Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 6, January 2018
Pp. 94-100
http://www.arsartium.org

Diasporic Cultural Dilemmas and Ecological Insight in Taslima Nasreen's *Fera*

*–Jayeeta Nag**

Abstract

Fera by the controversial author Taslima Nasreen examines the chronicle of a migrant who has been searching for her true identity. This novel stresses upon the emotions of a Bangladeshi emigrant whose memory oscillates between romanticizing over idyllic past days spent in Bangladesh and confronting hardcore reality in India as a refugee. This paper intends to explore the traumatic sufferings and psychic torments of the protagonist while trying to synthesize the cultural dilemmas of two nations: cultures inherited by birth and customs adopted in host land. Caught between an emotional imbroglio and the fervent desire to visit her motherland Kalyani travels back to Bangladesh in search of her roots. The paper takes the initiative to analyze her journey from the point of view of diasporic literature while giving a stress to some cognate issues like societal constraints, cultural difference, the ethos of diverse communities and identity crisis. This paper interrogates how ecology and her association with her surroundings loom largely over defininghер identity. It also focuses how camaraderie is shared by human beings with natural phenomena like river, trees, land etc. This trait of the novel gives a way to analyze the text from ecocritical angle too. The border between two nations i.e. India and Bangladesh, doesn't remain a spatial character; its pervasive presence is felt in the hearts of the citizens residing in two countries. The corpus of this paper also highlights the binary between the thoughts of two women: Sharifa, Kalyani's childhood friend, who is relegated to the status of producing children and looking after the household chores and Kalyani, who travels to her motherland to reclaim her native identity.

Keywords: Migrants, Eecocritical, Host land, Cultural dilemmas, Identity.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. The unhealable rift between a human being, and a native place, between the self

* *PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Aliah University, Park Circus Campus, 17, Gorachand Road, Kolkata, West Bengal - 700014, INDIA.*
Email: jaika475@gmail.com

> and the true home, its essential sadness can never be surmounted.
>
> – Edward Said

This observation of Edward Said made in the essay entitled "Reflections on Exile" purports an insightful observation into the painful psychic agonies that a migrant undergoes in a host land. This paper tries to explore the existential agonies of a lady migrant under the backdrop of the partition of Bengal. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 contributes significantly to the genre of Eastern-India partition novels. These partition novels are intertwined with a deep-rooted sense of alienation, rootlessness and dislocation. It portrays the dislocation of a community from motherland and relocation of those refugees in host land. This partition in Eastern India has contributed a significant part to the canon of third-world diasporic literature. But before contextualizing the trauma of diasporic identity in view of Taslima Nasreen's *Fera* we must look into the origin of the word "diaspora". The etymological root of the diaspora can be traced back to the ancient Greek word διασπορά which means "scattering". Diasporic literature narrates the saga of survival of a dispersed community. Trauma and identity crisis constitute an inextricable link with diasporic novels. Robin Cohen in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* delineates the predicament and trauma of displaced community. He unravels the plight of diasporic community and concedes:

> all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that "the old country" – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotion (ix).

This paper seeks to undermine the mental inflictions and psychic torments of a Bangladeshi emigrant who comes to India at the advent of the partition of Eastern India. The story of partition remains usually clouded with the saga of the struggle of a dispersed community. But the novel *Fera* by Taslima Nasreen stresses upon the emotions of a single Bangladeshi emigrant whose memory oscillates between romanticizing over idyllic past days spent in Bangladesh and her strenuous struggle to synthesize the cultural dissonance of two nations (one inherited by birth and one adopted due to displacement). *Fera* by the controversial author Taslima Nasreen also examines the chronicle of a migrant searching for her true identity. The journey of the protagonist of this novel is intertwined with some testimonials of the exiled author's personal encounters when she undergoes a similar turmoil in her real life. The voyage of the protagonist in host land (India) and the fragmentary segments of the narrative describing her bygone days in her homeland (here Bangladesh) conjures up certain incidents which are inherently analogous to the author's personal life. Besides taking a dip at the predicament of Bangladeshi refugees in West Bengal, the novel also hinges on the subject of 'hyphenated identity'. The protagonist realizes this when she revisits her natal place. She grapples with the theme of identity crisis. She cannot make out who are her near and dear ones. Kalyani, the protagonist of the novel, is sent from Maimansingha (now in Bangladsh) to Kolkata at the critical juncture of partition of Bengal. She has got shelter in her maternal uncle's house. The novel portrays her hardships and tribulations in a relative's house. Her status is relegated to a housemaid.

Kalyani strives hard but her dreadful encounter debars her from becoming a 'fully-fledged member' of the host nation. Both in the homeland and host land she remains under the panoptical and suspicious gaze of her own people. She strives hard to forge a new identity in India but her cultural baggage, linguistic traits derived from homeland "Bangladesh" posits an invisible barrier to intermingle with the cultures of the host nation. Kalyani tries hard to forget Maimansingha language and tries to adopt polished Bengali pronunciation to assimilate with the culture of the host land. Linguistic traits often bear an attachment to one's own motherland. Here in the novel Kalyani often gets satirized by her cousins for Bangladeshi accent. A nostalgia centring on her motherland takes a grip over her when she coincidentally comes across a "bangal" clerk in her college. Exchanging customary greetings with the clerk, cropping up of the names of cities of Bangladesh in the middle of chats, indulging in communicating with Bangal language provide her with a *jouissance* in her otherwise humdrum life. But while the company of people of Bangladesh makes her elated the loss of amity and a strong sense of estrangement from her cousins make the thread of bonding with them fragile.

Space also makes a domineering factor in Partition Novel. The dislocation of space looms large and casts a pertinent effect on the protagonist. The sad fact of estranging from the sprawling mansion of Rajsahi Dhaka and shifting to a home at Tiljalacongested with the family members of maternal uncle make the life of protagonist a bit difficult. Physical displacement as well as emotional detachment from the native surrounding takes a toll on her. He Tiljala house never succeeds to appear as a "home" in Kayani's psyche. Her conscious and unconscious psyche reverts to her home in Bangladesh. The Tiljala house in India never posits an enshrinement of love and care; rather it stays just as an (in)secured shelter for living. Variations of emotional attachment with the notion of a home take place. In the book, *The Trauma and the Triumph*, Jasodhara Bagchi also addresses this notion of space in the chapter called "Re(creating) the Home". She concedes that

> …the creation of refugee colonies and the transition from the sprawling bastu with its ancestral snakes to a one-roomed bari involved a reorganization of space as well as an alteration of the emotional affiliations of home. With this reorganization of space came a refiguring of gender and of women's relationship to public and private spaces (70).

Kalyani, the free bird of Maimansingha becomes incarcerated within the four walls of maternal uncle's home. She also has to keep a vigilant eye on the cousins and her friends who shamelessly try to rob the chastity of Kalyani on any pretext. Staying at her maternal uncle's home without parents makes her vulnerable to the attack from relatives. The patriarchal authority and her surrender to the domestic violence make her a prey to the hierarchical stigmatized patriarchal society. Intimidated and faced with such isolation in hostland she retreats to a self-induced reverie in which she feels cosiness. So, Kalyani resorts to create a cocoon for herself. She gives vent to the role of memory to recreate an imaginary homeland. Though geographically delocalized she incessantly tries to recount the bygone childhood days spent in Bangladesh. She

reminisces her euphoric moments spent with childhood friend Sharifa and strives passionately to construct a utopian reality in her memory. Memory posits a key factor in rerooting herself to the soil of Bangladesh. In this way, her wistful nostalgia prompts her to be in her homeland. Her analeptic and proleptic thoughts always revolve around wandering on the banks of Brahmaputra, in the classrooms of school in Bangladesh, in the garden of her sprawling mansion of Dhaka, etc. Her memory of spending childhood days in the lap of nature somehow relieves her of present agonies. Andrew Davidson in an essay entitled "The Play of Identity, Memory and Belonging: Chinese Migrants in Sydney" acknowledges the dialectical relationship between memory and diaspora. He remarks that

> … unquestionably, memories-fragmentary moments-provide an intimate means of connecting a migrant's life worlds, in dealing with homesickness, security, social dissonance and cultural dislocation. Memory fragments, however, are not simply disassociated shards of past events but actively (re)constructed to provide a new take on the old, (re)fashioned to provide a different perspective. In other words, memories are not static but are dynamic, emergent, and produced interactionally in the dialogic interlude between subject and location and as such impel a recursive relationship between the personal and the social. (13)

Memory studded with nostalgia instils in Kalyani to create a microcosm of the alien world of the host nation. The writer resembles the character called Sandhya in Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997) who "kept returning to her childhood home, a house with a red-tiled roof and a sandy courtyard where the mulberry bloomed" (41). The plot of the novel foregrounds Kalyani's desperate urge to coming up with the hyphenated identity of being a Bangladeshi emigrant and an Indian immigrant. This novel zooms into the emotional oscillation of Kalyani and the protagonist's countless failed endeavors to adopt the culture of host land –realizing the convoluted connotations of both - an emigrant and an immigrant. Caught between emotional imbroglios and stimulated by an all-pervasive and fervent desire to find her place in her motherland, she travels back to Bangladesh in search of her root. This text also focuses the dilemmas, the traumatic experiences Kalyani undergoes while revisiting the alleys of her once inhabited land. It stresses upon the hyphenated-identity inferred upon her. The paper explores the sojourn of a lady who travels back to her native land in search of relocating her position and who ultimately finds herself completely torn between the spatial, religious and cultural binaries of two nations- India and Bangladesh. This adventure of revisiting her motherland not only remains limited to experiencing changes but also culminates into a spiritual sojourn. Her striving to reconcile the cultural and social differences proves futile. The novel revolves around Kalyani's journey from the point of view of diasporic literature while giving a stress to the pertinent issues like the societal constraints, religious dogmas, an ethos of diverse cultural heritage, etc. All these acts as barriers which restrict Kalyani, the protagonist of this novel, to find the solidarity, humanity and hospitability from her near and dear ones residing in Bangladesh, her motherland. It also restricts the assimilation of people belonging to two different

cultures and having different religious values. The border between two nations doesn't remain as a spatial character; its pervasive presence is felt in the hearts of the citizens residing in two countries. She mourns for fresh air and water of Bangladesh. Air, land, water- every natural phenomenon of Bangladesh induces in her a sense of nostalgia. But her long self-induced reverie which plays a trope to keep her firmly grounded in her native place courts a meek surrender when she literally revisits her homeland. She receives cold hospitality from her best friend Sharifa in Bangladesh. The very Hindu name "Kalyani" connotes a different religious gesture to the inhabitants of Bangladesh. The more she tries to efface this disjunction the more her efforts prove futile. The demarcation line remains invisible but makes its impact palpable in its function. The plot of the novel confronts Kalyani with an all-pervasive question: "who are her own people?" The cordial bonding she once used to share with the neighbours seems to be elusive, an eluding vision. The idea of home proves to be illusionary. The more she tries to relocate her place in her once inhabited land the more she finds herself lost in the intricate web of religious dogmas and contingent issues of partition (of which the pervasive one is communal hatred). Home has always been a pertinent factor in the partition literature. Kalyani's case is no exception. Her myriad experiences undergone in both India and Bangladesh very much foreground the search for an ideal home. She strives to find one but it seems to beckon her always. It leaves her only to be trapped in a maze. The notion of home brings in the notion of cosiness. But her visit to Bangladesh lays bare the striking lack of solidarity and a vibe of unfamiliarity she experiences from her near and dear ones. Kalyani realizes the perilous intermediate position that both migrants and their children are deemed to confront: "living 'in-between' different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place" (McLeod 214). But her story helps us to understand that "'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" (Brah 192). Kalyani hardly finds the same camaraderie in childhood friend Sharifa's formal greetings and treating Kalyani like a guest. Kalyani's visit to the native place of Maimansingha is seen by the Banglades his as a reclaiming of the ancestral property on her part. The corpus of the novel also highlights the binary between the thoughts of two women: Kalyani and Sharifa. Sharifa, Kalyani's childhood friend, is relegated to the status of producing children ad looking after the household chores. She has forgotten her own identity and has forged the identity of her husband as his own. Another woman, Kalyani, travels to the motherland as a seeker of finding her true identity. But her long-nourished dream to see her "bastuvite" i.e. ancestral home actually makes her face the hardcore reality. The demolition of the sprawling mansion at Dhaka and not finding any trace of her ancestral home makes her emotionally and psychologically destitute. Change in ecological surrounding wreaks havoc on her mind. The ecological destruction of the environs of her native locality renders her emotionally deprived. Her association in Bangladesh remained not only with living beings but also with every phenomenon of nature. This sudden realization makes her feel pining for paraphernalia she has left behind in her natal place. This regret of recounting the bond she shares with pristine nature can also be interpreted from

ecocritical angle. The novel from the very beginning focuses how the camaraderie is shared by Kalyani with natural phenomenon like the river Brahmaputra, trees, land, etc. Place or terrain forms an integral part to human existence. Place assigns the quality to strengthen the thread of attachment with one's domicile. Kalyani's bonhomie with every tree in her courtyard also reveals the ecofeministic sight of her. Women's oppression is shown in her protestation of conjoined bonding with the non-human entities. While revisiting Maimansingha, Kalyani pines for the sight of the school "radhsundori" where she has planted the sapling of hibiscus plant. Her long-cherished desire to adorn the main gate of her new home with madhabilata trees and flowers connote her treasured wish to recreate the environs of Maimansingha in her newly built home. But her newly ornamented house at Kolkata does not exude the same natal flavour that the sprawling mansion with its beautiful garden does. That's why her fervent desire to implant betel nut in her courtyard at her house in India actually summons her long-cherished desire to recreate a microcosm of the surrounding of Maimansinha. Her association with non-human objects like trees actually brings in her bonhomie with outside world. Her rendezvous with outside surroundings in Bangladesh is a fragile and deliberate endeavor to cling to her roots. The shrinking of Brahmaputra from a mighty voluminous river to a shrinking one metaphorically collaborates with her shrinking space and humiliating subjugation at her host land. At the very concluding portion, Kalyani's repentance and heart wrenching cry embracing the berry tree in the courtyard of her ancestral home is laden with symbolical overtones. When she realizes herself totally unwanted by others in Bangladesh, she feels her long-time soulmate berry tree (i.e. a phenomenon of pristine nature) as a confidant. She finds the tree as the only mate who will not leave her destitute. Here the Brahmaputra, tree and every living natural phenomenon entangles Kalyani and posit themselves as the only friends in her homeland.

Cutting of trees and building sprawling mansion renders a massive blow to her emotions. Ecological changes in her Maimansingha localities and her disillusionment at seeing the demolition of her home make her utterly destitute. But the changes in the environment also bear a parallel with her sordid existence. From the narrow existence of Brahmaputra to the demolition of trees, all metaphorically correspond to Kalyani's redundant status in her host land and home land. A suitable definition of 'ecofeminism' by Vandana Shiva (about the destruction of "bhum") strengthens this point to show the text from ecocritical angle. According to Vandana Shiva, "The word 'ecology' was derived from 'oikos', the household- and ecological destruction in its essence is the destruction of its 'bhum' as the spiritual and ecological household" (104).

Here the destruction or demolition of Kalyani's natal household conjures up the feeling of being closely associated with her home in Mainmansingha (better to say bastubhumi). For Kalyani, the soil of the land of Maimansingha home is a token of blessing from her forefathers. Her collecting of dust from her residence at Maimansingha lays bare her utmost desperation to cling to her native roots.

Thus the above critical study reveals the interweaving of partition literature with ecological surroundings. The paper tries to not pigeonhole the concept of identity and

diaspora within the framework of borders and boundaries, but to expand the trajectory of diaporic literature in relation to ecology. So I have tried to prioritize the relevance of ecology in a migrant's life. This paper also interrogates the psychic torments of a refuge (Kalyani) when she relocates herself in a new nation.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Meena. *Manhattan Music*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1997. Print.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press, 1997. Print.
- Davidson, Andrew P. "The Play of Identity, Memory, and Belonging: Chinese Migrants in Sydney". *At Home in the Chinese Diaspora: Memories, Identities and Belongings*. Ed. Kuah-Pearce KhunEng and Andrew P. Davidson. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010. Print.
- Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Jaipur: Rawat Publicatons, 2010. Print.
- Nasreen, Taslima. *Fera.* Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2013. Print.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism.* Dorling Kindersely, 2008. Print.
- Said, Edward. "Reflections on Exile". Web. 30 June 2017. http://www.dobrasvisuais.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Reflections-on-Exile.pdf.
- Weber, Rachel. "Recreating the Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta." *The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India.* Ed. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta. Kolkata: Mandira Sen for Stree, an imprint of Bhatkal and Sen, 2007. Print.

❑❑❑