and beyond there is a conflict of interest in labelling these individuals as members of a diaspora as it suggests loyalty to the land of their ancestors with which many have tenuous links. Therefore, the term diaspora has contested, deconstructed, and reformulated so as to be meaningful and not just remain a blanket term to be used *ad infinitum*.

The first generation has strong attachment with the country of their origin. From the second generation onwards the relationship with the homeland gradually gets replaced by those with the adopted country. Most of the second generation diaspora, on the other hand, accept the land in which they are born as their homeland. They are not happy about the way their parents live. It leads to several kinds of misunderstandings between both generations. As a result, the central theme of diasporic writers of second generation is “the sexual politics of the family, represented by the struggles of a younger ... against arranged marriages imposed by authoritarian, coercive, gerontocratic elders” (Webner).

These second generation diasporic writers who are born and brought up in alien culture and as such they have no in-depth familiarity with the concept of ‘home’ or ‘nation’ because they cannot miss or feel nostalgia for a place with which they have not been even in touch. Whatever link they have with their land of ancestors is by virtue of their ancestry or racial genealogy. Therefore, when they face discrimination both from their homeland and host-land, it hurts them and compels them to raise questions regarding their roots. The works of such writers construct narratives that speak of ‘homing desire’ or ‘desire for home’. Which home is their object of longing? Why that restlessness and sense of rootlessness? The literature they produce, speak of, from and across migrant identities and develop ‘narratives of plurality, fluidity and emergent become even when they have not witnessed the trauma and turmoil of displacement or dislocation being second generation diasporics. With these points the present paper tries to explore two novels –Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* and Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission*. Being second and later generation writers both these two novelists are struggling to figure out whether they belong to Indian diaspora writers group or mainstream English literature. While doing so, they are suffering from a sense of identity fragmentation and these two novels, though focusing two different stories of two different generations have somehow helped them to fix their identity or satirically say leave them in nowhere. This happens because the second and later generations of the diaspora writers like Meera Syal and Hari kunzru kept in dual identity.

Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* records the struggle of Meena in such a painful way to evolve an authentic self and come to terms with it. As an offspring of the family that has experienced migrancy, it is natural for Meena to inherit the diasporic predicament of her parents. Meena’s dilemma is the dilemma of British-born Asians (like the writer Meera Syal herself) whose divided identities make it difficult for them to locate and place themselves. They do not know when, where and how to relate and belong. There is nothing ‘fixed’ or ‘pre-given’ in identity. Meena is a very good example of a girl who from the outset feels different and is prepared to do very much anything to achieve the identity of an English girl. She rejects one culture for the other and feels unable to live in and combine the two. There must be a realistic opportunity for an individual to find their identity in such a society since they are not alone in living under such circumstances, with the background that they have. Regarding this Schoene-Harwood remarks further that, “In Meena’s case hybridity signifies a state of not being able to fully meet the standards of either culture.” He means that this is displayed through the difficulties that Meena has trying to switch between authentic India and Englishness. This quite described in the text, where Meena goes from, at the beginning of the text doing everything to fit in with the English community and at the end of the text doing what her parents expect of her. Homeland gains significance at this stage and she remarks, “I now knew I was ... a girl with no name or no place” (Syal 303). She wonders how ‘insignificant’ the issue of displacement seems against the ‘shadow of mortality’ (Syal 303).

Displacement, whether forced or self imposed, is in many ways a calamity and this we can experience while reading Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*. This novel can be read as a study in what happens when its protagonist's homing desire is thwarted. In Delhi, Arjun Mehta, the protagonist of the novel, a computer geek is fascinated by two things- Bollywood films and in particular Bollywood actress Leela Zahir, and the dreams of making an identity in America. Seeking his fame and fortune, Arjun Mehta joins a company that places Indian workers with American computer companies. Instead of an impressive position, Arjun finds himself working as a lowly virus tester in Washington. Far from the computing superstar he claims to be on phone calls home, he likes his job and is a dutiful employee. Alone, save for a co-worker he longs for and a fantasy relationship with Bollywood star Leela Zahir, it is through his work that he develops his identity and security. This workplace sanctuary adds to his devastation when Arjun is laid off and his identity comes under crisis. Desperate to appear invaluable to his employer, Arjun releases the Leela computer virus that quickly takes on several lives of its own. But as the virus started to corrupt the global financial market Arjun loses his existence and identity in his dream country as well as from his homeland. Realizing the havoc he's unleashed, Arjun laments "All I wanted was to work and be happy and live a life in magic America (Kunzru 149)." And finally he gets a devastating end with losing all his identities and finds himself in nowhere.

Cultural memories play an important role for a diaspora community. The tragedy is that the children of the migrants far removed in time and space, and do not even have 'fragmentary, partial memories' which could help in laying the foundations of 'constructs' like 'home' and 'belonging'. They are deprived of what Rushdie calls the 'interior knowledge' because they had never been to their lands. Their knowledge of the distant place-its history, language, culture is based only on their mental construct. Syal's awareness of this state is expressed in their prefatory note tagged to *Anita and Me*. She remarks, "Those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete to belong." It is about the cultural displacement felt by nine year old British – born, Meena in *Anita and Me* and her desire to be assimilated in the host culture. But she wonders why she is forced to eat the traditional foods. Meena cannot appreciate the efforts put in by parents to preserve their culture at this stage. It is this reason that leads her into the world of Anita. The Indian girl had closed the doors of the parental home with the feeling that "life was outside the home, with Anita my passport to acceptance" (Syal 148). The approval of Anita becomes the sole aim of her life. Despite her best efforts, she finds herself bewildered in this land of strangers. The issue of identity which she thought she had resolved re-merges. Nanima's arrival at this crucial juncture helps her to relate back to her parental homeland and her place of origin. It enables her to put the bits of history into some kind of context with Nanima's stories and thus create a meaningful narrative for herself. As she says, "It was falling into place now, why I felt this continual compulsion to fabricate, this ever-present desire to be someone else in some other place far from Tollington (Syal 211)."

Transmission contrasts the abstractions of programmes to the 'noises' of real life as when an Indian dreaming of success in Silicone valley finds himself jobless during the post 9/11 business downturn. In the novel, the uncertainty of Mehta's situation is represented by his mobility. From the moment he chooses to go to work to the US he is a victim of globalization, a powerless pawn moved around by those who are power, constantly unsure of his final destination. In the due course of the novel, for Arjun Mehta everything goes wrong in the world where local has become global, while global is become local. What it does have in common with the diaspora writings is a central character living at the interface between cultures, the estrangements of living abroad, and the mixing of languages. Kunzru's *Transmission* is an imagined myth of successful resistance.

Although these two novels dealing with the diasporic consciousness but maintains two different layers. In *Anita and Me*, Syal gives a realistic account of the various aspects that a girl with Meena's background and circumstances may encounter while trying to find her identity. Syal does not shy away from the ugliness that real life sometimes presents or the complexities that her protagonist experiences. The text reveals how Meena, through her extrovert, experimental lifestyle is made to mature and to choose sides. By making her do that Syal just signals that there neither have any options or easy solutions for Meena, if she is to evolve her factual self. Hence, in Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* Arjun can be interpreted as a signifier of the resistance of the diasporic self to the logic of capital which thwarts its homing desire. The homing desire is not the same as the desire for a 'homeland'. It is the desire to create the home where one is, that is in the host culture, through tangential affiliations. He may like to enact the proverbial return of the prodigal only after realising that his seemingly innocuous cyber-terrorist act has made him a dreaded terrorist running for his life fearing disappearance without any court trial.

To conclude this discussion, after reading these two novels we will find ourselves in a confuse state about the identity of these two authors whether they can be called diaspora writer as the content of their novels deal with diasporic experience but they don't have any direct links to their 'home' land i.e. India. When he was asked in Jaipur Literary Festival (2012) about his identity and root he quoted from Lee Marvin, "I'm an ex-citizen of nowhere. And sometimes I get mighty homesick..." Then the question arise how to categorise these authors.

Finally we can say these authors, to a lesser or greater extent, belong neither here nor there, but where one is able to write and thus create a home.

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