Abstract:

This paper is an endeavour to seek the many instances of diaspora within the characters of George R.R. Martin’s first book in *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, *A Game of Thrones*. It delineates the effect of migration of these characters upon their psyche and their immense longing for the home and memories that they carry within themselves. The world of George R.R. Martin has been introduced to us via the many focal and fan-loved characters in the book. It is through their eyes that we witness the fascinating world building of the author. In accordance with that, a reader is able to trace the traces of diaspora that haunts these characters in the novel, who, either due to exile or banishment or marriage or a royal decree, has been forced to migrate to different parts of this world. This consolidates the fact that Martin bricks his fantasy world with the very real experiences of human life, giving it a breath of relatability. I shall follow along with their journey and attempt to show how they are reminiscent of their homeland and the known corners of their childhood, thus ailed by a crisis of identity and belonging. This paper focuses upon Daenerys, Viserys and Jon, with their various forms of ‘diaspora’ and unearths their emotional turmoil as a symptom to their forced immigration and an attempt to adjust to the new habitat, all the while establishing their own identity.

Key Words: Diaspora, Homelessness, Identity Crisis, Multiculturalism, Hybridity.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Diaspora has been in vogue through the hands of the Postmodern critics who have dissected and modified this term in many different ways, causing an evolution of sorts that adapted with the motion of time. Though the term has been designated to the modern idea that we are accustomed to very recently, the word ‘diaspora’ could be traced back to ancient Greece and “derived from the Greek word *speiro* (‘to sow’ or ‘to disperse’)” (Cohen xiv), thus, probably, resulting in a myriad of agricultural term like ‘uprooting’, ‘scattering’ and so on used by the scholars. Diaspora, in the modern times, disclose the situation of those people who had left their homeland to travel to a foreign land in search of work or freedom, or compelled to do so as slaves and exiles, only to be constantly plagued by homesickness and maladjustment to their present habitat. Though this simple explanation could not possibly be able to grapple the unimaginable scenario that these people go through that take a toll on them physically and psychologically, compelling them to question their identity and self. A fear of oblivion chokes their very existence, that their culture, language, heritage, home and childhood along with their identity might one day be erased from the pages of history. A sense of belonging, that is innate to human nature and is a prime component of our existence, is simply lacking in their case. In some cases they can neither go back to their homeland nor are able to find a deserving position in the hostland, exposing the unanswerable question of ‘where is home’ or perhaps ‘what is home’ that haunts these people.

There are many varieties of diaspora surfacing out of the many reasons for migration but the aspect that brings these people under this particular term is their intense longing for belonging and the crisis of identity as a repercussion. Robin Cohen establishes a criteria to this assignment that states the common features of a diaspora, the most prominent being time, along with dispersal from the original homeland, memory and idealisation of home, an attempt at returning to the roots, lack of acceptance of host society and culture and lastly a strong ethnic consciousness. It is under these characteristics that I shall anatomize George R.R. Martin’s first book in the famous *Ice and Fire* series *A Game of Thrones* by unravelling the traces of diaspora within some characters of this novel.

In A Game of Thrones, the author tries his hands at cartography by mapping a world very similar to ours with two distinct landmass Westeros and Essos among others, and it is within these two countries that the characters are shuffled like chess pieces to narrate the grand chronicle. It is through their individual experiences that we find a crisis quite similar to our world, that is, the emotional turmoil arising from the malady known as Diaspora. Among the multitude of characters who are ailed by this crisis, Daenerys Targaryen and her brother Viserys, and Jon Snow are perhaps the ones who show the most prominent symptoms and shall be the focus point of this paper.

VICTIM DIASPORA

By definition and characteristics, exiled princess Daenerys Stormborn is a second generation immigrant who, along with her brother, fled Westeros during a rebellion that massacred their family and usurped their father’s throne. Being merely a baby at that time, she remembers nothing of the homeland and her family other than what her brother has narrated to her. Living most of her life in *Essos*, she develops a *Tyroshi* accent that Viserys starkly dislikes, as, according to him, it diminishes the purity of their own language. While Viserys possesses a strong sense of connection with his identity and the glorious past of the Targaryens, Daenerys’ identity lies at the intersection of three cultural roots turning her into a misfit both to her brother as well as the common people of *Essos*, who turn her into the ‘other’ in accordance to her fair skin, long silver hair and purple eyes. With a stark similarity to diasporic scholars like V.S. Naipaul, the interaction between her past and present play a vital role in defining her character. For the most part of her life she had adhered to the imposed identity provided by her brother, “A princess, Dany thought. She had forgotten what that was like. Perhaps she had never really known.” (Martin 41). But this identity, just like her brother’s, who calls himself the rightful king of Westeros, is composed of the reminiscence of the past she has never known, and has no connection to the present that she is used to. Just like an Indian diasporic child living in the Caribbean, her world is divided into three; the cocooned Targaryen-ized existence with her brother, the *Tyroshi* hostland existence outside and the *Dothraki* existence after her marriage, thus living in a constant negotiation between the three. This also concors to the three kinds of language she practises, resulting in the lack of integrated selfhood or a one coherent whole. Parallel to this is her idea of home, not the one that is beyond the Narrow Sea, in the land where her ancestors have ruled, but rather in the known passages of the golden palace in Essos “All that Daenerys wanted back was the big house with the red door, the lemon tree outside her window” (Martin 44). The other home resides only within the imaginative retelling of her brother’s stories, a land of fantasy rather than reality.

To understand Viserys it is essential to know the history of the Targaryens, as it is his strong grasp over this past that makes him unlike his sister. The Targaryens were one of the noble houses of ancient *Valyria*, situated far southeast of Essos. Some five hundred years ago after the apocalypse known as the ‘Doom of Valyria’, they rode their dragons to an island in Westeros where they colonised the original inhabitants and established one of the biggest dynasties ever witnessed. But the battle of the Trident had finally put their reign to an end, unearthing long suppressed hatred of the common people towards the colonisers, and slaughtering any Targaryen left in Westeros. The two children, compelled to leave their home, found refuge in the land that held their ancient heritage. But surprisingly Viserys never associates the Valyrian past as his homeland, perhaps because this relocation of their native culture to a foreign land only results in a misinterpretation of the true culture. Viserys has known nothing besides the fragmented memories of his past life in King’s Landing that he asserts by calling himself the ‘Dragon’ and the rightful heir to the throne that he dreams to one day take back from usurper. He resides in a disillusion and a constant hankering of the past that culminates in what Avik Gangopadhyay diagnoses as ‘maladjustment syndrome’ with the hostland, that has alienated the brother and sister into the ‘other’, calling him the ‘beggar king’ behind his back. Viserys deems every other culture within Essos inferior to his pushing himself further away from even her sister, whom he sells to the *Dothrakis* (a nomad tribe) in exchange of an army. His memories of home and history also imprints itself upon his dress, while Daenerys clothes herself with a very convenient leather rag riding pants, he sticks strictly to silk and jewels that adorns his diasporic mentality, all the while turning him into a laughing stock and an outcast. Both the Tagaryens, as kids, had to travel from “Braavos to Myr, from Myr to Tyrosh, and on to Qohor and Volantis and Lys, never staying long in any one place” long enough to truly establish their roots, and had to sell away every bit of the traces of their heritage for a living, deleting the physical remains of their home from their life, what remains is a promise “We will have it all back someday, sweet sister,” (Martin 44).

What scares Viserys the most is the fact that his sister is turning into a Dothraki day by day. She attempts at learning the language[[1]](#footnote-0) and the culture of her husband and soon enough adjusts to the Dothraki lifestyle, though most of them still consider her as exotic and foreign. This affinity of his sister towards the host culture further alienates Viserys who rebels that ultimately leads to his demise. While Daenerys establishes her identity within the new territory, her brother seeks it within the past, the duality within their interpretation of home turns it into a vague idea rather than a geographical place. Thus the character that is properly defined by the idea of diaspora is Viserys. While the other characters might face maladjustment and a longing for home, none truly identify themselves with the strong unwavering hold upon one's past heritage and nation. Indeed it is a survival mechanism for Viserys that makes him strictly adhere to the old notions of his family’s glory and heritage, as without it he would lose himself in the crowd of the present, that is, of a world entirely different from his own, where he has to establish his worth rather than inherit it. Thus excluding this foreign culture directly aids in the fragmentation of his notion of self “identity is always unstable, fragmented and contingent, since it is dependent on the exclusion of that which is ‘other’” (Gangopadhyay 110). Even his hostility towards his sister springs out from his denial and not finding a similar sensibility towards their lost home. His memory of homeland distorts into a kind of idealised form of ancestry and spends most of his life in attempting to restore an essence of that home within the hostland, creating a “continuous simulation of ‘memory and desire’ of a ‘deterritorized’ ethnic psyche” (Gangopadhyay I). Being a sample of victim diaspora, Cohen’s view that diaspora “may create sufficient social cohesion to separate particular groups from their surrounding context in the countries of settlement” (Cohen 4) holds true in his case as well.

BIRTH OF A NEW IDENTITY

Often the conflict between ethnicity and a transnational identity births creativity and enrichment. Contrary to her brother, Dany, through her cross-cultural experience, finds strength by situating herself ‘in-between’ the three cultures, quite akin to Bhabha's Third Space where her new cultural identity is formed. Danny labels herself as Daenerys Stormborn that associates her with the Targaryen ancestry and *Khaleesi* of The Great Grass Sea that connects her to the hostland of Essos along with her marital heritage, thus possessing multiple homes all at once. This in-betweenness helps her move forward in the ever evolving world all the while fulfilling her dream of breaking the wheel, that is the culprit of her miseries. She becomes a part of not only the culture of the hostland but establishes her stronghold over the politics, quite like the recent coloured influential faces in world politics. Danny’s pliability is explicitly noticed in her love towards the wild nature of her hostland and her fluency in multiple languages including the old tongue of Valyria, creating a borderless identity. Though, while being so, she doesn't disconnect herself from her roots, rather uses it to empower herself. The vestiges of her glorious heritage like folktales about her homeland and dragons and the three petrified dragon eggs help her endure her brother’s cruelty and sexual subjugation by her husband Drogo. As she emerges from her husband’s funeral pyre, at the end of the book, with three hatched dragons she coagulates the divergent cultures in her life into ‘Multiculturalism’. Acknowledging and rediscovering roots thus, plays a vital role in stabilising her identity thus acquiring the ‘Third Space of Enunciation’, recognising the fact that inherent purity and originality is unattainable for her in the present day world of cross cultural interactions.

LABOUR DIASPORA

The Night’s Watch in Martin’s fantasy world is a place quite similar to the concept of *Kala Pani[[2]](#footnote-1)*, where people are exiled as punishment for crimes petty to major. Some even send off their sons to serve so they have one less mouth to feed and some choose to migrate to the cold northern border called The Wall for employment. The Stark bastard Jon, being an outcast in his own home, decides to join the Watch and spend the rest of his life serving there. His glorified misconception of the night’s watch soon stutters when he realises that not everyone is employed there willingly. Soon the common pangs of being snatched away from their homes creates a sense of community within the Crows[[3]](#footnote-2) and a strong dislike towards the rich snob, Jon. This brings Jon across the fact that he is far away from home, and he has to discard the husk of his previous identity, title and talent in this new environment. He now has to earn his name and place by competing against his Crow mates who, though belonging from a lower strata of society, are equivalent to him. As soon as he does so, the shared trauma and deterritorialized identity of the Crows manifest a strong sense of communal brotherhood, while they vow to discard all material past and lust by dedicating every bit of themselves to defend the landmass. This bond of brotherhood between a group of misfits transcends any familial relationship as the thread that binds them now is fear, trauma, alienation and a strong sense of duty. The colour black that they adorn holds true to their ideals that they no more fall under the banner of their home. Black is usually created by the admixture of multiple colours and thus could denote the amalgamated identity of the Men of the Night’s Watch that gives birth to a new one. Jon, who lacked any sense of belonging back in his home due to his bastard identity, now finds a family he can fight for. Even so it becomes a bit difficult for Jon and a few others to completely discard their heritage and culture for they chose to not renounce their gods and beliefs even after taking the vow. Some still dream of one day being welcomed into their homeland and earn a respectable place within it. Jon even tries to leave the Brotherhood when he hears of the distress back home despite warnings of court martial. The coagulation of displacement leading to his many experiences turns Jon into a leader who recognises no boundary rather transcends the limitations created by his uprootedness.

OTHERS

Accompanying the Targaryen siblings are a few other characters who show symptoms of a similar hyphenated identity due to their displacement to an unknown habitat. Though those symptoms are minor in comparison to the siblings, they are in no way negligible with their relation to our contemporary real world. One such representation is noticed in case of the persecution of the common folk who belong from the northern part of Westeros after Lord Eddard Stark had been accused of high treason and beheaded. People from across the continent migrate to the capital in search of a job but remain as an outcast to the rich locals. A capital wide prejudiced vendetta had spread when heard of the rumour of a northern lord assassinating their king, and thus, a simple marginalisation turned into xenophobia and genocide. One can easily notice the similarity of this situation to the persecution of the Japanese after the infamous Pearl Harbour incident, where prejudice had targeted an ethnic minority to near extinction. Eddard Stark’s wife on the other hand has been adjusting to the cold northern geographical and ethnic environment since her marriage, but in vain. Even after having six children she still feels quite alienated within the shivering corners of the proud castle, reminiscing the warmth within her childhood home. She feels more distant when she is unable to find solace within the Gods of her husband’s culture that she felt in the religion she was born into. Though her husband had built a sept for her gods, she had never felt more alone in her life than when she prayed all alone to them. Quite similar to Ashima of Jhumpa Lahiri’s renowned novel ‘The Namesake’, she fumbles to find a sense of belonging and tries to connect herself to home via small acts of pleasure, which, for Catelyn, is making a prayer wheel to acquaint her children with her gods. But despite her best efforts the distance that has manifested between her and her family makes her constantly reminisce about her girlhood in the sunny godswoods of Riverrun.

CONCLUSION

Diaspora writers usually depict the crisis of identity, rootlessness, nostalgia and the rhetoric of insider and the outsider, to represent the deeply rooted psychological trauma that alters their perception of home and belonging. Though George R.R, Martin can never be considered one, his fantasy novel does include a very burning topic in the modern day world which concur to the influence of diasporic communities that changed the tide of history. Indeed it is the existence of hybridity and Multiculturalism that are born from diaspora and transnationalism that drives both the fantasy world and the real world forward into the future where misinterpreted narratives of home, purity and heritage hold less meaning than it did some centuries ago. Martin aptly fabricates characters who either hold onto the narrativised sense of home too strongly and perish or let their uprootedness evolve into a productive future of the society. While Viserys’ diaspora gives birth to a double consciousness, both Daenerys and Jon, transcending their diaspora identity helps them camouflage within their surroundings, “and thereby slowly disappear as a separable ethnic group” (Cohen 16). Martin’s novel not only pleases the imaginative mind but informs of the earthly histories and experiences that are very real to many communities across the world who shall find a common ground within their favourite characters.

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1. Emily Weiskopf-Ball explores more into the idea of the rediscovering of one's identity with the help of language in her thesis, <https://jis.athabascau.ca/index.php/jis/article/view/7/62> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. This term is linked to the Hindu belief that the one who crosses the ocean shall lose their purity. In diaspora studies this recalls the willing and unwilling migration of the Indians, in the 1830s, to plantations of the West. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. A nickname given to the men of the Night’s Watch for their grim appearance and the black uniform they adorned. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)