

Diaspora, Indian Women and the Movie *Queen*: A Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores the concepts of Diaspora, meaning and definitions along with the debates and dilemmas. The issues of Indian diaspora and the women in diaspora are also discussed. The notions of diaspora are not just about the geographical boundaries but also about the mental paradigm shift. The shift causes rifts in the people of diaspora leaving them schizophrenic. The Indian women are dominated both in diaspora and in nation. However, women can find their paths of freedom and individuality in diaspora than in a nation of orthodoxy.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indian women in Diaspora, *Queen*, Rani

Diaspora: Definitions and Debates

“It’s my present that is foreign, that the past is home, albeit, a lost home in a lost city, in the mists of lost time”. (Rushdie 1)

The Diaspora has given us a plethora of experiences on exodus, immigration and exile. The discourses of Diaspora are designed in the binary forms of dilemma and carry a bridge of culture and history between the two destinations. The schizophrenic immigrants constantly waiting to be identified in an ‘other’ land, the crisis of the cultures between homeland and the abroad, nomadic disorders, nostalgia and memory as the survival tools, are the basics of the Diaspora studies. History signified slavery, indentured labors, racism etc, as the aspects of Diaspora through colonization. The British were the examples of Diaspora who dominated and created ‘New Englands’ everywhere. But in the present, the contemporary Diaspora has been an amalgamated world of fusions representing multicultural hybridity. The fast growing technology and travelling have merged the nations and people. The Indian diaspora has constructed little Indias as a symbol of survival and consolation. Diaspora represents alienation, exile and guilt. The alienating foreign lands, the isolated hearts and minds, the guilt of abandoning home and nation create trauma for the people in diaspora. The contemporary Indian diaspora is widely spread throughout the world from UK to US representing Rishi Sunak and Kamla Harris, to Priyanca from New Zealand and Harjit Sajjan from Canada, signifying the progressive growth of the Indians. Indian Diaspora treads the journey from indentured labors to independence. India also showcases the present problems of migration

through Rohingyas and Srilankan refugees and in the north and north east parts of the country. Since history India has been proved as a good host to the outsiders welcoming every kind of diaspora. Diaspora revives the debate of nationalism and claims that the writers outside can be more nationalistic than the writers inside. The diasporic writers are guiltier when it comes to performing nationalism and the guilt of abandoning the nation lurks in the corners of their mind constantly. In order to prove their missing presence they become conscious of the exiled nation and become nationalistic. The nation is constructed in their imagination and expressed in their writings.

Vinay Lal, in his essay, “Living in the shadows: Injustice, Racism and Poverty in the Indian Diaspora” opines that Although the Indian diaspora is today an incontestable fact of world culture, its global presence marked by such diverse cultural phenomena as Bollywood, Indian writing in English, tandoori cooking, and even the emergence of a new class of aggressive Indian business tycoons, it is not a matter of wide public knowledge that overseas Indian communities embody a strikingly wide array of political and socio-cultural histories. Perhaps nothing illustrates better the unwavering hold that the US has on the middle-class Indian imagination than the shocking ease with which fabricated figures – purporting to establish that 30–40 per cent of all doctors, engineers and NASA scientists in the US are of Indian origin – appearing in the once prestigious daily *Times of India* were widely trumpeted as an instantiation of a resurgent India and as a sign of what Indians can achieve in the unhindered spaces of diasporic settings. The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ diasporas, the first pre-eminently a diaspora of the nineteenth century, the latter largely of the twentieth century; the former also coincides with the diaspora of the ‘South’, just as the latter appears to coincide with the diaspora of the ‘North’.(Lal 1)

The difficulty of defining diaspora is relevant as it signifies the hyphen and inbetweenness. It is a debatable discourse where definitions do settle, neither in the center nor in the periphery. One of the eminent critics Vijay Mishra, in his essay, “The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora” defines that

“All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passports. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia.” (Mishra 1)

Gijsbert Oonk in his essay, *Global Indian Diasporas*, “Exploring Trajectories of Migration and Theory” substantiates that, “A diaspora refers to a particular kind of migration.” The below points denote diaspora.

- (1) Dispersal from an original homeland to two or more countries.
- (2) There must be a collective – often idealised – memory/myth of the homeland.
- (3) A myth of returning to one’s homeland (be it now or in the future, temporary or permanent)

(4) There is a sense of empathy and solidarity with similar groups elsewhere in the world and/or with events and groups in the homeland. (Oonk 14)

Indian Women in Diaspora

Indian Women in Diaspora have double issues to deal with. Every married Indian woman is diasporic, as she migrates from her home to the other house. She experiences identity crisis, exile, alienation inside as well as outside the nation. Torn between tradition and modernity, the Indian women showcase the hyphenated positions. The Indian women are the 'othered' and marginalized. Patriarchy rules the Indian women, both diasporic and non diasporic. However, for some, Diaspora can prove as a place of freedom, liberty and equality. Most of the Indian Diapora writers like Chitra Diwakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri etc, represent women in different angles. Amba Pande, *Women in Indian Diaspora: "Redefining Self Between Dislocation and Relocation"* opines that,

Indian women usually migrate within the patriarchal framework and cultural considerations, and are supposed to preserve it as the 'bearers of Indian tradition,' yet the process of migration and economic self-dependency give them an opportunity to assert independence, and redefine roles and perceptions of the self. While many of the problems, women in the Indian Diaspora face, arise out of patriarchal structures besides foreign settings, one can find innumerable instances of their struggles and triumphs over adversities and hostile situations. Standing 'in-between' the two worlds, with complex realities of unequal power dynamics of the homeland and stereotypical spaces of the hostland, women tend to experience conflicting subjectivities of freedom and subjugation. (Pande 1-2)

Amba Pande in the book *Mapping India* mentions about the two examples of how the women laborers migrated to other lands and settled.

I would like to narrate two interesting stories here told by two of the descendants of indenture labourers. One is that of Shridath Ramphal, former commonwealth secretary general, and the other is of Pandit Kamlesh Arya, president of the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Fiji. According to Shridat Ramphal, when his great-grandfather passed away sometime in the late 19th century, his great-grandmother was being forced by the villagers to perform Sati, which she refused, as she had a young son. As a result, she was forced to leave the village, so she went to Benaras, where she got recruited as an indentured labourer. Another story narrated by Pandit Kamlesh Arya was about his grandfather, who used to work in a shop owned by a Gujarati businessman and fell in love with his daughter. They decided to get married, so they had to run away, and with no other alternative, they got themselves recruited. So going to Fiji as an indentured labourer in the late 19th century was like the start of a new life and settlement for women. (Pande 87)

Nivedita Menon in her pathbreaking essay, “Between the Beauty Parlour and the Burqua?” mentions about how women can be victimized in diaspora through religion and culture.

The complexity of the negotiations between tradition and modernity is particularly evident in the phenomenon of migration from the global South to the North, and the transformations within these relocated communities. Naila Kabeer’s book on Bangladeshi women workers addresses the apparent paradox that while women garment workers in Dhaka have entered garment factories and work unveiled, whereas Bangladeshi women in the garment industry in London are almost entirely confined to Homeworking. (Menon 9-10)

Diaspora within Home: Chitra’s “Bats”, Mahasweta Devi’s “Breastgiver”

The aspects of diaspora are experienced by women inside the nation and they suffer from exile at home. We have been witnessing women like Sita and Droupadi being exiled. The stories “Bats” and “Breast-Giver” by Chitra Diwakaruni and Mahasweta Devi are the archetype of women under exile within home in different ways. An Indian woman need not be an expatriate or an immigrant but still be exiled at home. These stories stress on the bitter and true experiences of Indian women as wife and mother suffering from the pains of exile and reveal the realities of hidden lives. The story “The Bats” is a tale of a mother and wife and a girl child who are in exile, as the married life is at chaos. The woman’s exile here is more psychological. The other story “The Breastgiver” denotes the theme of meaningless motherhood that whatever and how much ever a woman sacrifices, she has to experience an exile as a result of it. These two stories contemplate different colors of exile of Indian women and are the epitome of Indian women exiled at home.

Rani and Diaspora in the movie *Queen*

Cinemas have been relevant in portraying and mirroring the realities of Indian diaspora. Many movies have showcased the themes of diaspora in varied angles. The movies like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Pardes*, *Namaste London* represent women and their shattered views about home and the other nation hyphenated between family values and independence. Movies like *Swades* and *Lagaan* represent nationalism of Indian history and contemporary times. Likewise movies of present times *RRR* and *Kashmir Files* revisit the diaspora within and outside the nation. Similarly movies *The Karate Kid*, *The Immigrant and the Human Flow* picture the dark shades of diaspora, struggles and the stories of survival. The movie *Queen* has a representation of a traditional woman going abroad and returning as an independent and individualistic woman. This movie depicts how Diaspora changes the life of a woman and her journey towards liberty.

Queen is cited as a groundbreaking and an influential feminist film by many scholars. Over the years, the film has built a strong cult following. It was named as one of the best films of the decade (2010s) by multiple publications such as *Paste* and *Film Companion*. Several publications such as *The Oprah Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* have named it as one of the best films of Indian Cinema. Shubhra Gupta from *The Indian Express* named *Queen* as one of India’s seventy-five most iconic and finest films that

celebrate the journey of the country. British Film Institute ranked *Queen* amongst the ten greatest Indian films of the 21st century. (Wiki)

Rani Mehra is a young Punjabi woman from Delhi, who is a typical Indian. Rani and Vijay fall in love with each other and decide to get married. But to her bewilderment, before the day of marriage, Vijay announces that he won't marry her as she is outdated in nature. He has been residing in abroad and Rani would be a mismatch for him because of her conventional attitude. Rani is devastated and clueless of her future after this incident. However, she composes herself and decides to enjoy the pre booked honeymoon to Paris and Amsterdam all alone. Her parents are reluctant to send her to honeymoon alone, but Rani is determined and she flies to Paris.

The first experience of diaspora for Rani is at a hotel in Paris, where she meets Vijayalakshmi. Vijayalakshmi unlike her name is a modern, candid and free spirited woman. She is a literary foil to Vijay, and Rani learns to be independent because of her. Vijay represents the modern patriarchal mindset by ditching Rani for her outdated ways. Rani enjoys the unknown freedom never experienced before in her life at India. Vijayalakshmi's lifestyle as a maid and an unwed mother deconstructs Rani's cocooned mindset of tradition and culture. All the forbidden joys are waiting for Rani to enjoy. They both enjoy at the clubs where Rani shares her story of betrayal. She indirectly hints how traditions are like cancer for women, which victimize her. She drinks and dances out her frustration. The different land of freedom away from India transforms Rani's life.

From thereon she travels to Amsterdam, where she shares a room with three men. This second experience of Rani in diaspora gives her a chance to enjoy gender equality. Despite being skeptical, she soon becomes good friends with them and spends time shopping, sightseeing, visiting a sex shop, going to a church, and meeting pole dancers in a club. Meanwhile, Vijay receives Rani's picture, which is sent to him by mistake and revives interest in her and lands in Amsterdam. A conservative thinking Vijay judges Rani's new friends and behavior, like drinking champagne and her choice of living with roommates of the opposite gender, and tells her that she should not involve with men. Revisiting Vijay is like revisiting of Indian patriarchy in Amsterdam and Rani Deserts him again for his conventional and dominating views. Her infatuation with the Italian chef opens new avenues of romances in her life.

In Amsterdam, she proves her culinary skill by preparing golgappas in a cooking competition. That's the moment when she enjoys the essence of independence and individuality. Cooking as a skill among Indian women is rejected as a common necessity. But in diaspora, Rani's cooking skills are appreciated and she has a sense of achievement. Rani, a namesake queen and an ordinary woman in India experiences a transforming journey of herself in diaspora, blooming into a real queen. Rani learns to live and survive on her own. Her paradigm shift is completed when she returns to India, visits the family members of Vijay to return the wedding ring. The grace and confidence in her smile and walk at the end of the movie prove that now she is not namesake Rani but a candid queen.

The concepts of Diaspora and Indian women can be analyzed and represented in vivid angles within and outside the home. Woman is a migrant and has a diasporic soul. The traditions of the society have made her a refugee. Nevertheless, one can choose the path of freedom in diaspora.

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