

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture42

Lecture 42: Introducing Digital Diaspora

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to introduce the concept of digital diaspora. So, diaspora studies has gone through different stages of development over the years in the recent past. It has incorporated a number of transnational flows within its ambit of reading or scholarship.

Digital Diaspora: Introduction

- Diaspora studies has gone through different stages of development over the years. It has incorporated various transnational flows within its ambit of reading, and freed itself from binaries that are evident in the initial formulations.
- The concept of diaspora has evolved significantly over the years, undergoing several semantic shifts. It has now reached a stage, where its transnational implications and all its capitalist associations are included in the scope of study. As technology has advanced, the concept of diaspora has also taken a semantic shift. The idea of 'home' as a place of longing has continued to evolve, reflecting changes in the locations and attitudes of diaspora individuals.



2

And with time, it has been able to free itself from binaries that were evident in the initial formulations within diaspora studies. The concept of diaspora has evolved significantly over the years, undergoing several semantic shifts. It has now reached a stage where its transnational implications and all its capitalist associations are included within the scope of study. As technology has advanced, the concept of diaspora has also taken a semantic leap or shift. The idea of home as a place of longing has continued to evolve within the scholarship, reflecting changes in the locations and attitudes of diaspora individuals.

With the advent of technology and the emergence of globalization, there has been a significant blurring of homeland and hostland, to the extent that even the hostland has begun to be accepted in the same spirit as the homeland. So, we see that this is also part

of the optical illusion that postmodern experience brings with itself as baggage, where the concept of far and near, the concept of familiar and unfamiliar—after a point, all these concepts are conflated, thanks to the sophisticated methods of communication that we now have in our society. It could be transportation in the physical sense, from one part of the world to another. It could be the transmission of information.

So the world has become smaller, and there is a kind of optical crack in terms of the host and the home, in terms of the familiar and unfamiliar, where experiences after a point are simultaneous, hybrid, layered, and hardly. They are hardly immutable. They are constantly flowing into one another. The homeland could become as unfamiliar as the hostland could become familiar—that kind of experience. Now, diaspora studies have remained confined mostly to debates about homeland and hostland, as well as acculturation and problems of belonging.

However, within this scope of study, critics have hitherto paid little attention to certain issues, including the question of citizenship for immigrants from countries with limited resources and opportunities. So, these are the nations that face significant socio-economic challenges, which in turn affect the experiences of their diasporic communities. So, we are talking here about topics that deal with the distress that a counterpart, a spouse, undergoes in a hostland. How immigrant women's reproductive power shifts or revisits an existing state policy. As well as the impact of religion on the lives of diasporic subjects and communities—all these factors remain relatively less discussed topics within diaspora studies.

A fresh new perspective on diaspora studies can be found, one that is interested in understanding the role of cyberspace in the diaspora. Diaspora critic and writer Himadri Lahiri has studied Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane' from a fresh perspective through his reading of the character Karim, who is Nazneen's lover. Before moving on to Karim's character, we need to understand what a digital diaspora is. The cyber boom, the popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, and the advent of Twitter were nowhere in the scene when human migration had started decades and centuries back.

However, in today's age, life is unimaginable without the support of these digital platforms. So, digital innovations have a profound impact on the diaspora. The emergence of two seminal books in this field of diaspora studies—Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff's 'Digital Diasporas' and 'Identity and Transnational Engagement,' and the

other work being Anna Everett's 'Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace.' These two works testify to the impact of technology on diaspora studies.

In the last decade, countless research works have been done in this area of digital diaspora, producing handbooks such as Mihaela Nedelcu's 'Digital Diaspora,' alongside a substantial number of essays and articles that have been written on this topic. The term 'digital diaspora' has still not been received unanimously to mediate diaspora studies and its cyber associations. However, in her book, Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff uses the term 'diasporas organized on the Internet' as a way of studying the impact of the Internet and social media on diaspora communities worldwide. So, Brinkerhoff says the following:

I quote, 'These impacts include the potential to foster democratic values, support integration in the host society, and contribute to security and socioeconomic development in the homelands,' unquote. Digital broadcasting satellites, internet-based online media such as email, Usenet, Listserv, as well as the World Wide Web, alongside offline digital media such as CD-ROMs, all these together provide great opportunities in creating diasporic communities in the host land. So, the character of Karim in Monica Ali's novel 'Brick Lane' is an ardent religious activist who thinks in terms of the local, where highly volatile inter-ethnic and inter-religious situations prevail, but he is also interested in establishing a global Islamic network. Karim is often seen using journals and cyberspace as a way of remaining updated and communicating with other members of his community, as well as with people.

That are relevant in other parts of the world. And all these communications are happening through technology, with the help of technology, and this enables Karim to build an Islamic network. So, he is interested in building an Islamic network by using technology—the sophisticated methods of technology—to propagate ideas. So, he is often found carrying his mobile phone most of the time. Through the character of Karim, it can be observed how important mass media and communication have become in the 21st century.

Introduction

- Digital broadcasting satellites, internet-based online media such as Email, Usenet, Listserv and World Wide Web and offline digital media (CD ROMs) provide great opportunities in creating diasporic communities in the host land.
- The character of Karim in Monica Ali's novel, *Brick Lane* is an 'ardent religious activist who thinks in terms of the 'local,' where highly volatile inter-ethnic and inter-religious situations prevail, but he is also interested in establishing a global Islamic network' (Lahiri)
- Karim is often seen using journals and cyberspace to remain updated and communicate with other members of his community and people that are relevant in other parts of the world, in building an Islamic network. He is found carrying his mobile phone most of the time.
- Through the character of Karim, it can be observed how important mass media and communication have become in the 21st century. The new technology encourages the continuation and hybridisation of cultural and religious practices in a host land.



The new technology encourages the continuation and hybridization of cultural and religious practices in a host land. So, here it is important to understand that religion—which is certainly not a very modern concept or category—is being propagated and promoted. With the help of technology. So, technology may enable the propagation of ideas; it could be promoting some form of dissent or anything that helps in building a community across geographical borders and boundaries. So, we see that this use of technology has been made both positively and negatively.

So, while technology has its own sophisticated side, this fast movement of information can also have its own dangerous side. The way ideological communities and political communities across borders and boundaries are built—through the passing of information, through the propagation of information—also enables and facilitates extremist activities. Terrorist organizations benefit greatly from how information is digitized and how it passes swiftly through social media and online platforms. So, as critics like Pedro Oiarzabal and Ulf Dietrich Reipspoint out in the article 'Migration and Diaspora in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies,' the use of information and communication technology (ICT) by immigrants remains an unexplored area of research. The formation of a diasporic identity is deeply dependent on ICT, which plays the role of a catalyst, as exemplified through the character of Karim.

Introduction

- As critics like Pedro J. Oiarzabal and Ulf-Dietrich Reipspoint point out in the article “**Migration and Diaspora in the Age of Information and Communication Technologies**”, the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) by immigrants remains an unexplored area of research. The formation of a diasporic identity is deeply dependent on ICT, which plays the role of a catalyst, as is exemplified through the character of Karim. The use of digital devices refashions the identity of diasporic individuals and the communities in the diaspora.
- Oirzabal and Reipspoint state that ICT facilitates the [transnational] flow of people and the “formation, growth and maintenance of diaspora communities and family ties”. Diasporic individuals, according to the critics, “create formal and informal transnational networks in both the physical and digital worlds” with the help of technological devices like personal computers, cell phones and access to the internet. All these shape and reinforce their individual and collective identity.



The use of digital devices refashions the identity of diasporic individuals and the communities in the diaspora. So, as I was saying, digital diaspora or digital devices are you know, which connects the people in the diaspora, the communities in the diaspora, enabling the formation of identity, refashioning, reconstruction of identities, and certain ideologies, certain values can be propagated and developed. A certain virtual group can be strengthened around certain causes, certain activism, certain causes, or certain common goals that a given people are interested in. So, Oiarzabal and Reips point out that ICT facilitates the transnational flow of people and, I quote, 'formation, growth, and maintenance of diaspora communities and family ties,' unquote.

Diasporic individuals, according to the critics, I quote again, 'create formal and informal transnational networks in both the physical and digital worlds,' unquote, with the help of technological devices such as personal computers, cell phones, and access to the Internet. All of these, you know, digital devices shape and reinforce their individual and collective identity. Now, the character of Karim traces the reasons for the rise of ethnic media in the diasporic space. One of the factors identified by Karim is the growing wealth of the minority communities, the rising acceptance of ethnic media among receiving societies, and the increasing technological possibilities for narrowcasting. Satellite telecasting is one such media, a technological development which Karim mentions in the novel, indicating its importance in communicating information and news to transnational audiences.

However, we see that critic Victoria Bernal in 'Diasporas and Cyberspace' is quite critical and somewhat sceptical about satellite television and prefers cyberspace over it. According to Bernal, I quote, 'satellite television is highly centralized, often censored, and one-size-fits-all.' It is often controlled by the government, by a dominant ethnic

group, or by an elite class. So, Victoria Bernal feels that the key tropes of cyberspace are speed, mobility, connectivity, unboundedness, and information access. She further states that cyberspace provides an escape from everyday reality, from the body and from identity, decontextualization, and reterritorialization.

all of which have been understood as kinds of freedom. So when there is a displeasure regarding the states of affairs in one's host society, the cyberspace provides us an escape from the immediate reality. When there is a kind of dissatisfaction and inadequacy, a distance or alienation that one is facing because of the one's looks, one practices or one's you know lives move away or a getaway from such dissatisfactory or from such an unfulfilling experience in terms of deterritorialization happens through the aid of digital media, through the help of forming an alternate community as a part of the digital diaspora.

So, when one cannot fit into or cannot belong to the immediate surroundings of one's immediate physical surroundings, one becomes part of a digital diaspora. It compensates for the loss one suffers in actual life as a result of displacement, and it also compensates for the missing direct contact with one's homeland and culture. Through cyberspace, the immigrant community has the agency to recontextualize and re-territorialize themselves. The immigrants may create a version of home, an alternative version of home, and a fact that is established by the subtitle of the homepage of the longest website called Eritrea Online used by the Eritreans in diaspora.

So Bernal gives the example of Eritrea Online as the longest running website created by and used by the Eritreans in diaspora. The subtitle itself, you know, Eritrea Online creates in effect a virtual Eritrea, a virtual home, and Bernal observes in this regard, I quote, editorials may have entered the global village, but it suggests that the editorials do not escape their identity. On the other hand, they maintain their identity in the new context, unquote. So, Eritrea is a country in the Horn of Africa region of Eastern Africa with its capital and largest city at Asmara.

Diaspora and Cyberspace

- The subtitle, in effect, creates 'a virtual Eritrea'. Bernal observes: "Eritreans may have entered the global village, but it suggests that the Eritreans do not escape their identity; on the other hand, they 'maintain their identity in new context' (167).



- Eritrea is a country in the Horn of Africa region of Eastern Africa, with its capital and largest city at Asmara. It is bordered by Ethiopia in the south, Sudan in the west, and Djibouti in the southeast. Italy colonised it for as long as 31 years and had undergone several conflicts with its neighbouring countries.



It is bordered by Ethiopia in the south, Sudan in the west, and Djibouti in the southeast. Italy colonized this place for as long as 31 years, and this place has undergone several conflicts with its neighboring countries. So, Bernal further observes that the social construction of identity online is particularly significant for diasporas because their everyday lived social reality may be one of being rendered culturally, ethnically, and religiously invisible or possibly stigmatized. So, this lack, this lacuna that one is facing is at the level of social reality, lived reality, is compensated through an alternative existence, a getaway through the digital diaspora where one is finding or connecting with like-minded people, similar people from across the globe.

So, the concept of this home is once again an imaginary virtual space. The given example by Bernal suggests how the editorials fail to escape their identity. Rather, what they are doing is creating their identities in newer contexts. So, this example establishes Bernal's argument that the Internet offers diasporic individuals a third space since they are, in a way, neither here nor there. They feel that they are simultaneously present in two or more places, and traces of these places can be found on the Internet.

So, they simultaneously belong not only in the lived reality, in the physical space that they inhabit, but also live or inhabit a space that they have found on the internet. This third space also offers new opportunities for collaboration and co-production between diasporas and compatriots in the home country. So, this is creating a connection between the people from a particular country who have become immigrants and the compatriots who live in that country. So, this first phase is creating a network among the people in diaspora or the immigrants and the compatriots in the home country.

Diaspora communities are increasingly leveraging the power of blogs and social media groups to foster discussions on contemporary political and cultural issues. These

platforms serve as crucial tools for community development, enabling members to share their views, mobilize support, and advocate for their causes through social media. These platforms serve as crucial tools for community development, enabling members to share their viewpoints, mobilize support, and advocate for their causes. Taking the Tibetan diaspora as a case, we see that it is partly an under-researched area, and it is exemplary in understanding opinion formation and exploring methods for socio-political mobilization.

Diaspora and Cyberspace

- Diasporic communities are increasingly leveraging the power of blogs and social media groups to foster discussions on contemporary political and cultural issues. These platforms serve as crucial tools for community development, enabling members to share their perspectives, mobilize support, and advocate for their causes.
- Tibetan diaspora, a partly under-researched area, is exemplary in understanding opinion formation and exploring methods for sociopolitical mobilisation. The diasporic Tibetan community utilises cyberspace towards the development of its community.
- The struggle to achieve Tibet's liberation and preserve Tibetan culture constitute two main cyberspace discussion areas. After the Chinese takeover of Tibet, many Tibetans fled their country and are now scattered in different parts of the world. A significant part of this populace is connected through cyberspace.



12

The diasporic Tibetan community utilizes cyberspace for the development of its virtual community. The struggle to achieve Tibet's liberation and preserve Tibetan culture constitutes two main cyberspace discussion areas – After the Chinese takeover of Tibet, many Tibetans fled their homeland and are now scattered across different parts of the world. A significant part of this population is connected through cyberspace. They form their own virtual community through a network across the globe created via cyberspace.

They create their own virtual community through a network connecting them via cyberspace. Jennifer Brinkerhoff's close examination of the role of Tibet Board, founded in 2000 by Dorjee Nudup, further explicates the role of cyberspace in the context of the Tibetan diaspora. In an article titled 'Diaspora from the Himalayan Region: Nation and Modernity in Select Literary Works,' scholar and critic Himadri Lahiri discusses the role of mass media and cyberspace in creating an imagined Tibetan community and a pan-Tibetan identity among diasporic Tibetans scattered worldwide. This article explores the role of Tibet Rights, a small press that publishes works by Tibetan activists. For example, 'Tsen Gol: Stories and Poems of Resistance,' published in 2012 by Tenzin Tsundue, is one such work.

Diaspora and Cyberspace

- Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff's close examination of the role of **TibetBoard**, founded in 2000 by Dorjee Nudup, further explicates the role of cyberspace in the context of the Tibetan diaspora.
- In an article titled "**Diaspora from the Himalayan Region: Nation and Modernity in Select Literary Works**", Himadri Lahiri also discusses the role of mass media and cyberspace in the creation of an imagined[Tibetan] community and a pan-Tibetan identity among the diasporic Tibetans who are scattered in different parts of the world.
- The article, in particular, explores the role of **TibetWrites**, a small press that publishes works of Tibetan activists. *Tsen-Göl: Stories and Poems of Resistance* (2012) by Tenzin Tsundue is one such work. The print media acts actively in creating a sense of togetherness on the basis of the common Tibetan identity.
- Brinkerhoff informs us that TibetBoard is a website that encourages interactive, informal discussions about Tibet.



The print media, therefore, acts actively in creating a sense of togetherness based on the common Tibetan identity. Brinkerhoff informs that TibetBoard is a website that encourages interactive, informal discussions about Tibet. TibetBoard, while discussing Tibetan identity, politics, and policies of the Tibetan government in exile, also discusses figures such as the Dalai Lama, an iconic Tibetan religious leader who fled his country in 1959. So, it updates information regarding immigration and provides useful links and advice to potential immigrants. This website includes sections that engage

So, this website includes sections that engage in active discussions on culture, traditions, politics, and other important topics. It has a chat room allowing about 80 to 90 people to chat. Cyberspace becomes an open platform that allows people to mix and mingle. As Dorjee Nudup states, traditional Tibetan culture does not favor speaking openly, so this becomes an alternate space where people can still speak.

Participants are also allowed to comment anonymously, which is important for voicing their opinions. YouTube points out that although registration with TibetBoard is required to participate in discussions, one could easily choose any preferred username. One could easily bypass this by choosing a different username, that is. So, by doing this, even Tibetan participants can discuss sensitive political issues that are otherwise restricted. So, in this way, sensitive political issues can be discussed by Tibetan participants, which are otherwise censored in public discourse.

In the context of the Tibetan issue, Brinkerhoff summarizes the role of cyberspace thus. I quote, 'Because TibetBoard does not command physical-world power resources or seem to take seriously any mobilization agenda for action in the physical world, its primary implication for power is a psychological one, deeply rooted in psychological empowerment.' So, TibetBoard affords members opportunities to experiment with and

develop the capacity to aspire, envisioning alternatives and different, potentially better futures. So, what people cannot talk about in their everyday life, in their immediate reality, can be discussed through this platform, this social media platform, virtually known as TibetBoard. So, in concluding remarks on the advent of the digital diaspora, the recent essay by Laura Candidatu and Sandra Ponzanesi, titled 'Digital Diaspora: Staying with the Trouble,' defines digital diaspora as the dispersion of a community or group of people through digital means,

highlighting one essential characteristic, which is its everydayness, its mundane nature. So, digital media actually celebrates and propagates the mundane activities, the mundane thoughts, and exchanges. So, while considering different layers that the notion of digital diaspora entails—including internet-specific, network-oriented, and embedded in wider social practices—we foreground the idea of a digital diaspora conveyed through its everydayness, that relates to establishing points of connection and support based not on national or ethnic bonds, but on conviviality, mutuality, and support within and across diasporas. So, here we are celebrating ordinariness, the agency, the agential positions of the no-name, ordinary Tibetans.

Basically, their everydayness, their mundane, ordinary thoughts are being propped up in a way. So, digital diasporas are basically sites of intersectionality, and they significantly mediate and are mediated by different features of a diasporan's identity. With this, we come to the end of our lecture here today. Let's meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.

Conclusion

- In concluding remarks on the advent of the digital diaspora, the recent essay by Laura Candidatu and Sandra Ponzanesi titled “**Digital Diaspora: Staying with the Trouble**” (2022) defines the digital diaspora as the dispersion of a community or group of people through digital means, highlighting one essential characteristic - its everydayness.

[While considering] different layers that the notion of digital diaspora entails (Internet-specific, network-oriented, and embedded in wider social practices), we foreground the idea of a digital diaspora conveyed through its everydayness... that relates to establishing points of connection and support, based not on national or ethnic bonds, but on conviviality, mutuality, and support within and across diasporas (265).
- So, digital diasporas are basically sites of intersectionality and significantly mediate and are mediated by different features of a diasporan's identity.



 Swagati 

16

