

DIASPORA ON CANVAS: IMMIGRANT SENSIBILITY IN THE WORKS OF MEHWISH IQBAL AND BUSHRA HASAN

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Over the past few decades the term ‘diaspora’ has evolved from a term for an ontological state of being into a theoretical term discussed in academic and intellectual circles. This change in perception is the result of timely intervention made by writers and literary theorists through their works and scholarly articles. Diaspora and cultural hybridity are the two inseparable terms that can be studied and criticized. Moving to a new land brings cultural disparity and this diversity clashes with the migrant’s root culture. This hybrid culture is taken as a motif by many writers to nourish diasporic literature.

Artistic expressions from fragmented people are recognized and celebrated in most contemporary societies. What comes from the margins has become the centre of literary and artistic attention. Though marginalized people struggle for acceptance in mainstream real life, their voices, once inaudible, are now heard louder than ever before. To this group belong the migrants who settle down in some other nation find their sense of identity and belonging ruptured in a big way. The rupture or crack makes a deep impact on their lives and leaves an indelible mark on their psyche. Art or artistic expressions delineate how the human mind is affected when exposed to an unknown environment. The affected mind is well encapsulated in diaspora art forms.

South Asian people have a very different culture altogether. Their religious and cultural diversity makes them different from others. No study regarding South Asian culture is complete until and unless we speak of the religious and cultural diversity. The “walls” of South Asia brim with cultural and religious diversity. The people of the region have a very different concept of religious belief which includes the worship of nature as well as animals. Their admiration for animals and nature has found shape in literature and in other art forms as well. As South Asia is overflowing with these differences, people from one part of this world find problems in migrating to another part even within South Asia. Even then, people from different parts of South Asia migrate to new lands for several reasons. One of the favoured destinations is Australia.

Australia, being a big continent country, has become home to many migrants. They come to Australia dreaming of finding a “home” but the reality is that many of them fail to get find it in this totally new place. This drives them to speak out their trauma or longing or anything for that matter in the new land. They crave for their motherland, their culture, and their lifestyle. They even miss their clothing style they used to have in their homeland. All these lead to a cultural shock in the migrants’ mind. Many writers have spoken about these feelings in their

works without hesitation. This representation of ones' land in a very utopian point of view actually makes a basis for diasporic art form.

“As is painting so is poetry” (qtd in Alan 1); both are free in every sense. A painter can take his/her freedom to any extent to convey his/her real feelings and imagination. The four corners of the canvas is the only limit that they face. Picasso has rightly remarked that “art is the lie that reveals the truth;” his words are really true to its core because art is its creator's impressions. When these impressions find words or colours, they become art forms. A painter paints with his mental emotions and for that, he uses colours in different proportions. No art is complete without the creator's subjectivity. Diaspora in literature and art forms demands subjectivity. When a migrant is not belonging but longing, then he/she starts meditating in his/her mind and whatever he/she produces as an art form will definitely pulse with subjectivity. Subjectivity plays a major role in the making up of diasporic literature as well as diasporic paintings.

While studying diaspora in painting, one should look deeply into the heart of the paintings. Nobody can understand anything unless he/she views the portrayal from a different point of view. Mehwish Iqbal is a Pakistan-born Australian painter whose name is written in the field of colours. She has etched an indelible portrayal of herself in the artistic arena. Mehwish Iqbal artistic hand spans across painting, printmaking, textiles, ceramics, and sculpture and installation art. Her creations provocatively explore many myriad themes including the double oppression faced by women in another country, notions of womanhood, courage, liberation, and power. Apart from these themes, migration, influx of refugee and migrant diaspora, monopoly of power-play, commodification of human agency, hybrid identities, and unfolding fragile and complex state of individuals have also become an important motif in her paintings (Iqbal 1).

Qualified as an oil painter, Mehwish went on to acquire printmaking skill in the Master's programme. She has evolved her own style, experimenting with multiple techniques through layering to create manifold imagery. She takes inspiration from classic Indian miniature painting and Islamic geometric patterns; the work process comprises stylized sceneries demonstrating the fragility of an atmosphere whereas the representation of animal imagery in her works is derived from hunting scenes of Indian miniature paintings. Her work is an alteration of diverse ideas which are carefully webbed through a process of layering at a physical and an intellectual level (Iqbal 2). Other than Mehwish, Hazem Harb and Mohammed Joha through their paintings highlight and respond to the identity crisis, home and diaspora of Gaza.



Harb's painting

The silhouette of a person suffused in sturdy colours with a white mask is one of his striking paintings. This masking shows the identity crisis in the new land. The mask hence

embodies the concept of anonymity. Harb uses both dark and light colours to portray his intense emotions of loneliness. Fragmented images and the question of “what it is” always arise while studying those paintings of both Harb and Joha. This “what it is” is the same question that always pop up inside the minds of migrants. If not always, at least sometimes, this question of identity definitely arises as a major concern and shows its face. There is a presence of childhood in Joha’s works in the form of a girl/doll standing amidst the chaos of what was once home. Joha plays with the purpose of suggesting haunting memories of home. These painters use canvas of bright background and contradict them by portraying very bizarre kind of images that a layman cannot understand (Ardia 401).



Joha’s painting

Relating memories and evoking nostalgia for the homeland are the other two major concerns of the painters of diaspora. Deep eyes, deformed legs and sorrowful faces are the strange images that we see in the paintings of people who belong nowhere. The use of deformity in the portrayal of human body is a cult element in diaspora painting. Mehwish also deploys this technique in depicting migrant’s isolation and depression. Colours and the material used for painting are something very important even they too can speak of dilemma.

Mehwish uses cloth and most fragile things as her painting materials. This implies that the subjects in the paintings are also as fragile as the material. Her works have that power to tackle all the sensitive issues of the society.



(Mehwish’s painting 1)

This particular painting gives a revelation of a person's longing for the homeland, most likely the craving of Mehwish herself. As we zoom into the painting, we see India's map before partition. This is a clear depiction of her longing for that southern part of Asia wherein she belonged. The painting is stuffed with images that are completely Australian. The main projection of the painting is the image of an animal which is somewhat similar to a kangaroo. Kangaroo is the national animal of Australia. She is fond of importing animal imagery into her painting. The kangaroo image is fluttered and cluttered with many dragon flies as Australia is very famous for its variety of dragonflies. She depicts a number of India-Pakistan maps here and there on the canvas, which shows her shattered identity in the panorama of Australian landscape. Mehwish is very peculiar in portraying crowds of people in her painting which can be a symbol of chaos in the midst of a new land.



(Mehwish's painting 2)

This portrayal of a bust of a man divided into two makes the aesthete to think more about the identity crisis faced by a migrant. The face is portrayed with deformities, so that one cannot make out whether it is a man or a woman. The only thing for sure about the portrayal is that it is all about the torn apart life of a migrant. The person in the canvas is divided into two and he/she is connected with the waves of an ocean which may symbolize the person's travel from his/her homeland to the host country. This traversing takes away his/her identity and now he/she belongs nowhere. There are numerous complex images in the painting and they enhance the complexity of identity crisis within the man.



(Mehwish's painting 3)

The final picture of Mehwish in this study is a very peculiar one as it generates an idea of clothing dilemma; it also throws light upon the marginalization of a migrant by the natives. The major scene of this painting is the image of a person who lies in the earth and is likely to be subjugated by the people who seem to be half beast and half human. Like her other paintings, this one is also portrays the multitudes of people who roam about here and there aimlessly.

The indications made by Mehwish through her paintings are direct in an indirect way. As we look at her paintings we realize the canvases she selects for painting are all off-white in colour unlike other painters who go for pure white canvases. The off-white itself is an indication of dispersion and artificiality. In her painting, we find a brilliant medley of colours as well as the fusion of images one over the other. Like a Chinese doll structure narrative technique used in literature, Mehwish deploys a kind of frame narration in her paintings. This embedding of pictures may refer to the question of self. The use of undefined images in her paintings are typical examples of undefined self in human life as well as in a host country.

Famous American painter Philip Guston once said that “painting is an illusion, a piece of magic, so what you see is not what you see” (“Brainy Quotes”). Mehwish very brilliantly makes this quotation seem true. Sometimes her paintings cannot be explained but can be enjoyed for no reason. Her brush finds different colours for painting the theme of diaspora, identity, power and subjugation.

With regard to Bushra Hasan’s works, one can easily identify her love for the nation in her paintings. Being a true Indian, (born and brought up at Lucknow) her works throb with cultural diversity. Unlike Mehwish, Bushra uses bright colours for painting a true representation of India. Indians, especially people from the northern part of India, have a penchant for bright colours and a country like India, possesses symbolic colours. This representation of myriad colours in their life style is the true representation of Indian consciousness. The use of symbolic colours on different occasions itself is the true reflection of the Indian colour culture. For instance, the colour white is used as a symbol of mourning and it is the colour of the saree usually a widow from Hindu community is supposed to wear. Their longing for different coloured bangles, multicoloured dresses and so on give a very pleasant feeling to the mind of an aesthete.

Bushra says that it took approximately three years for her to come up with an art exhibition in the land of migration. This shows the lack of opportunity that a migrant faces in a new place especially when it comes to an artist. An artist finds it very difficult to plant himself/herself in a new place. In fact Bushra has rightly acknowledged that she is very happy to see the late but warm welcome given to her by Australia. Australian artistic world has wholeheartedly accepted her for the brilliant brush work. Australia’s acceptance of her works is readily seen in Melbourne’s designer tram. Her talent in bringing out the real India in its complete sense saw its fruition in the designer tram that she designed in the year 2017. She brilliantly fuses the hues for making visible many things about India in a single tram. She has said that it is the truck art prevailing in India that inspired her to paint such beautiful images in the tram (Jabbal 1).

Indian truck art is really a good area to deal with because it is the art of the lay man. The acceptance of popular culture especially in art forms are denoted in the truck art of Indian streets. This art has much to contribute to Indian culture. Both the broad chest of big trucks as well as the small space of a rickshaw become platforms for painting. This is a very fine example of popular art or mass culture which has been accepted by the common folk. This is what happened in Melbourne as well. Bushra wanted to establish a replica of her own culture in that city. This shows her sheer craving for roots. Psychology says that what we crave most will find its space in

dreams and we try to make it possible at least in our dreams. Likewise an artist can make his/her cravings true through his/her works.



(Bushra's work)

By closely reading her paintings in the tram, like Mehwish, Bushra also tries her best to incorporate Indian culture with Australian culture. The portrayal of the national animals of both the countries is a very important thing that needs worth mentioning. Through her paintings she actually wants to show the beautiful side of India instead of merely lamenting about her lost land. This picturing of the fabulous side of her homeland is actually a kind of representation of a utopian society where everything is fine and peaceful. Utopian image of one's land is rather familiar in diasporic literature as well as art forms.

While Mehwish's characters and objects in the paintings cry and crave for her mother land, Bushra's images depict the happy faces of Indians. For some people, representation of happiness is the way of suppressing their yearning. Bushra beautifully paints the face of a woman in the wide canvas of the tram, of course the image is that of an Indian woman; who shines with bindhi in her forehead, khol in her eyes and a big nose ring which gives completion to the figure. Typical Indian woman of North India looks like this and this portrayal of the woman by Bushra is her way to make other's aware about what is India and Indian culture all about. On the other part of the tram, she uses her brush in a manner which pervades the heart of an Australian ethos very easily. It is nothing but the representation of two women carrying lamps in their hands most probably a typical Indian symbol of welcoming. She paints this picture on the doors of the tram and she tries to blend the cultures of two different nations by welcoming a non-Indian in an Indian way.



(Bushra's work)

Her paintings in the tram show different coloured Indian birds flung over the canvas of the tram. These birds are the representation of her country's true spirit and which also represent her immense love for India. She loves to see her country, always enjoying spring and always living a colourful life.

Bushra is very famous for her creativity in embellishing Indian teapots using colours and symbols. Her paintings in the kettles always remind the connoisseurs about Keats' "Grecian Urn". As in Keats' "Grecian Urn", the colourful pots of Bushra also speak. These pots and cups say a lot about Indian culture. The colourful pots may be an imitation of Rangoli, an art form usually drawn in Indian homes to celebrate festivals like Diwali, Pongal and so on. Colours are very special to an Indian girl especially for a North Indian girl and Bushra being a North Indian, cannot alienate herself from drawing her country without making it as bright as her holicolours.



Colourful teapots by Bushra Hasan

(Bushra's Colourful Kettles).

By critically analyzing Mehwish and Bushra, we see that there are many differences in their paintings. Both have their own style of diasporic representation of painting. But what is common in both of their paintings is their passion and love for their homelands. Mehwish's brush paints a mourning memory of the homeland and her brush finds dull and off white colours as the best way to show her craving for the land and she wants to expose her torn apart life in a very bizarre manner. Her paintings are really intellectual and a lay man cannot find any meaning if he/she surfs through the painting. Bushra unlike Mehwish appropriates her brush to hunt for bright colours to introduce the colourful India to the new place. Whatever be the matter, the only thing that matters in painting is the "speaking" ability of pictures. Diasporic artists find it easy to pour down their emotions either through words or through colours. Brilliant blend of words or a mash up of colours in a canvas can easily convey the real pangs of torn apart people.

The notion of transnationalism becomes a strong foundation for a migrant whose identity cuts across borders. In this epoch of migration, transnationalism is an integral aspect of the migrant's identity. A migrant is shaped by his/her native country and still he/she adapts to the new land, thereby synthesising both. Transnational community is closely related to diasporic art forms because in this so called community of transnationalism, a specific group of individuals who act on the basis of some shared interests and references like religion or linguistics and they use networks to strengthen their solidarity beyond national borders. Diaspora in art also plays such a role in solidifying the unity of scattered people and even if each diasporic art form speaks of different emotions, the common interest in every diasporic art form is its creation of pang in the minds of the aesthete and brush is not an exception in creating that pang.

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