

# **A Panoptic Approach to Diaspora and Gender: Theorizing through Intersectional Prism**

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*Diaspora and Gender are the two broad concepts of contemporary literary discourse. The interconnection of the two has enriched the scope of critical analysis leading to newer formulations of theories and studies. The negotiation of borders and boundaries in transnational realm has intensified the process of migration. The ideology that diaspora is boundary specific and gender is boundary restricted has evolved to a farther extent to accommodate newer shades and dimensions of interpretations to our present day understanding of the realms. The paper approaches the topics of gender and diaspora through a historicized lens, examines its implications in past and present, and explores its ever-widening impact on the future generations through the perspective of inclusion. The contributions of various diasporic and gender theoreticians are analysed in length to give insight to the area. Theorizing gender and diaspora through the intersectional approach of the Latin American writer, Gloria Anzaldua, has dilated the topic.*

**Key words:** Diaspora, Gender, New Mestiza, Borderlands theory and Inclusion

## **Introduction**

The term 'Diaspora' is currently designated with the weightage and shades of many pivotal terms like expatriation (a person who resides outside native country), transnationalism (cross-border

movements), displacement, migration and ethnicity. Each of these terms locate diaspora as involving a long sojourn away from home and return always becomes deferred. The diasporic citizens share a common history, culture, and spiritual belief in the hostland. The different stages involved in diaspora are adoption, absorption, assimilation, and retention. These stages help dislocated citizens to reinvent various domains incorporating migrants into the countries of settlement.

As per the data released by Western Union in Migration portal, around 244 million people lived outside the country of birth in 2015. This points to a sharp progress in 41% increase from year 2000. The number of international migrants reached 258 million in 2017. Of these, 14% are below 20 years old and 48% are women. Two-thirds of international migrants live in Europe or Asia. It is estimated that a new nation with the World's migrant population would be the fifth largest nation in the globe. The shifting demographics resulting from migration is accurately sketched by World Migration Report (2022);

The current global estimate is that there were around 281 million international migrants in the world in 2020, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population. Overall, the estimated number of international migrants has increased over the past five decades. The total estimated 281 million people living in a country other than their countries of birth in 2020 was 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970. (Mcauliffe, M and A. Triandafyllidou)

### **Background of Diaspora**

Approximately around 250 BC, the term 'diaspora' was first used by the Jewish scholars while translating the Hebrew Bible to Greek. The term connotes spiritual anguish following the scattering of Jews by an angry God. From 586 BC onwards, Babylon becomes a critical symbol in the lexicon of diaspora. The Jewish citizens exiled to the city of Babylon and thereafter the place signified images of sorrow and despair. Diaspora thus becomes exclusively associated with Jewish history for around 2000 years – dispersal of Jews who lived outside Israel. De-colonisation after the Second World War developed transnational bonds of cohesion among populations of African and Asian origin leading to aggressive remigration of many

groups. United Nations formally recognised 33 million people as refugees declaring 20<sup>th</sup> June as World refugee Day and 18<sup>th</sup> December as International Migration Day.

Migration is contributed by varied external and internal factors like urbanization (shift in population from rural to urban characterised by dominance of industrial and service activities), environment (sudden and progressive changes in environment force people to leave home), family (reunification of family through migration), education (migration of students to pursue education in international countries), war, and death. Voluntary and forced migration are likely to create a different impact to the migrant population. The broad spectrum of diaspora is characterised by distinguishing tenets and features like multiculturalism (co-existence of multiple cultures), multilingualism (co-existence of multiple languages), multigeneration (integration of people belonging to various generation), marginalization (victimization in the name of racism), alienation and estrangement (in the name of racial exclusion) and hybridity (mixing of races and cultures). The diasporic approach of the writers is twin fold. Traditionalist writers maintain ties with motherland and retain separate identity. Assimilationist writers deploy the process of acculturation and adaptation with the host society. Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Anita Badami and Rohinton Mistry are some of the promising writers of diaspora from Indian context.

The background of Indian and African diasporic history is tied by historical connections, cultural bonds, spiritual affinities and unifying racial memories. Indo-American diaspora is characterised by displacement, identity, and racism. Indo- Canadian diaspora is featured by multiple forms and layers of self-identification. African diaspora is featured by transatlantic trade (migration of Africans as slaves), racial dialectic and boundary maintenance by dominant authority. The contemporary diaspora is transnational by nature. It explores and accommodates the concepts of mobility, hybridity and cosmopolitanism. The pain, resignation and dilemma of the dislocated are captured in present diasporic writings. The diasporic writers discuss migration from culturally rooted homelands pertaining to the intensity of conflict experienced by the immigrants. Such fictional endeavour

not only make writers visible but also delves into theoretical, psychoanalytical, and racial paradigms. Memory and intertextuality become powerful narrative strategies.

The literature of diaspora broadens to the formulations of new theories of diaspora. Robin Cohen in *Global Diaspora* discusses four phases of diaspora:

1. 1960's to 1970's (victimhood at the hands of the oppressor). The classical uses of diaspora were based on Jewish study- Armenians, Jews, Irish, Africans, Greek and Palestinians.
2. 1980's. Diaspora began to describe different categories of people through classification into expatriates, expellees, refugees, and alien residents.
3. Mid 1990's. The two major concepts that limited the diasporic idea is homeland and ethnic religious community.
4. Phase of consolidation is marked by the diasporic notion including elements, features and ideologies.

Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* speaks about diaspora of hope, diaspora of terror and diaspora of despair. Paul Gilroy in *Black Atlantic* talks about the scattering of Africans and he defines the whole process as Black Atlantic. Stuart Hall in 'Cultural Identities and Diaspora' states about producing and reproducing identities through transformation and difference. Chivallon in *Beyond Gilroy's Black Atlantic* talks about hybrid diaspora and rhizome as a metaphor which scrutinizes the complex migration patterns and contours that emerge across transnational realms. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari expand the concept of rhizomatic cartography to comprehend the third space theory. For them the rhizome metaphor stresses the co-existence of diverse points of power and this unlocks the prospect of multifaceted guidelines of possible additions. Homi K. Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* observes that fluctuating borders and boundaries estranges the frontiers of modern nations.

### **Emergence of Women Diaspora**

Gender becomes a central notion to the critical understanding of migration. The male dominated literary realm veiled the personal struggles and conflicts of women. It is at this juncture a new wave of

women writers emerged in the horizon of diasporic writing. The stereotypical representation of gender roles to the portrayal of strong women surfaced in these writings as to articulate new ways of expression. Transnational spaces and narratives of migration channelised women authors new contours for self-exploration and engender newer depictions of black and female diaspora. The hostland, memories of homeland and patriarchal hegemony dominate women diasporic writings. Women diaspora further investigates and re-examines dislocation, alienation, conflict between tradition and modernity, suppressed identities, cultural dilemma, in-between spaces and subjugation of third world migrants.

The diasporic women writers from Africa fictionalized forced migration of family, victimisation due to racism and brought out diversities of black female experience and authored women characters tied by community bonding. The women writers from Indian diaspora are keen to portray immigrant experiences, captured moments of diasporic life, longing for east and cultural tradition. Through these diasporic writings the authors reflected distinctive notion of womanhood and projects women's unique role in constructing and weaving an organised pattern of life in hostland.

### **Development of Gender as a concept**

The origin of the concept 'gender' dates to 1970's with the emergence of second wave of Feminism. Closely enclosed within the social stratifiers like caste, class, family and group, gender is evolved out of binary thinking where hierarchy privileges one term over the another. Gender roles are defined by behaviour but gender stereotypes are beliefs and attitudes about masculinity and femininity. Gender Studies evolve from Women Studies and deal not only with women's issues but also with LGBTIQ. Thus, discourse of Gender Studies conceptualizes existing gender power relations.

The theoretical approach to gender by various theoreticians illuminates and ponder on varied depiction of comprehending principles and roles ascribed by gender. For Judith Lorber, gender is an organizing principle that goes beyond reproductive differences (*Social Construction of Gender*). In *What is a Woman?* Toril Moi elaborates gender as a constantly evolving concept. Judith Butler in *Gender*

*Trouble* highlighted sex, gender and sexuality as performances and challenged the biological conception of sex. She interrogated generalization about men and women and destabilized gender dichotomy of men/women. Ann Oakley in *Sex, Gender and Society* observed gender as a matter of cultural and social classification into masculine and feminine.

Feminism is conceived as a politicized discourse which uncovers symptoms of oppression, diagnose problems, and offer alternative versions of realities. It involves subjectivity and tends to disrupt objectivity. Feminist literary theory helps women to read the text closely and to read against the grain. The sexual politics of the world inside and outside the text are part of political critique and action in feminist theories. Rosi Braidotti speaks of feminist reader as a nomadic subject wandering to find sustenance. Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Kate Millet are some of the prominent gender theoreticians. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of Rights of Women* rejected the established view that women are naturally or intrinsically weaker or inferior to men. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* developed women centric notion of reading and argued that patriarchy prevents women from reading as women. She also asserts that authorship is gendered and women's language is conditioned by patriarchy and sex. Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* asserted that men mystified and stereotyped women in propagating patriarchy. Women becomes part of othering, seen as inferior or other and creates gender inequalities. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* ascribes woman writer as producer of text and meanings to replace male critical theory. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* examines the power-oriented relationships that govern women and shifts definition of power and politics towards private and public spheres.

### **Intersectionality of Diaspora and Feminism**

The interconnectivity and intertextuality of diaspora is reflected in another areas like Feminism, Postcolonialism and Queer studies. Theory of Intersectionality holds a magnificent place in Feminist theory to study convergence of multiple identities and is developed by Black Feminist scholar, Kimberle Krenshaw in 1989.

The fabric of multiple identities is interwoven into the experience of oppression and privilege simultaneously. Intersectional approach overcome gender biases and fill historical gaps and inequalities. Socially constructed categories based on race, class, gender, and ethnicity interact and trigger inequality. Crenshaw herself said;

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It is not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGQT problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all these things. (Interview 2017)

The intersectionality of diaspora and feminism can aptly be theorized through the writings of women theoretician, Gloria Anzaldua. The concepts like Mestiza, New Mestiza, and Mestiza consciousness among others, as propounded by Anzaldua in *Borderlands*, has unlocked new vistas of wisdom and inter-racial experiences. The study covers a series of inter-related topics like overview of diaspora and gender, theories of diaspora and gender, women diaspora, intersectional approach to gender and diaspora and the theoretical domain of Anzaldua to integrate gender and diaspora. The true significance of the paper lies in the way it establishes the integrated aspects as part of contemporary phenomenon and how it teaches the people to assimilate and accommodate cultures across race, gender and ethnicity. The spirit of resilience and survival against oddities and conflicts by diasporic women folk is yet another message delivered through the study. Born as a Mestiza, Anzaldua situates herself between Spanish/ Mexican and American culture. She herself positions her identity as Mestiza, Chicana, Feminist and Lesbian. Hails from Texas-Mexican border, in-between space aids her to delineate multicultural isolation and to unify the experiences of all those who live in the margin or borderlands. Anzaldua's pivotal concept to the formulation of her literary theory centers around 'Mestiza.' It is an ethnic racial category that emerged from racial mixing of European and indigenous people of America as a result of colonialism. Her *Borderlands* focussed on New Mestizas – the people who inhabit multiple worlds because of their gender, sexuality, color, class, personality, and spiritual beliefs. Intersectionality

of feminist, queer and cultural theory contributes to the rich theoretical speculations of Mestiza.

We are the porous rock in the stone metate  
We are the rolling pin...  
We are the pestle...  
We will abide (Anzaldua, *Borderlands* 104)

Mestiza heals the split of our lives, cultures, languages, and thoughts. Mestizo evolves as supreme crossers of cultures with self-respect. The person who transcends culture and race and even the borders, becomes a true mestiza and survives in the world with the mestiza consciousness. There are some pivotal terms central to Mestiza consciousness.

- a. Mestizaje- a state of being beyond binary (“either or”). Anzaldua explored the experience of mestiza, a woman living on the border between different countries and cultures.
- b. Nepantleras- describes a unique type of mediator, one who facilitate passages between worlds by bridging the gap. Mestiza lives within and among multiple worlds through painful negotiations.
- c. Borderlands- it becomes a metaphorical space of ambivalence, tension, and unrest. The concept goes beyond the geo-political Texas and Mexico borderlands to encompass psychic, sexual and spiritual borderlands as well. Mestiza fits well in to this space.
- d. Coatlicue State- psychic conflicts that lead to self-division, cultural confusion, and shame.

The methodology of mestiza is based on the strategy for survival. The instance of cross breeding and amalgamation of different cultures lead to preservation under manifold situations.

Because of I, a mestiza,  
Continually walk out of one culture  
And into another,  
Because I am in all cultures at the same time  
(Anzaldua, *Borderlands* 99)

Symbiosis of cultures through the concept of coalition building across gender, race and sexuality is the highlight of mestiza. The subject-object duality breaks down and leads to disruption of borders-



both physical and psychological. The creation of new identity redefines gender roles in revolutionary ways. Mestiza consciousness becomes highly significant in present day diaspora and gender. Borderlands theory, multicultural paradigm, theory of inclusion, emergence of new value systems and resistance are some of the key impacts. The massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of long struggle.

The formulation of in-between space and the conceptualization of the third space are both based on the common premise that human subjectivity is attributed to differences. Homi Bhabha devises third space in delineating cultural identities of immigrants occupying the trans-border, geographical and cultural space of diaspora. Unlike Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness,' which specifically caters to Africans, Anzaldúa suggests the contribution of multiple factors as accountable to the formation of individual self, identity and subjectivity. *Borderlands* exemplifies that construction of identity is based on differences. The concept of border consciousness and mestiza stressed the emergence of new politics of difference in the assimilation process of new self. The theorization of the concept of mestiza consciousness as a fluctuating process is the basis for dismantling binary dualism. The parallel co-existence of differences and opposites has been theorized by Bhabha through a series of terms like hybridity, ambivalence and third space in colonial and postcolonial context. For Bhabha, in-between space provides "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new sings of identity and innovative sites of collaborations and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (p.1-2).

## **Conclusion**

Race and sexual subordination are reinforcing mutually. Women are marginalized by either race or gender. Intersectionality theory disrupts the assumption that identities are fixed and explores its fluid aspects. Gender and diaspora theories are vehicles for raising consciousness of oppressed groups. Literature becomes diagnostic pieces, cure for social evils and hope for social transformation. It becomes a political document and site for someone to voice against multicultural women oppression. The concepts of pluralities,

multiplicities and hybridities involving the third space become a testimonial to diasporic and gendered cultural identities. The immigrants constantly oscillate between the home culture and host culture. Their negotiation in the hybrid space of diaspora and the resulting pluralistic identities pave way for cultural transformation in third space. Brah states in *Cartographies of Diaspora*:

. . . [D]iaspora [is not] a metaphor for individual exile, but rather, diasporas emerge out of migrations of collectivities... The word *diaspora* often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation. . . But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings.” (p. 193)

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