

Belonging to Nowhere: A Psychological Study of Alienation and Estrangement in Ramabai Espinet's "*The Swinging Bridge*" (2003)

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Abstract—Diaspora communities feel alienated because they cannot decide which space they belong to. The notions of identity and home are problematized and characterized by a sense of continuity and discontinuity, a conflict of location and dislocation and a process of hybridization. Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) resembles outstanding indication of the psychological conflict that happens in the mind of the diaspora. Feelings, homes and identities are indeed swinging and cannot be certain to belong to a certain space or time. The question that is raised in this paper shows that there is no fixed home for a diaspora to belong to. This is due to a psychological clash between homes, identities, cultures, politics and many other factors that reconstruct and help in the formation of a hybrid identity that belongs to none in particular and cannot be accepted in all. So, this identity starts swinging between homes and cultures. The idea of 'bridge' in Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*, is no more than an illusion and a dream that the writer tries to present as a solution for this dilemma of estrangement.

Index Terms—estrangement, alienation, double diaspora, in-betweenness, belonging

I. CONTEXTUALIZING ALIENATION

Talking about estrangement is to investigate the psychological state and feeling of being strange in a place thought to welcome one's presence. Estrangement thus means one's feeling of being unfamiliar to all around him/her. The Collins dictionary defines it as "the state of being estranged from someone or the length of time for which you are estranged." However, in their *Estrangement Revisited: Part I* Meir Sternberg and Svetlana Boym (2005) explain it further relating Estrangement to "art and life" where it becomes 'disturbing':

Estrangement lies at the heart of human experience in art and life: how the familiar is made strange, perceptible, disturbing, as if never before encountered. Also known as defamiliarization or di automatization, estrangement originated as a form of literary and poetic theory within Russian formalism in 1917 and was elaborated largely through the work of Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky (2006).

However, this paper attempts to debate the historiographical and psychological estrangement in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* 2003. Espinet deals with the notion of Caribbean-Canadian immigrants in a very perplexing manner where none seems to be comfortable in the new changes faced in the host lands nor they were once content of their life in their previous homes. The title of the novel pre-tells readers of its content and makes clear that identity, home, culture, and even time are 'swinging', unfixed, shaky and there seems to be no way to calm down and be at rest. Semiotically, the bridge as a symbol brings us to think of being in-between and in space that is not in the native land nor in the host lands, but rather tries to link them all in an imagined spatial dimension.

The Swinging Bridge as a title is very telling about the disturbance of defamiliarization which immigrants feel, and at the same time, it tells that as the diaspora has nowhere to feel calm in, women's trouble as diaspora becomes doubled too because of the ill-treatment they face in their home land and when being alien and estranged in the host land. This novel contains many topics that can be dealt with through several critical and analytical approaches: post-colonial, feminist, psychoanalysis ...etc. However, the 'bridge' to history, and homeland used by Espinet in her story makes clear the psychological state of being alienated and estranged which her protagonist feels despite the many attempts she does

to cope with in her new life in the host land which she is ready to feel as her own home. Yet, something around immigrants and in their minds tells them that they are still different whatever their readiness to change seems to be. Patricia Clark (2004) in a review published on College Quarterly online site that throughout the narrative, the protagonist attempts to reclaim and redefine her identity. *The Swinging Bridge*, in particular, explores the previously new world to show the crucial but unappreciated part played by female characters in this community. "The nowarian" by choice in her childhood games, Mona has always fought this excursion because she did not want to be trapped by the alienating restrictions and norms of her traditional Indian and Presbyterian culture.

Clark's (2004) focus is on the notion of the journey that the protagonist Mona feels rather than does. A state of restlessness is felt as Mona thinks of her past events. He adds that her brother Kello, who is 44 years old, has asked her to return to Trinidad to buy back the property that her father Mackie Singh sold several years ago. Their father had sold the property to move outside his nation's origins and move to the "contemporary world" by literally and metaphorically setting off on this journey.

The journey thus becomes figurative and the request of Mona's brother becomes metaphorically a kind of homesickness that Espinet feels and declare indirectly through her protagonist's feeling towards purchasing her father's property which he sold to move to what Espinet calls in her novel the "modern world". Espinet believes she is really in a place that can be characterized by modernity according to her imagination of the world she wants to live in in spite of the fact that she is quite sure that this new world does not welcome people who are not white. She mentions that Mona is struck by the first sentence she reads in Canada that visitors should "keep everything white" he adds:

These Canadians, as the narrator's father laments, 'always came to backward places like [Trinidad] to do what they couldn't do at home ... just because they are white [...]' "walls and fences scrawled with graffiti that read Keep Canada White" and an ingrained, white-gloved racism "so deep" that "people don't even know they're doing it" (Clark, 2004).

Ramabai Espinet's as the title of her novel show a state of uncertainty and swinging feelings between the past and present, elder generation and the new one, and between life in home land and host lands. She illustrates her feeling saying that "If you happen to be born into an Indian family, an Indian family from the Caribbean, migratory, never certain of the terrain, that's how life falls down around you. It's close and thick and sheltering, its ugly and violent secrets locked inside the family walls. The out-side encroaches, but the ramparts are strong, and once you leave it you have no shelter and no ready skills for finding a different one. I found that out after years of trying" (p. 15).

As a Ph.D. holder Espinet's literary works should not be seen as innocent and cannot be written for the sake of writing a piece of literature only. Espinet writes consciously and seems to be aware that her works will be criticized one day. So, a reader should carefully read her works as analysis of what she presents in her stories of events, feelings, conflicts and so on. Just in her *The Swinging Bridge*, she skillfully presents lots of important topics that are heavily studied in modern criticism schools. Some of these are the search of identity and identity crisis, diaspora and immigration, sexuality, feminism, estrangement, resistance etc.

Hitherto, it is the question of identity and belonging that the story seems to focus on. The protagonist, Mona, in shows a great interest to find who she really is; Indian, Caribbean or Canadian. Which place should she think to be her real home? Mona tries to find a solution for such quest, but she finds none. She simply loses the ability of deciding her new identity that swingles in three places and has three cultures. She cannot confirm one neither she can negate one of these three choices and she becomes in a crisis of swinging between the three places and the identity keeps on swinging as well. Deshmukh (2015) writes an essay about the quest of identity in the *International Journal of English and Literature*, stating that

The migration experiences of Mona Singh and her family from India to the Caribbean and then to Canada leads them towards the very serious challenges to the problematic notions of identity, belonging and imaginations of homeland, and contest traditional understandings of Diaspora. [...] Through this important theme of identity Ramabai Espinet explores a unique identity construction of twice migrant subjects (p. 78).

It is rather a matter of identity identification that plays a great role in the construction of Mona's characterization in Espinet's novel. Mona's identity is swinging as well as her belonging. The cultural conflict that appears in Mona's hesitation towards her original home makes her alienated not just by her new surrounding and people in Canada, but also in her mind. The clash of cultures becomes a clash of unstable identities in Mona's mind. Diaspora communities find a difficulty in defining themselves, let alone Mona's identity that is a double diaspora with three different cultures. The feeling of alienation controls her psychology and thinking.

II. WHERE TO BELONG

The double diaspora makes Espinet's protagonist belonging in *The Swinging Bridge* to one of three homes unstable. Though she seems to like living in the 'new world' despite the fact that she is annoyed by the colonial and racial experiences she feels in Canada, she also belongs to Trinidad and of course she cannot forget her Indianness. She feels she belongs to all and at the same time she belongs to none. She lives in a space that cannot combine the three places. This makes her unfamiliarized in the three places even in her Indian home and family.

The 'Indo' in herself arises after her ancestors' movement from India to Trinidad, along with hundreds of other Indian laborers or workers. It was during the 1870s when her family at the beginning arrived in Trinidad, and where she was born in the town of San Fernando district in 1948. She was brought up on the island in a protestant-Christian Indian family. Espinet lived the same way of as her ancestors in moving from Trinidad and being emigrant to Canada. Her life has typically been torn apart between Canada and Trinidad, and Ramabai writes from the perspective of a woman who is attempting to resolve the conflicts of identity and belonging. Her works are best studied under the heading of cultural memory since she does not speak about individual memories but rather a massive collective memory rooted in Indian and Creole cultures. The beginning point in her work illustrates the crisis of disconnection, which is the leading factor for her tremendous undefinable existence.

Mona was not aware about her Indian identity and she was not to know about the major source of her Indian identity unless she found that her grandmother's history and stories. In the novel, Mona's identity in Canada as a south Indian is a kind of neglected and ignored. There, she is not Trinidadian nor Indian or Canadian. Mona and her other family and community members are highly influenced by the Trinidad Creole society and their life-style which has been neglected in Canadian society. Mona's way of thinking about her Indian identity differs according to the place where she is. To explain this, when talking about their identity in the Caribbean they and others describe them as Indian and when in Canada they are described as South Asians. But in all the narratives, we find that the struggles and experiences of the immigrants are being neglected. Displacement is the source of their feeling of identity suffering and being alienated in a place in which they do not know that they belong to or not.

When the main character Mona learns that her great-grandmother Gainer had been an indentured servant coming from India to Trinidad, hence, Mona starts to connect herself to Trinidad, Canada, and India, she says: "I was an Indian, an Indian from the Caribbean, and Indian long out of India, for generations now" (p. 188). She thinks about her identity which will be the main theme of the novel. Mona is lost between her triple identities, then questioned herself whether she belongs to India, the Caribbean of Canada in which this becomes her main struggle.

In *The Swinging Bridge*, Ramabai Espinet tackles the problems of identity and belongingness that she suffered from during her childhood and draws her suffering into her main character. Espinet connects herself to the Caribbean and this is manifested in her protagonist, Mona who has a strong connection to the Caribbean land and Trinidadian culture same as her. Espinet is disturbed by her South Asian identity, she does not to be called or mentioned by her South Asian identity, but later she is endeavored to know and learn further about her Indian identity and belonging as Mona the main character in the novel. In her opinion, having an Indian identity assists her to form a distinct the Caribbean and Trinidadian identity. Mona has evolved into a diasporic subject whose Canadian identity does not contradict her Trinidadian identity. As an Indian-Trinidadian-Canadian writer, Espinet's depiction of her Indo-Trinidadian protagonist's return to her homeland and re-captured Indian culture is transformed into a narrative of the establishment of Indo-Trinidadian cultures in Trinidad and the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Solbiac, 2015, p. 68).

In fact, estrangement in this context is a feeling generated by practices exercised upon diaspora communities by people around them in the host and home lands as well. One cannot believe in the theory of 'Imagined Communities' and it is just an illusion that one feels nationalism, because the feeling of belonging seems to be humanly innate. It is just a matter of accepting reality that immigrants accept being alienated by whatever reasons. The only problem lies in the fact that immigrants start feeling of belongingness to the host space they are in after immigration. They like to feel at home, but they are certain it is not the place where they belong to. Yet, it is not always conscious that their identities and ways of thinking and behaving stay the same. Mostly cultural, regional, language, religious and many other factors participate in influencing the native identity causing it to lose its authenticity and thus it becomes strange in its original home. Bhat and Bhaskar (2007) in their "Contextualizing Diasporic Identity" debate:

Any diasporic community is uniquely situated owing to its multi-polarity, defined by the continuity/discontinuity of the cultural baggage from the place of origin, the dynamics of the host society and the influence of the motherland or ancestral land. The Indian diaspora is not a homogeneous entity without diversity, though there is an overriding common identity as 'Indians' despite the 'differences' on account of regions from which they have migrated, when they migrated, where they have migrated to, including the socio-cultural and demographic environment in the receiving society (p. 89).

It is clear that the formation of the new identity includes all previous backgrounds, trajectories, spaces and experiences. Espinet's protagonist has three spatial dimensions that make her unique in some sense; she is double diaspora which means her situation is doubly problematized. Mona explains this feeling by saying: "I left Trinidad in the afternoon with a mixture of sadness and excitement. In a strange way, I felt as if I was leaving home for the first time" (p. 304). Later she declares that "It is late November and the Montreal city streets are slick with freezing rain when I return ... I am part of this city I live in, and right now I want no other place. Like any other migrant I bring my own beat to the land around me" (p. 305). Mona simply believes she has become a part of Canada but she feels it is the first time for her to feel she leaves home when she is leaving Trinidad and at the same time, she looks for knowing more about her native land India. This makes her in a dilemma of choosing which home she belongs to.

Diasporas' feeling of dislocation leads to a psychological conflict which is affected by the diversity of geographies which they have lived in and thus become unable to decide to which home they should belong. Space and time are

interrelated because each space is related in the mind of a diaspora to a certain period of time. Mere remembering India makes Mona think of her late father and brother and led her to go further searching for all about her family's history.

In her novel *The Swinging Bridge*, Ramabai Espinet encourages diasporic individuals to reconcile with their painful past and create new trans-cultural spaces that bring them along with others. This work challenges traditional views of Indian migration to Trinidad and advocates a new image of Indo-Trinidadian female character. Diasporic characters in *The Swinging Bridge* are positioned inside a diasporic location and time that is infinite, dissolving the boundaries of home and away to create a new home for them in countries like India, Trinidad, the United States, and Canada. It encourages cultural hybridity and belonging through a reconstruction of history to avoid cultural struggles and displacement (Solbiac, 2015, p. 77).

Hybridity in Solbiac's (2015) use is a diaspora's attempt to cope with the new scattering mental situation which a diaspora experience. It is not mostly a choice, but it seems to be so for those whose belonging is swinging and find no home to belong; they feel home in the host land but they are sure their home is somewhere else. Nationalism turns out to be a shaky feeling and a fake concept.

Accordingly, the notion of home is very essential when investigating diaspora psychologically. A diaspora wishes that there is no feeling of homesickness, because this feeling occurs even for host lands. In other words, the idea of belonging swingles whenever a diaspora thinks of which home is his/hers. Blunt and Dowling (2006), in their Home offer a critical geography of home and suggest three areas of investigation: (1) home as simultaneously material and imagined, (2) how home is politicized vis-à-vis power and identity, and (3) an appreciation of the multi-scalar nature of home, that is, from the actual space of dwelling and nationhood to homelands that are produced by Empire (p. 22).

In *The Swinging Bridge*, we find the protagonist is scattered in three spaces that are real and imagined at the same time. Mona cannot belong to three places but she feels she must. Her identity is split to three and she belongs to three cultures. She seems proud of being in Canada and she has no objection to be from Trinidad besides she is certainly Indian. However, she is scattered and feels she belongs to no one in particular. She just wants to belong to all but she knows it is not possible because of the discursive differences in race, space and culture. So, she is estranged in her psychology more than to her surroundings. A diaspora is thus unable to belong to a limited place and for this reason a new space that belongs to no certain place is created in the mind of the diaspora where all places gather and clash leading to the psychological state of feeling alienation. In a study of the Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature, Solbiac (2012), gives a new conceptualization of diasporas [...] in Espinet's novel, espouse the idea of "a multi-locational diaspora consciousness" (p.15) that engenders instability, ambiguity and hybridity, and privileges the role of female Indo-Trinidadian identities in the recovery and representation of diasporic memory and space.

Hence, such state of instability and uncertainty leads to a hesitant attitude which can be characterized by ambivalence, dislocation, uneasy experiences. Memory and imagination become participants in creating a new space of in-betweenness. They also participate in the hybridization of culture in Mona's mind and Mona in *The Swinging Bridge* is no more than a reflection of the double diaspora Ramabai Espinet.

The westernized Presbyterian Indo-Trinidadian middle classes of San Fernando that Espinet describes, live in an ambiguous relationship to the Trinidadian space. Unable to fully acknowledge their Indian heritage, and locked in an urban/rural divide which also elicits the dichotomy between Westernized or non-Westernized communities, they are reluctant to contribute to Trinidadian national culture. Belonging becomes a problematic issue insofar as they do not involve themselves in building ties with India, nor do they involve themselves in the active reconstruction of patriarchal Indian social and cultural practices (Solbiac, 2012, p. 232).

In this context, belonging becomes a thorny and uneasy task. Like Identity, home also is scattered, and lost. Espinet, as an academic teacher and critic, is quite aware of such conclusion of diaspora. However, she mingles the title of her novel with a hope of bridging between the three places of India, Trinidad and Canada.

Underneath the mask of everyday life lies the swirling sea of memory and desire, of dreams and mythmaking.

In the separation of these two worlds, we perish. The bridge between them arches high above a raging river, held in place by silken ropes, ropes strong as gossamer (p. 304).

'Mona' feels displaced in the Caribbean which is manifested by her identity crisis, and thus, she suffered in Trinidad because of her Indian identity and in Canada due to her skin color. Therefore, she experiences identity and belongingness. Mona straddled from her childhood to her adulthood in the host land. Also, she examined the social, cultural, and psychological levels in which she goes through while dealing with her identity and belonging. Mona and the Indo-Caribbean characters feel displaced, and dislocated because of the identity crisis and the conflicts of structural break-ups of class and caste within the Indian family which force the characters to undergo the crisis of belonging within the family in the host land.

III. CONCLUSION

This critical paper argues the psychological state of belonging in Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003). Throughout the analysis of Mona's character in the novel, we find that she has no choice but belong to nowhere because of the several homes she thinks she belongs to. Identity and home are in process swinging here and there. The sense of nationalism is lost because Mona feels she is a citizen of Canada, a citizen of Trinidad and also to her original home India. Consequently, Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) is a search of home and a quest of identity but is also a mark

of estrangement and alienation. Mona's mimicry does nothing except exaggerate suffering because of the loss of belonging and the bridge that the author proposes is nothing but a hope and an attempt to hide suffering.

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