

Narrative of Identity and Multiple-Migration of Indian Diasporic Women: Translating Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street* (1993) And Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003)

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Abstract: Indian Diaspora is an impregnated term coupled with various culture, religion, and linguistic diversity which form the multiple identities of an ethnic community pronounced as Indian. The term is highly contested and limited when it comes to the old classical Indian Diaspora of Labourer, which is replete with the memories of multiple displacement and totally different feeling of accommodation and hyper mobility. In vogue the successors of old Indian Diaspora (Indenture labour Diaspora) in Canada see themselves to be Twice-Displaced and consider them to be struggling with severe identity crisis. There is an anxiety in this community for having been once settled as Diasporic entities in Caribbean and having again been plunged into multiple hybrid identities which is highly uncertain and unfixed. They often term them as “Bastardised Indians”, “Unfixed Salves” and their identity is malleable, shifting and uneven. In such scenario the movement of women becomes even more challenging and ambiguous as they are already under multiple patriarchy of being Diasporic women. The present study tries to understand and ask the questions: how do women negotiate within the multiple hybrid space? How do they mediate with their unfixed salves and Multiple Identity as women? Do multiple migration empower them or de-empower them? What kind of memories do they peruse within them? What historicity do they trace is it the patriarchal Indenture History or the History of their grandmother and great grandmother as Coolie women that they associate their identity with? The above themes would be elaborated with the literatures produced by the multiple migrant women authors like Ramabai Espinet and Shani Mootoo.

Keywords: Bastardised Indians, unfixed salves, Multiple Hybrid Identity, Patriarchal indenture history, Coolie women.

The term Diaspora entails diffusion and dissemination of people from one territorial space to another or to multiple spaces. Traditionally, the phrase Diaspora contains tinge and connotation of violence, belligerence, catastrophe, alienation, trouncing, loss, exile and a ray of hope to return into the heart diaspora. But in the recent aeon the axiomatic of the term Diaspora has widened, where, it is not only appended to the negative repercussions of migration, but also the words is used for voluntary migrations of the community who drift to make a new dwelling and abode for them and living outside from their realm of origin.

Diaspora with its epistemic origin is a word which was basically and very precisely used for Jews community who were forced to live in exile and expatriation and their dispersion into multiple lands; and it chiefly signified and symbolised the oppression and the pangs of migration and exile due to forceful displacement. But in the contemporary epoch the term Diaspora is used rather as “Metaphoric Designation”¹ to refer to several migrant communities who live outside of their country of origin. Walker Connor defines Diaspora as “That segment of people living outside the homeland” (Connor quoted in Reeves et.al p.g. 364), William Safran has brought in more inclusion to the term by identifying six

characteristics to the community who could be termed as diaspora: : 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 descendents 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 ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran in Vertovec et.al. p.g.364)

Further To quote "A Diaspora exists precisely because it remembers the 'homeland'. Without this memory... these migrants and settlers would be simply people in a new setting, into which they merge, bringing little or nothing to the new 'home', accepting in various ways and forms the mores and attitudes that already exist in their new country and society". However these people "do not merely settle in new countries: they recreate in their socio-economic, political and cultural institutions a version of that...that homeland they remember". (Lal Brij V.et.al.18)

However these definitions have raised a lot of critical debates and disputes in academia among theoreticians, who claim that the definition of Diaspora is limited in scope and does not include the vast variety of migrant communities. Theoreticians have raised the issue of the limited application of the definition of Diaspora and further opined that the term Diaspora needs to be revisited, rethought and reframed into the discipline of Diaspora, transnational and migration studies.

Waltraud Kokot in his book *Diaspora Identity and Religion* (2004) talks about the contradictions and conflicts that are that are attached with the term Diaspora he views that the "The rising significance of 'transnationalism' and 'Diaspora', as terms of selfdesignation chosen by political, artistic and intellectual elites of diasporic communities, as well as in Western academic discourse, is closely related to the increasing relevance of representations of 'identity' and 'culture' in international politics. (p.g 2)

Further he talks about Tölölyan to elucidate his point and he argues that As Tölölyan (1996) has pointed out, for many authors writing about Diaspora also implies coming to terms with their own experiences of hybridity and multiple belonging. Ancillary he mentioned James Clifford (1992, 1994) he says Clifford and others have noted, this may lead to a conceptual dilemma of how to distinguish between the concept as an analytical tool and the experience it denotes. It is an open question whether this distinction is entirely necessary, or if it is possible at all. Still, 'diaspora' remains widely contested, both as a term of reference and as a concept for research. Among others, James Clifford (1994) argued for a re-evaluation of the term, focusing on the constructive potential of Diasporas as 'mediating cultures' instead of implications of forced dispersal, exile and loss, In contrast, Dabag (Dabag and Platt 1993) and Safran (1991) emphasize the dangers of underestimating the ever-present forces of persecution and violent expulsion" (Waltraud Kokot et.al p.g.2).

As the above discussion indicates it is exceedingly difficult and challenging to define the term Diaspora given the historicity of its origin and diversities that the term contain and comprises of. Into this whole area of swot up different theoreticians supports different definition of Diaspora hence it provides a novel opportunity to the contemporary researchers to enquire deeply into the vast area of Diaspora studies and to come out with more inclusive definitions of the Diaspora.

Considering the classical and well accepted definition of diaspora and making it a "touchstone" when one tries to apply it into the broader corpus of Indian Diaspora, the definitions fall short to describe and delineate this Diaspora community accurately. Indian Diaspora is consists of variety of cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic populace which are very different in their typologies and genealogies; thus define such community as a Diaspora in to the term of William Safran, and Vertovec is highly impossible. The term Diaspora in the context of Indian Diaspora is multilayered and often designates to the migrants who originated in areas falling within the territorial boundaries of present day India. The diasporizingⁱⁱ of Indians are widespread in different parts of the world and Indians from all parts of the globe have maintained the link with home country either through their relationship with homeland or through memory and myth of homeland.

Further one could define in the broader stretch; the term Indian Diaspora as an impregnated idiom coupled with various cultures, religion, linguistic and ethnic diversity which form the multiple identities of a community pronounced as Indian. But even this term is highly contested and limited when it comes to the application of it into the old classical Indian Diaspora of indentured Labourers, which is replete with the memories of multiple displacements and totally different feeling of accommodation and hyper mobility.

This old Indian Diaspora has formed a very different and complex diasporic identity away from the traditional theories and definition of Diaspora. In vogue the successors of old Indian Diaspora (Indenture labour Diaspora) in Canada see themselves to be Twice-Displaced and consider them to be struggling with severe identity crisis. There is an anxiety in this community for having been once settled as Diasporic entities in Caribbean and having again been plunged into multiple hybrid identities which is highly uncertain and unfixed. They often term them as “Bastardised Indians”, “Unfixed Salves”.

This hybrid- cultural identity and fragmentations are a normal part of the Diasporic experience of this community. Where, the twice displaced Diaspora experiences hybrid cultural identity and fragmentation in their individual-self which brings the conflict and discourse of multiple identities into their personality. This multiple and hybrid culture and identity have become one of the essential theme of writings of the multiple Displaced writers of Indian Diaspora Writers like Cyril Debydeen, Neil Bissoondath, M. G Vassanji and Ramabai Espinet etc, these writers illustrate the circumstances of multiple migrant community and their shifting identity into their literature very starkly.

The present writers see themselves as multiply dislocated and their literature are also discernible by to quote Vijay Mishra (2006) “...both a different memory of the homeland and a different kind of accommodation within their new land”(Brij V Lal et. al. 2006).

Neil Bissoondath in his compilation of Short stories such as *Insecurity* (1986) *Security* (1991) depicts the situation of Diasporic in-between-ess where there is no sense of security involved with migration and by the time a migrant began to feel secure in one land, it is immediately replaced and reinstated by another insecurity in his story *Security* he says that:

“The weekdays were long for him. He had not even after many months, grown accustomed to the endless stretches of being alone. On the island, someone had always been there” (Bissoondath Quotedted in Brij V Lal.et.at. p.g. 131:2006)

Likewise M.G. Vassanji’s *No New Land* (1991) depicts the dissatisfaction of the migrant into many homes where he migrates into order to find a new home which acknowledges the heterogeneity that exists in the world and accept every individual equally but here also he is paranoid and discomforted by seeing the same discrimination existing towards migrants based on the racial categories. Thus he does not find any newness into the new migrated home.

Although the multiple migrations and the rootlessness and the relocations are difficult and for the whole community and the migrations have been harsh and exigent for every individual, but when one consider the situation of women into the whole discourse of multiple migrations, it is the gender, women which suffer the pain and anguish of migration more than the gender men. The women in spite of hyper mobility, and migration are expected to play the primitive antiquital role which if at all comes with modernity comes with just a least degree of alteration. This in-between- ness of multiple migrations faced by Indian women has been dealt by vividly by the multiple migrant women writers of this community.

They are expected to be the cultural ambassadors of their nation and its traditions they are not only expected to play these roles rather they are expected to play the roles of bestowal who would bestow the culture and tradition of their ancient land, from one generation to another. This multiply constructed roles of women and the conflicts that arise with these roles are the central theme of the writings of the multiple migrant women authors.

The multiple migrant women writers through their literature explicates that their uneven, potholed experiences of migration and inbetwen-ness has been excluded by the theoreticians and scholar of Diaspora and migration studies into the discipline of the study of these areas . The multiple migrant community claims which would also fit into the domain of multiple migrant women, that “ those who are twice-displaced, those unfixed selves, signal a diasporic awareness that cannot be contained within the theories of diaspora that neglect to specify historical moments, specific experiences and differences in historical conditioning”.(Lal Brij V. et.al p.g.130).

The term multiple displaced identities in Diaspora refer to the displacement of already once displaced and fixed culture and identity into different cultures identities and selvesⁱⁱⁱ.

In such scenario the movement of women becomes even more challenging and ambiguous as they are already under multiple marginalisation of being Diasporic women.

Ramabai Espinet, says. "We are not south Asians in a true sense of word we are peculiar hybrid, our cultural world more pronounced than most children of India outside it shores. We, for the most part speak no language but European tongue: English, French or Dutch in its standard form as well as the peculiar version of Creole." (Mishra in Brij V. Lal et.al. 2006: 130)

The similar tone and theme could be observed into *The Heat Yesterday* (1995) of Ina Iqbal Rashid where he talks about the marginalisation of multiple migrant communities who, In spite of being exposed to different communities cultures, languages for centuries and being part of host communities for long are still are doubted and their body and skin colour explicates the entire thought of identity into the eyes of the host communities.

Ramabai Espinet (2004) in her novel *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) talks about the complex multiple histories and identities that her characters have acquired as a result of multiple migration, in the novel the protagonist Mona, who traces her ancestry from India and have lived in Trinidad and later on migrated to Canada, describes about the multipart and intricate experiences of memory, history and identity that multiple migrant communities often under goes. The novel is surrounded around the life of Mona and her family members, and it describes how the multiple migrant communities mediate with space, memory, history, and identity. Mona the protagonist, recollecting her past identity in Trinidad and her multifarious identity now in Canada, Mona says, "All that it took then in Trinidad was looking Indian; all it took in Canada was skin colour" (Espinet quoted in Lal Brij V et.al.130).

Mona, in the novel is in her forties, trying really hard to feel associated and belonged. She tries to make Montreal her new home but she find that like her complicated history and life her home is equally complicated subject. Dissatisfied with everything around her, she not only feel uprooted and isolated but also has acquires a nowherian position and associate this nowherian self to her identity.

Mona makes a new life in Canada where she is a, so called independent woman, but as contradiction of the previous statement she is often torn into multiple roles and responsibilities that she has to play and carry. On the one hand she is expected to behave like the eldest daughter of the family, a woman, and the cultural icon of Indian femininity, but on the other hand she is expected to act as highly liberated and independent woman which is quite antithetical.

Mona is looked forward to obtain a masculine personality of Kello, as he is suffering from HIV/ AIDS, thus she is suppose to substitute him; she is trusted by her parents to be the sole care taker of the family which brings a new kind of oppression, marginalisation and conflict within Mona.

Mona though a Christian and living away from India from centuries and residing in highly liberated and gender sensitive developed country Canada, is already is into a lot of identity crisis but she is made to feel more questioned and gazed where being an Indian women by skin, she faces racial and sexual assaults which shocks her, the assault of Mona also exposes the hypocrisy of *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988, "to [...] recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage" (qtd. in Hutcheon and Richmond 371).

Even into the novel the hypocrisy of multiculturalism is exposed where the writer not anything really exciting about multiculturalism she finds that the world was different for the different skin colour people in Canada she says:

"When I arrived in the early seventies, Canada was a white country. If multiculturalism was as idea, it never touched me. For Dada, the moment of truth came when he saw a wall covered with graffiti that read Keep Canada White" (p.g 236-37)

At the end of the novel Mona discovers her multiple and complex identity thus asks for a deconstructed space of identity and she says:

I am part of this city I live in [Montreal], and right now I want no other place. Like any other migrant navigating new terrain, I bring my own beat to the land around me. . . . Any new beat is like that: parts of it at war with itself until the separate parts recognize the point of fusion and merge seamlessly. When the rhythm becomes right, everyone forgets the time when cacophony threatened to drown the whole enterprise. . . . A dub rhythm, the Caroni Dub. (305)

Here I quote Jacqui Alexander who states: “How do we construct home when home is not immediately understood nor instinctively accessible? Our challenge is to invent Home in different spaces that cross geographically”(Quoted in Brinda Mehta, p.g. 218)

Espinete shows in her novel how the path of identity formation is more challenging for women due to the levels of marginalisation that they go through the historical and the modern roles that a woman is expected to play which on the surface gives them the illusion of liberation but in to the deep it further brings a new kind of marginalisation.

The similar sort of, Segregation and marginalisation is also felt by the nameless narrator of Shani Mootoo’s *Out on the Main Street* (1996) who unveils the experience of multiple displaced women of Indian Descent a Caribbean and her diasporic relocation to Canada and especially the sexually other women. She is trapped in to the “collusion between the racist policies of the Canadian state with respect to its immigrant populations, the cultural high mindedness displaced by the South Asians nationals from India and the hetero-narrative patriarchal foundations of the Home state Trinidad and the metropolitan state Canada creates an undeniable refugee status of Nationalness”(Mehta,217) for a sexually other Indo-Caribbean Canadian woman which often do not allow any identity to such categories.

Provided the fact that the Indo-Caribbean immigrant in Canada are often termed as cultural Bastard, by the Indian Canadian Nationals and a sexually other woman have been even more marginalised and have been facing three kind of national rejection experienced by the women From National, cultural to sexual bastardization.

This could be seen into this passage when narrator says to her friend that:

“Yuh know, one time a fella from India who living up here calls me a bastardized Indian because I didn’t know Hindi. And now look at dis, nah! De thing is: all a we in Trinidad is cultural bastards, Janet, all awe. *Toutes bagailles!* Chinese people, Black people, White people. Syrian. Lebanese. I looking forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am nothing else but Trinidadian, whatever dat could turn out to be.”(Mootoo quoted in Glave, p.g. 256:2006)

In “Sushila’s Bhakti” other story from compilation *Out on Main Street*,(1993) the protagonist, a Trinidadian-Canadian artist who is trapped within her constructed role by patriarchy as “a good Brahmin girl” make a way to submit herself to God by offering prayers and the roles which are attributed to each human being by God. She is more often comes into internal conflict with her identity and often gets torn between her multiple roles as woman, often anxiously tries to reconnect herself to fixed and permanent identity. She is confused and bewildered with her role as immigrant and really seeks to find her authentic origin. Her anxiety to achieve a fixed identity and pining to be a rooted individual could be perceived in these lines, where she utters:

“I want to connect with my point of origin. Not the point of origin as in “Who-made-me-God-made-me,” nor the point at which we are said to have flipped over from animal to human, but rather the origin of Indian-ness. ... What is my point of origin? How far back do I need to go to feel properly rooted?”

Sushila uses saffron colour in her artistic works, she also paints and colours her palm with dark orange colour, She also uses henna an art form to refresh her Trinidadian memory and provides her an unusual pleasure; she also claims by putting the Henna art in her art form that this art form gives her a purpose until, elatedly; she begins to see the replica of her own self in the artistic work that she creates. When she tries to create an artistic creation out of Canadian art form she pathetically fails into this and she finds there is no life so far that she could find into these works rather her Henna mixed creation makes her feel more original and authentic and she feels connected to her by Henna art form.

Shani Mootoo, through the story provides an opportunity to the migrant women to transcend themselves from the rigidly defined cultural, religious and traditional identity that they have been bestowed with by their birth. Although the message is implied and indirectly embedded into the tale where Author elucidates that there is no better identity than to identify your own self which is a new ray of hope to create one’s own identity away from the societal specified identity.

Ultimately Shusila become conscious and realizes that her search for roots and pining for belonging to her origin is no more relevant and her identity does not have to come from the identity discourse that society create for individuals rather she realizes that her identity need not to be kowtow to any predictable and documented or storied history conventionally accepted by the society but more importantly it only needs be her story; She also understands that it is not necessary that she has to follow only one distinct tradition or a particular culture in order to accomplish identity rather it is the

multiplicity, diversity and intricacy of her distinctiveness and individuality that surpasses the intently defined identity roles.

Mootoo's short stories also illustrates that diasporic crossings fortify and reinforce the efficacy of the heterosexual convention in the name of cultural preservation. Women as the traditionally attributed role of protectors of cultural veracity are bequeathed with the multiple role of guaranteeing to safeguard the group identity by maintaining a definite and given gender role, which should be stagnant and has not to be changed with the contemporary changes that happens with migrations; together with that, women also has the role of taking care of the future of tradition and culture of her society by imparting the traditional and cultural role of a women and community into her society by bestowing it to her daughter and granddaughter as maternal and grand maternal legacy.

Thus from the above elucidations one could infer that the voice of protest, struggle and the continuous dilemma of being an Indian woman is just not the part of the life of Indian women being in India, where life of women is surrounded and governed by the regressive controlled and oppressive structure of patriarchy. The baggage of being Indian women, and the constructed ideological roles that are expected to be carried out by them, is an all prevalent social phenomena of Indian Diaspora. Even after centuries of migrations the stagnant gender roles are very efficiently maintained by the Indian patriarchal society. In Diaspora the role of women becomes more challenging where they are confronted with multiple societies which are pronounced to be highly gender sensitive, subversive and liberal; Even here the position of Diasporic women becomes more marginalised because, she becomes the object of fancies of the host society; where she is expected to justify the Ideologically constructed role of women the particular culture and society that she comes from, thus it further depowers the diasporic women. Even the societies like developed countries, where women are said to have a higher individual stature to articulate and enunciate their voice of struggle and subversion proves and turn out to be helpless for the diasporic women.

It could thus be understood that Indian diasporic communities have formed a new India of its own into its new locations it has shifted to; the community has been very successful in marking their cultural and ethnic distinction into the host society as a positive side of it, but the negative side of it is that not only the ethnic and cultural uniqueness has been retained by the community but the strong patriarchal regressive, oppressive and controlling structure has also been very dominating feature of this community that it inherited from its ancient mother land.

To conclude I quote Kavita Sharma who highlights the ambiguous position occupied by the Indian diasporic women who are afforded the illusion of greater mobility and control in the new location through the process of migration. Caught between Past, Present and future patriarchies, these women are simultaneously expected to maintain homeland kinship networks and religious and cultural traditions in order to transmit them to their children. This trends to reinforce patriarchy and makes the domestic sphere both a refuge from the material and the spiritual anxieties of exile and a trip in which the conflicting demands of the family, work and old and new patriarchies have to be dealt with. The situation is painful (quoted in Brinda Mehta, pg. 211)

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Endnotes:

ⁱ The term has been borrowed from the Article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myth of Home Land and Return” by William Safran to know more refer to the article.

ⁱⁱ This term is used in the book *Negotiating Identities: Women in Indian Diaspora* (1997) by Aparna Rayprol where she describes it as a process of spreading of diasporic community throughout the globe.

ⁱⁱⁱ Refer to Ramabai Espinet’s quotation “We are not south Asians in a true sense of word we are peculiar hybrid, our cultural world more pronounced than most children of India outside it shores. We, for the most part speak no language but European tongue: English, French or Dutch in its standard form as well as the peculiar version of Creole.” *The Swinging Bridge* (p.g.)

And Shani Mootoo’s Quotation: :“Yuh know, one time a fella from India who living up here call me a bastardized Indian because I didn’t know Hindi. And now look at dis, nah! De thing is: all a we in Trinidad is cultural bastards, Janet, all a we. *Toutes bagailles!* Chinese people, Black people, White people. Syrian. Lebanese. I looking forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am nothing else but Trinidadian, whatever dat could turn out to be.” *Out on the Main Street* (Mootoo in Glave.p.g.256:2006).