



A STUDY OF ETHNIC AND IDENTITY ISSUES IN ASIAN AMERICAN DIASPORA AS SEEN IN SELECT TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper ventures to take up the study of the Asian American Diaspora considering that there has been a major influx of people from various countries of Asia into The United States of America forming this diasporas. The Literature of this diasporas is particularly and notably interesting for research as not much of it has been explored by researchers in India. This study explores the identity and ethnic conflicts of the people alongside the problems and issues of adaptation of Asian Americans to American culture and way of life; how memories of their past and of their homelands connect to their present lives. It takes into account the various facets of these issues, as portrayed in select texts from the book, 'Asian-American Literature – An Anthology' edited by Shirley Geok- Lin Lim.

The Asian American movement, together with the recent emphasis on multiculturalism, has been inspiring Americans of Asian descent to explore their composite heritage. The movement of people from various Asian countries like India, China, Korea, Japan, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam, and Bangladesh into America brings in assimilation problems and several social and cultural issues among them. Moreover, the reasons for their movement and the struggles they undergo are largely unknown. An Analysis of these concerns forms the core of the present study.

The new diasporic emphasis coincides with growing interest in Asian American Literature among overseas scholars as well as with the deepening interest in East Asia among scholars in the United States.

This paper focuses on the struggles of the characters in these texts to show how they choose to stay connected to their homelands in spite of trying frantically to assimilate into the host society. Each of these forms an individual diasporas within the bigger framework of Asian American Diaspora namely: the Indian American Diaspora, the Chinese American Diaspora, the Korean American Diaspora, the Filipino American Diaspora, the Japanese American Diaspora and so on. A discussion of the nature of assimilation and the thresholds of their restraints regarding culture, ethnicity and identity among these people is the basis of this paper.

Keywords: Identity, Assimilation, Memories, Homelands.

1. Introduction

It is remarkable that relatively few people today are aware that the populations of most Western nations have consisted for centuries of people from many cultures.

Though the word 'Diaspora' meaning 'scattering' was originally used to denote the experiences of the Jewish peoples, the word has now been extended to also include the experiences of all those people who are dispersed in different countries outside their homelands, voluntarily or involuntarily. Diaspora discussions are now the forte in literatures today.



According to Joel Kuortti, Diaspora brings to mind various contested ideas and images. It can be a positive site for the affirmation of an identity, or conversely, a negative site of fears of losing that identity. Diaspora signals an engagement with a matrix of diversity: of cultures, languages, histories, people, places, times. (Kuortti, 3)

In his excellent book, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (UCL Press, 1997), Robin Cohen tentatively describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who 'acknowledge that "the old country" – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions'(p.ix). Cohen continues that 'a member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background.'

It is tempting to think of diasporas peoples as migrant peoples and indeed many living in diasporas certainly are. However, generational differences are important here. Though children of migrant people become citizens of the new country, their sense of identity born from living in a diasporas community will be influenced by the 'past migration history' of their parents or grandparents. This is why it is more accurate to talk about 'diasporas identities' rather than 'migrant identities'; not all of those who live in a diasporas or share an emotional connection to 'the old country', have experienced migration.

This should also make us aware that diasporas are Composite Communities. As AvtarBrah puts it in *Cartographies of Diaspora : Contesting Identities*(Rutledge, 1997), distinct diasporas communities are created out of the 'confluence of narratives' of different journeys from the 'old country' to the new, which create the sense of a shared history. Yet, we must not forget that 'all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "We". Differences of gender, 'race', class, religion and language (as well as generational differences) make diasporas spaces dynamic and shifting, open to repeated construction and reconstruction. (McCleod, 207)

Diasporas, as phenomenon and experience, are centuries old. However, diasporas, as an analytical category of discussion and debate, only gained significance in Asian American Studies in the early 1990s. A combination of factors converged at this historical juncture to enable this to happen. To a large extent, demographic shifts in the Asian American population combined with technological advancements and global economic changes made the concept of diasporas particularly meaningful to the study of Asian America. Since the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, the Asian American constituency has shifted from a primarily American-born population to a mostly foreign-born one. The legislation was also class-biased, so that aside from those coming into the United States as political refugees or for family reunification, it favoured skilled and educated immigration applicants. Intersecting with developments in communication technologies, especially the Internet and all its associated services, these post-1965 immigrants and their descendants were the first group that was truly able to sustain communication on a regular and timely basis with relatives and friends dispersed in Asia and other parts of the world. By the 1990s, this demographic shift in Asian American college and University-level student bodies had become increasingly



apparent and the area of Asian American Studies was confronted with the challenge of making the field relevant to them. Diaspora which offers a framework to study relations among the adopted home, the ethnic homeland, and geographically dispersed co-ethnics, provided a meaningful way to address the experiences of this new student body and population.

Within Asian American studies, diasporas has been used primarily to refer to ties and relationships between Asians in the United States and their respective ethnic homelands in Asia. Diaspora research in this field, therefore, has focused on this binary relationship between homeland and place of settlement. But in the present days, Asian Diaspora has grown as a research agenda that encourages not only ethnic-specific studies of ties between the homeland and place of settlement and ties among geographically dispersed communities, but also comparative analysis of different ethnic diasporas, both in terms of their two sets of ties and in terms of their interaction with one another in specific locations. This involves both ethnic-specific/ geographically dispersed and place-specific/comparative ethnic research.

The active role of Asian states in producing and sustaining diasporic connections and identifications with their respective homelands is perhaps the single most important factor that distinguishes Asian diasporas from most other diasporas. (Parreñas, 6-8)

As opposed to the term "Oriental" that was being used to address immigrants to America from Asia, the term "Asian American" came to be used which highlighted the American status of immigrants from Asia and their descendants. The term grows out of the frustration felt by many American-born citizens of Asian extraction at being treated as perpetual foreigners in the United States despite the fact that their roots in that country go back as many as seven generations. Such racist treatment, along with Orientalise tendencies that fetishize Asian objects, customs and persons, has also engendered in many Asian Americans an internal uncertainty about their Asian heritage. It is therefore not surprising that writing by Asian Americans has coalesced around the theme of "claiming an American, as opposed to Asian, identity". (E. Kim 1987, 88) Many people of Asian descent feel, to this day, the need to prove their 'Americanises' by shedding their original culture and by setting themselves apart from new Asian immigrants. In Elaine Kim's words, "The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly blurred" (1992, xii). The 1965 change in the immigration quota has resulted in the number of foreign-born Asians now exceeding that of American-born. Thus, Asian American Literature has been enriched by the voices of diverse ethnic origins. (Cheung, 5-9)

The issues of ethnicity and identity find a lot of relevance in the texts chosen for the purposes of this paper. Two short stories and two poems have been chosen for analysis. The stories are excerpts from novels which have been greatly appreciated for their graphic portrayal of Asian American experiences.

From Monkey Bridge is an excerpt from Lan Cao's first novel, *Monkey Bridge*. Lan Cao is a Vietnamese American who left Vietnam for United States in 1975. The Monkey Bridge refers to a bridge made of flimsy bamboo that spans perilous terrain. Such treacherous bridges we reused by Vietnamese peasants for centuries. The novel uses Vietnamese myth,



history and dreams to tell both a typical American immigrant story and a darker tale of a mother's revenge. The story revolves around a mother and daughter who move to USA as refugees due to the Communist rule in South Vietnam which forced a number of people to flee the country. Initially they are placed in military camps and later they move to Northern Virginia, closer to Washington DC for more safety. The story shows how the mother and daughter struggle to find themselves an identity in the new country.

The cultural differences in the new place makes them hurt as people's attitude towards them is different. In one such case a worker of a shopping mall points fingers at them awkwardly to call them which was condescending while they would have used much better gestures for the same back in their country. She speaks of the reality in a hard way: "This was the truth I was beginning to realize: it was not the enormous or momentous event, but the gradual suggestion of irrevocable and protracted change that threw us off balance and made us know in no uncertain terms that we would not be returning to the familiarity of our former lives."

Another instance is about the way in which she mentions people forming new identities changing their original birth year, their occupation, making up their identities to be something better than what they were, once they move to USA. The fact that their old identities have no proper proof makes it easier for them to fabricate their identities to their favour: A bar girl becoming a Confucian teacher, draft dodgers and ordinary soldiers becoming decorated veterans of battlefields and so on. Quoting the reasons for these shifting identities she says, "America had rendered us invisible and at the same time awfully conspicuous. We would have to relinquish not just the little truths – the year of our birth, where we once worked and went to school – but also the bigger picture as well." Further she says she realized what they had to do: "Keep what you see behind your eyes, and save what you think under your tongue. Let your thoughts glow from within. Hide your true self." She also notes how both of them sit comfortably in their living room in the US and watch the disintegration of their home country little by little 'silently' as if they are not affected by it. The story also shows how South Asian beliefs and myths like 'Karma' are not forgotten in the new land and associations are made to that from their experiences. Likewise, an instance of the daughter learning American English from her Aunt and Uncle:

She says: "This was my realization: we have only to let one thing go – the language we think in, or the composition of our dream, the grass roots clinging underneath its rocks – and all at once everything goes."

The last lines read thus: "We were in a new, immovable world, fortified by its proximity to Washington DC. From now on, our future lay in the capital of the Free World, our new home, where promises, real and hypothesized, would be made as extravagantly as they could be broken...."

The next selection is an excerpt from the novel, *Homebase* titled *From Homebase*, by Shawn Wong, a second-generation Chinese American, an active voice in civil rights campus politics and the Asian American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this excerpt, a young Chinese American participating in the Native American protest at Alcatraz Island in



San Francisco Bay engages in a dialogue with an old man in a prison cell raising questions of racial identity, home and belonging. The young man meets an old Chinese prisoner in an isolated cell in a deplorable condition who seems unaffected by the extreme cold conditions he is in. The conversation starts with the old man saying: "You know, people say I look Chinese..." He repeats this sentence ironically to show the state of Chinese prisoners lacking an identity of their own. When the young man who also looks Chinese, says he is an American, the old man questions him: "You mean you ain't born in China?" and says his ancestors came from China thirty thousand years ago and settled in Acoma Pueblo contributing his Chinese appearance to his grandfather, a Chinese. He then asks the young man what he is doing in an alien land: "What are you doing here? This isn't your battle or your land" to which the young man replies: "I'm part of this land too." The next dialogue startles the young man and makes him start thinking. The old man says: "You should be out looking for your place, your home. This is a part of mine."

Further, he notes that his grandfather was neither a Railroad worker nor miner as is evident in history about Chinese migrants, but was a 'bone collector': "Well, in my grandfather's days the tongs hired men like him to travel around looking for the bones of dead Chinamen so that the tong could send them back to China." Then the old man reveals to him that the Chinese were kept on Angel Island and says: "You didn't know that? I'm more Chinese than you are. I said before you got to find your own land, you know, where your people have been. Like Angel Island, like Rains ford, California." Ultimately it dawns upon the young man he is Chinese rather than American and the old man's words are eye-openers to this man. The identity crisis of the young man is clearly evident from this story and stark reality faced tells us of the hardships undergone by Chinese Americans.

The third selection is a poem, *We are Americans Now, We Live in the Tundra* by Marilyn Chin, a Chinese American, raised in America. Her name was changed from "Mei Ling" to "Marilyn" by her father being influenced by American culture and named after an American movie star Marilyn Monroe. She places the change of her own name also in the context of Asian immigration and negative influence of American Culture. She makes cross cultural references from America to China.

Chin explores what it means to be a Chinese American woman who experiences the pull of both Chinese and non-Chinese cultures, the pressures of assimilation, the conflicts of gender and sexuality, and the tensions between generations. This poem uses images of the 'old-country' (Chinese) plants and animals to contrast East and West. The poem starts with a 'hazy', unfriendly atmosphere in San Francisco where the speaker has moved to. There is a reluctance to blend with the host country's culture and also experiences a pull towards the home country's culture to which she cannot return. She says: "I sing her a Blues song; even a Chinese girl gets the blues." So 'a sense of belonging to nowhere' is projected by the poem, which is typical to a diasporic self. The image of 'a begonia tree' is used to establish the fact that though the appearance of China or Chinese is beautiful, inwardly a lot of pain is being experienced. The 'giant Pandas' and 'Bengal tigers' are examples of stereotyped images of Asians which the poet wishes to say is incorrect understanding of Asians. Two pandas brought to the zoo at Washington DC from China in the hope that they would mate. But they don't due to the change of environment and habitat and thus, through the state of the pandas,



the struggle of the Chinese migrants is established. The pandas say: "We will not mate. We are Not impotent, we are important. We blame the environment, we blame the zoo!" And then the 'Cultural loss' is reflected by instances of 'bidding farewell to ancestors: Hirsute Taoists' and the non-existence of their native plants: Bamboo, sasagrass and coconut palms in the new land where they are replaced by Legumes, Maize and Wheat instead. The fact that they have moved to a country where civilization exists away from nature is also projected by the lines: "We are Americans now, we live in the Tundra of the logical, a sea of cities, a wood of cars."

The last selection is the poem, *Breaking Tradition* by Janice Mirikitani, a sansei (third-generation Japanese American), a political activist, a teacher, a dancer and an editor. She seeks to defiantly break the stereotypes of Asian Americans prevalent in mainstream American culture. She contests the stereotype of the Asian American woman as demure and reticent. Mirikitani's family, like thousands of other Japanese American families in the western United States, were forced into concentration camps during the dark period of American history. In this poem, she portrays some of her mother's hardships during Wartime Relocation along with stressing the need to speak out against injustice. In 'Breaking Tradition', which is from *Shedding Silence*, a Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) woman reflects on her mother's struggles with the dislocation of immigration and contrasts her own attempts at self-assertion and assimilation with those of her own daughter. The conflicts seen through three generations are visualized in the poem. The speaker speaks about her daughter with pride and feels sorry for her mother who underwent more suffering and struggles than herself. The poem begins with a sense of pride: "My daughter denies she is like me, her secretive eyes avoid mine. She reveals the hatreds of womanhood already veiled behind music and smoke and telephones." She reveals the loneliness, frustration, and emptiness she experienced during the initial phase of settlement in the concentration camps in America. The forbidden state is reflected when she says: "This room we lock ourselves in where whispers live like fungus, giggles about small breasts and cellulite, where we confine ourselves to jealousies, bedridden by menstruation." She also experienced dirty, dark rooms like her mother, but she had the courage to voice it out while her mother was silenced by requirements of a woman to be 'otonashi' (obedient, docile, quiet) and maintained her room neat with silence. She wanted to break the tradition of silence which she couldn't but is proud that her daughter is able to do it. "I want to break tradition - unlock this room where women dress in the dark." She wants to come out of that practice of compression and smothered voices due to weight of tradition and cultural backgrounds carried from the home country.

A sense of identity crisis can be observed very clearly in this poem where the three women struggle in their own ways amidst assimilatory problems in the new country and the culture carried from their home country hinders their thoughts about protesting and voicing out. She ends with the happy note that her daughter is 'Breaking tradition' giving a sense of accomplishment to her.

2. Conclusion

It may be concluded from the analysis of the above Asian American texts that the Asian American subjects have been experiencing traumatic struggles with regard to their own



identity and ethnicities and a pull towards the home country along with a conflicting desire to be recognized with the American land and culture. The need to stay connected with the homeland and the subsistence and survival question in the new country raises concerns that make them question the ethics of their own states.

According to AvtarBrah, 'Home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin". (Cartographies of Diaspora, p.192). This has been substantiated by the stories analysed here. *Home base* and *We are Americans Now, We Live in the Tundra* highlight the fact that the migrants though settled in America, find themselves still strangers in an alien land and hence trace their roots back to their homeland.

Joel Kuortti argues in his essay, "Writing Imagined Diasporas: South Asian Women Reshaping North American Identity" that the diasporic South Asians are not merely assimilating to their host cultures but they are also actively reshaping them through their own, new voices bringing new definitions of identity. (Kuortti, 3)

Kuortti's words have been proved true by the selected texts which evidently show that the diasporic peoples retain that sense of belonging to their home cultures though also trying to assimilate into the new culture which is already a melting pot of cultures. At the same time, they have been forming new identities while also contributing to the culture of the host country bringing in the concept of 'multiculturalism', 'composite heritage' and 'binary identities'.

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