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Finding roots in home country: In Jayapal's pilgrimage to India

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Abstract

In the present times the word Diaspora is loaded with various understandings, broadening and blending its meaning by including to talk about the experience of any person living outside his or her homeland. Although it hasn't done away with its etymological meaning, it sure has stretched to represent something more which it initially did not. One such inclusion is the narratives of those who left their homelands in search of better opportunities to prosper in life, as their movement was never 'forced' but 'free willed'. This paper would be an in-depth analysis of Pramila Jayapal's *Pilgrimage to India, A Woman Revisits Her Homeland*, a memoir that records her journeys across India to find her Indian self and identity. The paper aims to explore the conflicting ideas of 'home' and 'roots', and how these concepts are interchangeable back and forth with the place one belonged to with respect to the place they currently live in. Also, an attempt is made to understand the concurrent concepts of alienation and acculturation as the parts of the same stem.

Keywords: Diaspora, alienation, acculturation, third space, resident alien

1. Introduction

The term Diaspora has metamorphosed over the time ever since its meaning was coined with regard to Jews being exiled from Israel. In the present times the word Diaspora is loaded with various understandings, broadening and blending its meaning by including to talk about the experience of any person living outside his or her homeland. Although it hasn't done away with its etymological meaning, it sure has stretched to represent something more which it initially did not. One such inclusion is the narratives of those who left their homelands in search of better opportunities to prosper in life, as their movement was never 'forced' but 'free willed'. Despite one's motive to leave the home country, all immigrants are faced with the sense of alienation in the foreign land and constantly battle to assimilate with the culture they encounter. Although there are few characteristic elements that are commonly explored in all diasporic writings such as alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest for identity, fragmentation, racial discrimination, marginalization, cultural confrontation and many others. But a closer look at these writings and the authors' biographies leads to compartmentalize their works with regard to their respective lineage, ancestry, bringing it down to trace the very reason behind their migration and categorizing the munder different generation of immigrants.

Sudesh Mishra in his essay *From Sugar to Masala* divides Indian diasporas into two categories the old and the new. Old being those who took a semi voluntary flight to non-metropolitan colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia and Guyana to work as indenture laborers, roughly between 1830 to 1917. And the new diaspora is the class which migrated to thriving metropolitan centers such as Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain (Mishra 276). While the raise of the migration started in the early seventeenth century in form of indenture labourers, their experiences were captured much later by the diasporic writings, it was only in the post-independence India the output increased manifold. Emerging as a huge corpus of literature essential to understand dynamics of the world on various aspects of region, language, customs, beliefs, geographical displacement etc., thus earning the global recognition amongst research scholars and social scientist.

The British colony in India, establishing themselves as the superior race, left India swaying in the colonial hang over. As the middle-and upper-class Indians acquired new westernized identity by emulating the western culture and ideas. These endeavours increasingly led to many moving outside India to settle in foreign countries for political, economic or personal gains to enjoy the liberal life style the first world nations had to offer. Although this kind of emigration was voluntary, it did not save them from the struggles that every immigrant had to face in the foreign countries, though it varied on the level of hardships based on one's privileges and affordability as compared to those who migrated as a means to survival.

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Under these circumstances the act of writing helped them cope with the psychic rift from the homeland along with making their existence recognized in the alien land. So, many diasporic writers have captured their experiences by weaving them into fictions interspersed with facts and non-fiction that allows them to create a fluid space between the two extreme polarities, which Homi K. Bhabha describes as 'a third space' in his book *The Location of Cultures*. No doubt these writings contribute to the burgeoning Anglophone postcolonial literature, but within its layers of depicting the self and the other, there exists a sense of coming together and oneness, which is termed as "melting pot" a metaphor referring to homogenization of different cultures and ethnicities, popularized by Israel Zangwill an English Playwright in his 1908 play *Melting Pot*. He relates this concept directly to American society. The idea of the melting pot holds the promise that each immigrant, regardless of race and background, can be transformed into an American. But many proponents of multiculturalism have rejected this theory, asserting that cultural differences within a society as something that should be preserved, and giving it an alternative metaphor as "salad bowl" or "mosaic", describing how different cultures mix, but still remain distinct.

This paper would be an in-depth analysis of Pramila Jayapal's *Pilgrimage to India, A Woman Revisits Her Homeland*, a memoir that records her journeys across India to find her Indian self and identity. The paper aims to explore the conflicting ideas of 'home' and 'roots', and how these concepts are interchangeable back and forth with the place one belonged to-with respect to the place they currently live in. Also, an attempt is made to understand the concurrent concepts of alienation and acculturation as the parts of the same stem.

Pramila Jayapal, born in Chennai, to a Kerala Nair family, left to Indonesia when she was four years old. Ever since he had been relocating to different places for better academic opportunities. At the age of sixteen she moves to the United States for college. Being away from home (Jakarta), she is gripped by the fear of becoming a "residentialien" a term used for a foreign national living on an official basis in a country of which they are not a citizen. This fear becomes a constant reminder that she didn't belong in America. Although she quickly masquerades to become a quintessential American by spirit, by adapting to American way of life, she also realizes the importance of a person's origins and its significant role in shaping their identity. As this desperate need for identity makes her rely on the historical symbol her home country stands to represent every time, she had to introduce herself to someone new, because popular monuments of the country always stood synonymous to the country.

India was still, almost by default, my origin, my heartland. So first day, Gina and I walked into Georgetown neighbor, and I bought a big poster of the Taj Mahal. Above my bed in the dorm room, the Taj Mahal gave me a story to tell about who I was. (Jayapal 2000:20) ^[3].

This makes her understand that doing away with ones origins in order to assimilate into a new culture would only push a person into the land of nowhere. As one couldn't grow with roots cutoff. Every new places he lived, was followed by the sense of not belongingness, struggling to fit in the culture she was surrounded by. The fact that's he was notable to readily embrace her Indian identity as she was

removed from her home land at a very early age. When questioned about her identity and homelands he lacked the knowledge to be a spokesperson of her country, making her more desperate to explore and understand her ties with the country she was born in. In 1995, she visits India in search of her roots and spends two years traveling the country, covering five states and many villages. On this journey to discover the "self", she documents her observation, providing an insight into the vast lands capes and diversified culture, witnessing the contradictions of progress that was grappling with traditions and modernity.

The diaspora-centric critical outlook of Jayapal is primarily different from those writers who write about the host land while reminiscing their homeland. Here the narrative oscillates between past and present; past being here experience of growing up in Jakarta to settling in Seattle, present being her journey to discover the self she was so long distanced from. While India is present only as the fragments of childhood memory or through the stories narrated by her parents reminding her of their homeland. This removed experience or second-hand account of India resulted in making her feel as an outsider in the home country.

Jayapal begins by expressing her anxiety over not able to fit into Indian culture, as she knew very little Hindi, and could only understand her mother tongue Malayalam. Fearing to be in more oddity in India than in America, engulfed by the sense of alienation she would witness in her home country. She purchases a wardrobe of *salvaar kameez*, thinking it would help her fit in, but which only served more to single her out as old-fashioned and dowdy in Bangalore. As she observes:

The young women, in particular, were trendy, dressed in blue jeans, tailored jackets and fashionable platform shoes. They rode motorcycles, [...] they seemed like the ultimate modern women. (Jayapal 2000: 48) ^[3].

Jayapal's ancestral and parental upbringing seems to play a major role on her psyche towards her initial rejection of India. Her parents in order to chastise her misbehavior, would threaten to send her to Vallimal Girlscollege, back at her grandparent's place in Madras. Which she found to be unsophisticated as compared to colleges in America. This outlook makes her draw two distinctly opposing images of India and America; India being repressive and backward, and America as creative and advanced.

This prejudice seems to clearly run through generations. as her grandfather's fascination towards the English lifestyle had heavily influenced her parents.

He mastered British English and developed an obsession for the English language, gathering dozens of dictionaries and books on etymology and the origins of idioms and common phrases, [...] He also adopted many British customs such as starting every meal with homemade soup, drinking tea from silver tea set complete with a floral tea cozy, and wearing British-style Bermuda shorts. (Jayapal 2000:15) ^[3].

In their own way Jayapal's parents also established their ties to the west while growing up in India, which made them cease the opportunity to go abroad for better prospects. This attitude of looking up to the western culture by shunning ones own culture made her look at things in black and white, depriving her the opportunity to explore and evaluate the differences on her own.

Although her parents expressed their skepticism towards her decision of spending two years in India. She takes up this

journey as a soul searching. Her objective observation of the places she visits reveals the dichotomy within her mind. In her nagging sense of guilt, she recalls the episodes where she was occasionally made to pull out her "Indianess" to dress up in traditional attire to attend Indian functions which she always disliked, further confessing her dreadful visits to India during the summer break, and her refusal to learn anything concerning India.

Starting from her home state, Kerala. She gives a glimpse of her ancestral traditions and few practices that are still followed, commenting on the progress the state has made on the index of literacy rate. As she travels through the state, she discovers yet another side of the state, that is filled with unemployment and lack of fulfillment resulting in hopelessness. Her interaction with the NGOs, striving to preserve the communal fabric of the tribal communities who are considered as the experts on herbs and helping them fight against the invasion of multinational corporations. This scenario comes as a blow to the image she had constructed based on the numerical development the state has achieved. Encounter with the reality, hits her guilt conscience, making her envy one of the environment activists she meets, she observes:

I saw in Sugatha, elements that I sought in myself: roots in community, a community that she fought for with her passion and talent, a community and environment that she knew intimately." (Jayapal 2000: 43) ^[3].

Disparities over gender relationships in India and America makes it difficult for her to express her self in the Indian society, being educated in the west and affiliating in various ways with feminists' ideas, organization and causes. She finds it strange and unacceptable to follow the norms prevalent in India. As her idea of American feminist rights largely differed from that of an Indian society, she falls into a state of disbelief when she learns that women in India had to still struggle for right to education. Although disheartened by the prejudices that existed, she makes note of those women in villages who have realized the importance of education and are determined to educate themselves by all means.

Caste being another major issue in India. She initially claims to be in denial of its existence, believing untouchability was out of practice when it was legally outlawed, until she was confronted by its striking presence in various incidents. The grim reality of caste system makes her initially reject writing about caste for her western readers, as she feared that it would attract a single minded focus on India, as a socially backward country rather than as a multifaceted, complex, contradictory country that as much to teach as it has to learn. Ultimately, she takes up the responsibility to portray the country in all its shades. "Loving India means being able to discuss both her good and bad." (Jayapal 75).

As Jayapal travels up north, all those frames she classified as black and white, turn into complex hues of gray, dismantling the prejudices she held against the society, system or one's culture by looking from the periphery. When faced with a moral dilemma to accept a child labor or not, she closely examines how child labor was intricately connected to poverty, which in turn had faults in the structural establishment of the social order, that not only exploited the labor class but strategically posed a blockade for them to move upward in the society, and a person's moral choice to not hire a child labor was not a definite solution to stop child labor.

The notion of progress and development in Ladakh, gives her some consolation to her contradictory mind set. She observes that pride in one's tradition develops a sense of cultural inferiority as they begin to imitate "modern" western ways. But again, remaining in isolation to preserve one's traditions was not the best option to progress in life. Which she realizes in a conversation with her guest house owner in Ladakh, he says:

we are humans, like anyone else. You cannot stop change. It is here. And it is survival of the fittest. The idea that we losing our culture is exaggerated. Just because we wear pants instead of our traditional goucharobes does mean we have lost our culture." (Jayapal 2000: 107) ^[3].

Here the concept of identity is juxtaposed with the idea of progress, making it nonstatic, as it is constantly evolving, over written and merged with various cultures one is exposed to through the course of life. Thus creating an ideal space of "acculturation" for all diasporas to achieve. Where an individual adopts, acquires and adjusts to a new cultural environment, but still hold on to the iroriginal cultural values and traditions. This transition of cultures and ideas across borders was not just exclusive to the works of diasporic writers, by also seen in the works of native writers, as the colonial powers made most people feel alienated in their own country in many ways, by introducing and implementing their language, literature, religion and culture, that stood as maker of social standards, which eventually relegated. Many writers choose to produce their works in English language giving raise to Indian-English literature. This adaptation of foreign language was not just imitation but rather indianizing the foreign language. As one could see in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raju Roaware all the products of the British rule in India.

Jayapal being the second generation immigrant, acknowledges her privileges to have a double perspective, where in she doesn't have to carry the burden of sense of loss and detachment like the first-generation immigrants. She is able to experience diverse cultural mores from a distance, and understand the nuances from within and outside, as an individual, a woman, an Indian and as a product of western education.

By the end of her sojourn, she discovers the roots of her origins, in a broader sense, shedding away the mantle of prejudices she comes to understand and appreciate the shades of gray the country possessed. She embraces the idea of progress and globalization, giving rise to a new cultural synthesis emerging to form a unique identity that reflects both homeland and adopted homelands. At the age of fifty-one, Jayapal became the first ever Indian-American woman to be elected to the US House of Representatives advocating to strengthen the diplomatic bonds between the US and India. And before entering into politics she worked a civil rights activist, serving as an executive director of One America, a pro-immigrant advocacy group. In an interaction with Times Today she concludes by saying "You need the good of the West and the East and the twain shall meet. "now she felt that she was at home both in the US and India. To conclude, for those individuals who are on the move, new horizons of home emerge for different generations, sometimes roots fade out with time and it becomes difficult maintain the ties, the idea of home becomes temporal and is constantly re-established, identity becomes fluid adapting to time and space.

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