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## DIASPORIC DISLOCATION: RENDERING A LOST PRESENT BEYOND THE PARTITION OF BENGAL IN LAHIRI'S 'WHEN MR. PIRZADA CAME TO DINE' AND MASUD'S 'ONTARJATRA'

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### **Abstract:**

*Displacement, alienation and dislocation are documented in many literary works and films, revolving around memories of loss. This paper has an attempt to explore the complex issues of dislocation and unstable concept of nation in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine and Tareque Masud's film Ontarjatra which epitomize the transformative power that creative representations in literary works or films can offer with regard to a history of communal violence and anxiety. Lahiri's short story When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine is set against the backdrop of Bangladesh Liberation War and the diasporic viewpoint of the story traces the traumatic snapshots of partition through the perspective of Mr. Pirzada, who is in US to study foliage of New England, has his family, who are endangered by the terrible conflict in Dacca, and a second generation migrant child Lilia, who sees no difference in the arbitrary drawn line between Hindu and Muslims. Similarly, Tareque and Catherine Masud's film titled as Ontarjatra (Inner Journey) focuses on a divorced mother Shireen and her son Sohail, who come back to Bangladesh after fifteen years overseas, prompted by Sohail's father's sudden death. As Tareque points out, "The story follows the conflicting reactions of mother and son as they, in very different ways, try to come to terms with the loss." This paper seeks to read these two narratives with a view to understand how the question of belonging and citizenship are connected and to which extent do they collectively contribute to the question of both national and cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** *The Partition of Bengal, trauma, communal violence, migration, memory, border*

### **Introduction:**

The concept of displacement is fundamental to all spheres of the study of partition. The Partition of India led to the Partition of Bengal by dividing the British Indian Province of Bengal into two- the western part with predominantly Hindu population (West Bengal), while the predominantly Muslim Eastern Part (East Bengal) became a part of Pakistan. The immediate aftermath of the Bengal Partition was a massive process of resettlement as million of Hindus and Muslims migrated

from East to West and vice versa. Immigrants undergo displacement in their lives geographically as well as culturally. The victims of multiple dislocations experience the complexity, hybridity and hyphenated identities as well as the difficulty in finding a lost present within the sense of belonging. Even the sense of displacement is as vigorous as the literal displacement. People can succumb to the sense of being dislocated while staying rooted in a particular place because the world around has changed. This paper gives an overview of the theme of multiple dislocations as seen in the lives of individuals, represented in the notable works which become collective expression of the nuances of the immigrant psyche.

### **Diasporic Consciousness:**

The term diaspora is derived from the Greek verb *diaspiroin* which *speiro* means 'I Scatter' and *dia* means 'between, through, across'. The term diaspora is reviewed in detail by Stephane Dufoix in his book *Diasporas*(2008). He states that the modern use of the term diaspora:

...stems from its appearance and as a neologism in the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek by the legendary seventy scholars in Alexandria in the third century BC.

### **The term diaspora is explained as:**

...citizens of a dominant city state who immigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire.

Dislocation/ Exile/ Migration – whatever may be the mode of displacement- all these movement are indicative of extraneous circumstances that define the dislocated existence.

### **Indian Diaspora:**

The history of diasporic Indian writing is not new and the word 'India' here denotes not only a geographical location but it is a concept, a shared history, a shared culture, and emotional attachment. So, Diaspora links with India in so many ways. According to Amitav Ghosh :

The links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination. The symbolic spatial structure of India is infinitely reproducible. It can be encapsulated in a microcosm[...] and it can be exported wholesale to be reproduced in other countries. The place, India, becomes in fact an empty space, mapped purely by words. Anybody anywhere who has even the most tenuous links with India is Indian; potentially a player within the culture. India mother country simply does not have the cultural means to cut them off.

### **The Bengal's Diaspora:**

India's partition in 1947 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 saw the dislocation and resettlement of millions of Muslims and Hindus. A third of the regions population found shelter across new borders. Some people were internally displaced and others moved to middle east, North America and Europe. Approximately 277000 Bangladeshi immigrants and their children (the first and second generations) live in the United States, accounting for a small share of the total U.S

foreign - born population : 0.5%. In Urbashi Barat's words, Bengali literature on refugee experience of partition is marked by "Commemorative Mechanisms". Which help the refugees to "(re) create their lost spaces, the heterotopias...(Barat 219).

Diasporic memory is a process consisted of both amnesia and recollection. The Bengal's diasporic literary works question about the implications of geopolitical divisions and partition discourses in the Indian subcontinent. Many of the narrative responses to partition of Bengal come from the diaspora, particularly the most contemporary works, from people who did not live through the period. This is a matter of great concern to re-examine how the diasporic writers or filmmakers represent partition of Bengal and question the sense of belonging.

Diasporic life has been an important influence both in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine* and Masud's film *Ontarjatra*. The speciality of these two works lie in the fact that nostalgia has been set against an amalgamated culture. As the story *When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine* opens, the readers come to know that in the autumn of 1971, Mr. Pirzada comes to Lilia's house to dine. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, then a part of Pakistan. He had his wife and seven daughters in Dacca and he came to study foliage of New England. 1971 was immensely troubled year in East Pakistan. As the trouble in Dacca increased, he lost his connection with his family. In his alien setting, he was full of nostalgia. Lilia's family is also disconnected from homeland and has not still forgotten its past completely. Mr. Pirzada's language, ways of behaviors, his food habits and his other peculiarities are the overall impact of the Indian element on Lilia:

It made no sense to me. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same. They ate pickled mangoes with their meals, ate rice every night for supper with their hands.

Lilia is correct in the sense that it is the sense of rootlessness which unites people of different lands and this epitomization of universal openness- *Viswabandhutva*- is the key element of perfect living. Lahiri attempts to forge her amalgamated domain to this cultural nostalgia. The ten years old narrator Lilia can not understand why Mr. Pirzada is "no longer considered Indian". Lilia has yet to learn and is innocent of the realities of 1971 when East Pakistan fought its way to nationhood as Bangladesh. Lahiri emphasizes the shocking losses during this time 300000 people were died, with teachers dragged into streets and shot and women dragged into barracks and raped. The halloween episode provides a suspenseful backdrop for the traumatized situation in East Pakistan. When Mr. Pirzada joins the custom of pumpkin carving, his knife slips and that creates a gash in the pumpkin- perhaps foreshadowing the chaos and bloodshed in Dacca. In the advent of war in Dacca, in December that year, Lilia's comment shows how unity can bridge divisions:

Most of all I remember the three of them operating during that time as if were a single person," she says, "sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear." The sense of

rootlessness is a key element in diasporic writing. As Janet Wilson appropriately remarks in the article, “Ironic Visioning: Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies.”

The story operates at two levels: Lilia’s family in Boston and Mr. Pirzada’s family in Dacca. America becomes a natural ground where differences disappear- whether Mr. Pirzada belongs to India or Pakistan does not matter, the two families being Hindu and Muslims does not matter.

Another person who offers an alternative narrative is the Bangladeshi film director Tareque Masud. He was born in 1956 in Nupur Village, East Pakistan. He studied in Madras for eight years until his education was interrupted by Liberation War in 1971. His *Muktir Gaan (Songs of Freedom)*, based on the 1971 Liberation War became a cult classic. His film *Ontarjatra* (“Homeland”, 2006), featured two generations of Bangladeshi diaspora in London and their return to Bangladesh. His films give us the message of harmony and peace as he stated:

I am not sure why, but I can not watch a film with the slightest blood, I can not see a film with violence. We tried to create a sense of violence without literally showing it. You get the audience to feel it rather than actually showing it. It is such a stereotype that in any movie that has to do with war you show too much. The other thing is that it was a conscious choice to make a gentle film- the gentleness is the core of the film, an appeal for tolerance, harmony and peace. There is another aspect of it, many films, if not all, made in Bangladesh, in 1971, show in a more commercial, exploitative way, excessive violence, including rape. We do not need to be graphic. That is what our contemporary media does: reproduces graphic violence. It is a vicious circle in reality, there is violence, and the media reflects violence. This creates an insensitivity, a numbing of human sensation, this is why people do not care about what is happening in the world.

*Ontarjatra*, directed by Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud, won for best direction at International Film Festival Bangladesh in 2006. This film explores the complex issues of diasporic dislocation and the quest for identity. After fifteen years in UK, Shireen and her son Sohail return to their homeland in Sylhet, Bangladesh for the funeral of Sohail’s father. For Shireen, the homecoming means one thing but for Sohail, it was completely another thing as he was not connected to this place earlier. The action of the film is mostly divided between Sylhet and Dhaka, while the opening shot is in a London home. Sara Zaker, cast in the central role of the mother Shireen says, “The film evokes the sound and noise of Dhaka. It shows present Bangladesh- complete with the mushrooming multi-storied buildings and clatter, but at the same time there is no negative imaging of Dhaka. For instance, Shireen takes a rickshaw ride through the Dhaka streets and the film depicts Dhaka as it is in reality. At the end of it you feel good about the country.”

### **Conclusion:**

The creative responses to Partition will continue to ensure that the partition at least does not vanish into history. The formation of diasporic culture is one of the outcomes. Whatever may be the

reasons for migration, the sense of being the discrimination on socio-cultural ground compel the community to form a diasporic culture of their own. The characters are not easily definable; they refuse to sit quietly in categories whether be it Mr. Pirzada and Shireen or Lilia and Sohail. There is an underlining of the universal nostalgia which is present in the works of diasporic writers. These diasporic works have become a response to the lost homes and issues such as nostalgia, dislocation, survival, cultural identity etc. A sense of loneliness, alienation and feeling of loss are inextricable and this produce a romanticized perspective of the homeland. But the notion of 'home' is employed in diverse ways, which are sometimes contradictory.

The memories of the homeland of the first generation migrants are panoramic while the memories of the homeland of the second generation migrants are in the form of fragments. Memories of the homeland get blurred as the generation advance but the memories can not be wiped out completely from the subconscious mind. The first generation experiences the new land for the first time and the second generation are having memories which are diluted by their new experience as they are well-settled in their new land and craves for their identity. Beyond the spatial territory, 'home' is associated with human territory. *When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine and Ontarjatra* remind us the convergence of the heterogeneous cultures and the hybrid identity creates the tumultuous situation in between and beyond the sense of belongingness.

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