

## Locating Women in Diaspora: Freedom or Confinement? A Study of Nawaaz Ahmed's *Radiant Fugitives*

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The concept of diaspora has evolved and the inclusion of transnationality has become the present face of diaspora. The earlier association with the feeling of loss, alienation, anxiety, memory and remembrance is not the only factor inspiring literature today. The post-modern literature proceeds to locate other factors like creation of identity, individuality and freedom in diaspora. Analysing from feminist perspective, women have different sorts of experiences and these cannot be put under the single umbrella with other human experiences collected in hostland and homeland after dispersion. Hence, this paper intends to analyse the present face of diaspora for women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by making reference to Nawaaz Ahmed's novel *Radiant Fugitives*.

**Key terms:** Freedom, Identity, Diaspora, Individuality

Diaspora refers to the population that have scattered outside the native place voluntarily, semi-voluntarily or forcefully. The history of diaspora starts with the dispersion of the Jews from Babylon and has continued till the post-modern times. Theoretical understanding of diaspora brings in multifarious connotations like the feelings of alienation, anxiety, loneliness, remembrance and memories into the surface. Historically speaking, at an age when communication and transportation was not yet developed, the distance between native land and hostland was immense; and this gap resulted in those nostalgic associations. However, with the passing of time, migration have become more voluntary and the exceptional innovations in communication and transportation facilities have brought every place nearby; thereby unveiling a new face of diaspora, i.e. a choice-based one. "The vast majority of migrants face some level of constraints yet also have some level of choice" (de Haas). The variety of opportunities an individual encounters in a place other than his/her homeland may be enriching in bringing personal, professional and mental growth. Voluntary dispersion for growth therefore has become an important aspect defining migration. In "The Romance of Exile" Ian Buruma tells about the positive aspects of diaspora and says that diaspora should not just be associated with loss and alienation. He points out that the post-modern tendency to transform the notion of diaspora or exile into a metaphor of alienation, disorientation and loss is a very limited interpretation of diaspora. It should be studied on broader terms. (Harper)

Indian Diaspora can be divided largely into two groups: first generation diaspora and the second generation. First generation refers to those people who were born in India and have migrated to foreign lands whereas the second generation refers to those who were born in foreign land to Indian parents. Both these categories undergo multiple types of experiences. The first generation is very often expressive of the loss and memory related to their homeland. However, for the second generation, the hostland feels more native than the homeland. But they still feel separated from the hostland due to their difference on appearance, language, culture and ancestry. The problem of fitting into neither of these leaves them confused. Combining the duo, they attain a hybrid culture.

Significant works on Indian diaspora have emerged in the recent years and this can be broadly grouped into two categories following the two generations of diaspora. The first category includes early writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Meena Alexander, Bharti Mukherjee and many others whereas the second generation includes Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Hari Kunzuru, Fatima Farheen Mirza, VS Naipaul and many other writers of Indian descent. All these writers have written about different experiences of people living in diaspora dealing with topics ranging from loss, nostalgia, alienation, exile and freedom. While analysing literature from the diaspora, most of the times, the focus automatically falls on the losses the people encountered. However, the changing face of diaspora needs to be considered. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century socio-cultural setting, transnationalism, multilingualism, hybridity has taken over. Considering the constant voluntary migration from India to outside countries, our attention gets directed towards what they achieve rather than focusing only on memories. Specifically for women, diaspora has many things to offer.

In Indian context, the role and position of women is known to all. The long-term patriarchy, as the socio-cultural background has internalized the dos and don'ts for women. Given the history as well as the changing face of diaspora, women's case becomes very interesting to consider. Stepping outside the native land is like crossing the threshold always asked by the paternal figure not to cross. Stepping beyond in an alien land opens up new scopes to create own spatio-temporal identity for them. In diaspora "Indian women find a freedom for self-exploration and deliberation to conceive new identity and move beyond the fixed definition of femininity" (Pande). The way women are represented in the Indian socio-cultural context proceed to represent themselves when they go outside the native land. Change of the space gives them new connections and an opportunity to develop new lifestyle. The environment, the socio-cultural and political

scenario inspires them to be vocal and bold and their identity is re-arranged; the earlier suppressed self gets replaced by a new confident self.

The new land or the host land is enriched with multiple opportunities and experiences. The women, who had been living in a home which has multiple restrictions get a scope to explore in the new land which do not share similar socio-cultural aspects with their homeland. The new place with its new culture and geographical affiliations can be enriching for the women “The element of an individual’s identity may be re-arranged or re-ordered as the result of a change of geography, particularly regarding real or perceived access to power or feeling of powerlessness. A second home allows for another facet of identity to come to the forefront, which may contribute the feeling of empowerment as the second geography allows the female to exhibit control over her own life through sexual freedom” (Wells-Lynn). Sexuality for women in a traditionally inclined Indian society is pre-determined. The fixed role is to be followed and any diversion is a matter of strong retort. However, moving outside the nation creates a major gap and the absence of such bounds let the women to explore themselves. The essential femininity is to be experimented further in a non-traditional setting.

In the light of the above-mentioned arguments, this article considers the novel *Radiant Fugitives* by Nawaaz Ahmed which is very post-modern in nature subverting almost every prior connotation of diaspora. Seema, the heroine of the novel runs away from her house as her sexual identity as a lesbian is something unimaginably wrong in the eyes of her father. She leaves her home and roams around, finally settles in California. The non-acceptance of her father had pushed her to seek refuge in a culture, which is more open and considerate of everyone’s personal choices. She ends up staying in the US where her life gets a drastic change from what she experienced in India.

The existence of both heterosexual and homosexual tendencies in Seema gets explored in a land which is very far from her homeland. Her failed marriage with Bill and relationships with Divya and Leigh shows how she got options to explore herself. Moreover, she lives in a house above from where she can have a view of the houses and cities below. It is in stark contrast with her corner of safety at home-the gulmohar tree where she used to hide in difficult situations. The vision from the tree was barred and she could only hear the voices. On the contrary, in the US, she is living with full vision from where, political, social and sexual aspirations are imaginable and explorable. She is fully involved in all these aspects and thus making the house in diaspora a better place to live in.

Interestingly, the slightest marker of her homeland hampers her freedom. She lives alone in California but when her sister and mother arrive to take care of her during her pregnancy, she starts feeling marginalized. The religious and cultural practices her mother and sister follow serve as an embodiment of back-home patriarchal standards. It remains as an undertone and she starts seeking refuge in her own home. Staying up late on bed or walking outside, she feels more comfortable and confident. In fact, she does not reveal that she is still lesbian. She realizes that she was happy and empowered when alone and far from everyone. The writer has deliberately involved Seema in the election campaign of the US and same sex marriage campaign in California. She is placed on a stage where Obama which is expressive of her ability in participating in huge campaign. Her involvement in both showcases her power and control over herself in a place where she, in no way, is pushed or pressurized by any markers of her homeland. Putting the two images side by side, Seema, scared of her family, hiding on a branch of tree and Seema, matured, empowered, strong and independent getting involved in political campaigns for Obama, a clear picture is drawn automatically.

She gets full freedom to experience multiple homo and hetero-sexual relations in the US. She becomes an American, not just entertaining its cultural freedom but getting involved in contemporary political scenario. The US has provided Seema with vigor and good health. The dresses she wears as well as her looks clarify how she has been treated by the new land. Unlike her sister, who is younger than her and has decided to live with her husband and continued her traditional lifestyle, Seema appears younger and more beautiful unlike the grave and seriousness Tahera harbours “Seema’s wearing a long skirt and a demure full sleeved top, brown and beige...she is stylishly dressed, poised, sure of herself. The prospect of a divorce seems to have had little effect on her-she is cheerful, unflinching, unbashful.” The description continues and we get a full picture of Seema’s happening life when the children of Tahera observe Seema and thought that Seema is younger “His mother is in hijab, his aunt is not, there are dark circles around her mother’s eyes, while his aunt’s face has make-up and lipstick. His mother is like a moth, his aunt like a sparrow, sharply etched” (Ahmed).

Setting parallelly the representation of her life in her Chennai Hussain home will further clarify the picture. In *Radiant Fugitives*, Chennai is portrayed as a place where the destiny of a girl is decided by her father. The lessons on poem recitation, the pressure of achieving first position and to receive the awards and to be the best had always manipulated the lives of the two sisters. The intensity was such that even the biological gap from what her father expected resulted in her forever alienation from her home. Moreover, the household rules were predetermined and when Seema tried to explain her sexual preferences, she is pushed away. The father’s detachment for a lifetime is the consequence of her sexual identity which cannot be changed under no circumstances. In the moment of weakness, when Seema expected her parents to support her and understand her, they pushed her far “In his voice she senses doctorly frustration masking fatherly disappointment, even distaste. She has become a problem to be fixed.. what she begins to understand is that they are on different sides of a fissure that will only grow wider” (Ahmed). This situation is furthered when her sister arrived in her home in California. The bondages at her home in India were so strong that the presence of any people from her past would take her immediately back to the similar mental space where she would see her freedom slip away “...it is an excuse to

stay longer in bed, for the rest of the apartment already feels like territory Tahera controls. Seema regrets having given in to her mother's appeal...but Taher's fraught presence has now made Seema an exile in her own home. She decides to claim an unavoidable appointment and stay out for most of the day" (Ahmed).

She hid in the gulmohar tree at home and on bed or outside the house in California. Both situations occur at the presence of her back-home connections. In both the cases, she is looking for a safe haven to contain herself; for a home for herself. "Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination" (Bachelard). Interestingly, home is not something that is only geographically inclined, rather, it is a place of attachment, power, freedom, happiness and individuality. The relational and familial component may not bring an end to the homing process. Rather, the feeling of the individual concerned must be taken into consideration. Home does not mean a house with walls and people, as the popular saying goes 'home is where the heart is'. Home can be a region, a person, a feeling or any space of attachment for the individual concerned. It is somewhere where one can feel safe to express. And in this novel, the lesbian heroine, after being outcasted by family, cornered by her sister and mother's presence, burdened by her backhome cultural aspects, feel at home when she is alone in California.

The above analysis of the novel showcases how, diaspora has evolved over time. The dispersion may not simply bring loneliness but sometimes, for women especially, can be liberating. The women may get a chance to create their own individual identity in a place that was not theirs by birth. The voluntary separation from homeland has not just caused pain and anxiety in this case but has provided with opportunities which were not possible otherwise.

However, since the context is diaspora, the connotations of loss and remembrance is imminent. Diaspora comes with the package of these feeling which are associated with one's place of birth and brought up. Despite, in this case, these feeling of nostalgia are suppressed as the unexpected freedom welcomed Seema to be a part of the socio-political and cultural aspects of the new world. Moreover, the temporal element plays a vital role in doing so. The novel is set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when communication revolution is taking place. Digitalization has brought every place and person nearby. The earlier gap and distance are now replaced with easy access and quick contact. Therefore, diaspora evolved and made the scattered population transnational owing Seema a space of individuality.

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