

Am I a Christian Yet?: A Diasporic Persian Liminality Portrayed in Pari Mansouri's "No, I Was Not Dreaming"

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Abstract

Diaspora is a term that denotes people who are displaced from their native place through migration, immigration or exile. The displacement causes changes not only geographical differences but also economical, religious, political, social, historical, and almost all of aspects of life. The changes drive the people to adjustments which are not very easy, that they have to negotiate their identity. The adjustments process brings about a liminal space that is in-between the designations of identity, a space when people face ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when the participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. The liminal space is also felt by An Iranian wife, the protagonist in Pari Mansouri's "No, I Was Not Dreaming" who migrated to London with her family due to economical condition of her country. One night, she got a dream taken to Santa Claus's palace and asked to judge the Christian people whether they are deserved to have Christmas or not. She was confused because she was not yet a Christian. Even though she celebrated it with Christmas tree and sending cards to her English neighbors, she was not a Christian nor left her Zoroaster yet. Moreover, as minor community it is not her right to decide for the majority.

Through Homi Babha point of view, this paper aims to explore the liminal space of the protagonist as her diasporic experience and how she solves the thresholds as her responsibilities of her present identity.

Using descriptive qualitative method, the results of the study found that the protagonist's motif leaving her native land, Iran is to find a better place due to the poor economical condition. Parts of her ritual of being English have been done very well such as being a good citizen: paying tax regularly, does not involve in politics, espionage, or terrorism, and being a good neighbor to her social: sending cards to her Christian neighbours or having Christmas tree at their house to celebrate the joy and happiness as her sympathy, and doing good deeds to all people. But, the rituals do not make her a Christian—a belief held by most English people, she considers all the rituals as her practices of Zoroaster teachings she believes in: Christmas as *Noruz* and Santa Claus as *Amu Noruz*. Her answer to Santa Claus's questions for Christian people is also a part of her belief teaching that the believer has an ultimate responsibility for the welfare and goodness of humanity and all creation, and her responsibility toward her nation's as well. The proofs of Babha's statement of liminal space, "a new sense of identity that maybe "almost the same, but not quite"", that she is a Zoroaster-English.

Keywords: *diaspora, liminality, christian*

Introduction

Life fulfillment is an ultimate dream to every human. The absurdity of the world where they live make them to move from a place to a better one. Therefore, migration immigration, or exile are movements that we called it as diaspora. Diaspora implies a "dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries" (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 1). From the statements we can infer that the displacement causes many changes of geographical economical, religious, political, social, historical, and almost all of aspects of life. Adjustments and negotiations from native lands to a new one will lead to a new life and identity in a long period of time. Confusing, inconvenience, anxiety or dread of the new identity which is not chosen yet led to a space of liminality—a space between the two worlds or cultures of the colonizer and colonized as the "Third Space of enunciation (Babha, 2007: 54).

Entering the "Third Space" or liminal space shows the potentiality of constructing a non fixed identity, it generates a new sense of identity that maybe "almost the same, but not quite" (ibid, 123). The colonized subject encounters two different worlds: one of the colonizer and the other of the colonized. He is caught between two clashing cultures and none of them is like his home, and he feels unhomey. He is missing his home which is no longer his while living in a new home which is not his yet.

Liminal space or the third place is also experienced by An Iranian wife, the protagonist in "No, I Was Not Dreaming" who was one night, she got a dream taken to Santa Claus's palace and asked to judge the Christian people whether they are deserved to have Christmas or not. As non native, she did not expect such an honor and extraordinary experience that she had the right to give a crucial decision. She and her family migrated to London due to economical condition of her country for a better place to live. She was a Zoroaster living in a country which most of the people are Christian, and she was not Christian yet. As "foreigner" she tried to make adjustments and adaptations by being a good citizen. Her family celebrated Christmas by having Christmas tree at their house and

sending cards to their English neighbors. She imagined Christmas as *Noruz* celebration, and Santa Claus as *Amu Noruz*. However, she still felt as a minor community that had not right to decide for the majority.

Applying the theories of Homi Bhabha's liminality, this paper aims to explore the liminal space of the protagonist as her diasporic experience and how she solves the thresholds as her responsibilities of her present identity.

Diaspora and Liminality

Diaspora studies explore the importance and intricacies of diasporic movement and investigate the poignant subtext of movement that maps the motivation for dispersion. It allows us to grapple with keener issues interrelated to dispersion, the idea of homeland and the impact of lost homeland on the host homeland. Diasporic space is a hybrid space motivated by historical changes. It can be observed that “in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of differences—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural values are negotiated” (Bhabha, 2). Therefore within the limited space that allows cultural exchanges and divergences the spatial venture of the diasporic subject negotiates the identity that perpetually interacts with the diasporic cultural differences. The process of the negotiations happens in a liminal space showing the potentiality of constructing a non fixed identity, it generates a new sense of identity that maybe “almost the same, but not quite” (ibid, 123).

Liminal space in Pari Mansouri's “*No, I Was Not Dreaming*” is a space of the negotiations and adjustments of in-betweenness being Persian and English, minority and majority, and Zoroaster and Christian as her rituals of her liminality.

Christian

Christian is defined as “one who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ (n), treating other people in a kind or generous way; has a very Christian concern for others (adj)” (www.Merriam-Webster.com). Therefore, it can be defined that a Christian is one who believes in the teaching of Jesus Christ which practices the ethics of treating other people in a kind or generous way, and concern for others.

In Pari Mansouri's “*No, I Was Not Dreaming*” it refers to majority of London Christian citizen or English who are expected to practice the Christian ethics. Or in diaspora view, it can be seen Christian as the colonial and Zoroaster as colonized.

Discussion

Being Persian and English

Being Persian means growing and living as Persian with its geography, history, and culture. Persian and London have the same season and climate as stated “I come from a country where for centuries regardless of what people have suffered, they endured the cold winter with the hope of the coming of *Amu-Noruz* who brings the warm breath of Spring. Now that events have brought me to this country where the sun hardly ever shines (Mansouri, 1988:4)”. A Persian is used to the cold of winter which rings sufferings for the people who live in poverty, Spring season becomes a season of hope of prosperity. The poverty motivates her family to move to London. The condition is not to different for English different hopes that winter means the coming of Christmas, a holy day for caring and meeting family and friends so is called greeting season.

Being Persian is familiar with “classical literature is often enriched with respectful and awe inspiring images of Christ, the messenger of Love (Mansouri, 1988: 3)”. So it eases her to understand the English's myth of Santa Claus and Christian ethics of love, as she knows *Amu-Noruz-Uncle Newday* which is a title given to a mythical old man who rings with him the New Year and Spring and *Noruz*-celebration-Persian New Year. she is also grown up with Zoroaster teachings which believe in spreading love through the good deeds toward others and all creations (Kapadia, 1905:26)

The similarities of getting used to cold of winter and the warmth of Spring make the protagonist be able to adjust and adapt to be an English and not too much exchanges. On the other side, she is also aware of love teachings of Christian believers.

Being minority and majority

Entering London as a Persian is a change of becoming a minor people. London with sets of rules to be obey by all the citizens and the immigrants makes her to be able to meet them to be considered as majority. Disobedience will cause punishment and exile. Therefore, the protagonist and her family try to meet all their obligations as a good citizen, as seen in the statements “I then tried to think what crime my family, or I may have committed to justify being summoned like this... I was certain that it could not be income tax evasion, since my husband is in the habit of paying it months in advance...had affinity to groups involved in politics, espionage, or terrorism (Mansouri, 1988: 2)”. The statements show that even though she is able to do as majority, on certain condition she is minority that is it is easy for minority to be accused or suspect to do a crime when something wrong. So when the protagonist was taken by Santa Claus unexpectedly, she thought of crimes or wrong deeds or even betrayal of the nation done by her family at once. Or doing practices do not belong to hers such as sending cards to her Christian neighbours or having Christmas tree at their house.

Another portrayed of being minority is that when she was chosen to give arguments to Christian people as the majority, she felt that she did not have any right to do so. Even though she believes that the country where she lives now is a democratic country as she said, “I always believed that we were in a democracy (Mansouri, 1988:2)”, she still doubts that she has the same right as the majority as her statement, “I am neither a Christian

nor from one of the powerful countries of the world. How was it possible that Santa Claus with all magnificence would want a consultation with an unworthy person like me? (Mansouri, 1988:2)". In her confusing, she also feels proud that she is chosen among the minority and tries to meet the command of Santa Claus by thinking as majority.

Obedying the rules and doing majority practices are not erasing the feeling of being minority. So she has to know when become the majority and when behave as minority.

Being Zoroaster and Christian

Zoroaster teachings practice of good deeds to all creations as a unity of universe, so "a Zoroastrian is able to concentrate his mind in divine contemplation of the Creator, and live in peace, unity, and harmony with his fellow-bethren. For the love of his fellow-men, he is rejoined to protect them in danger; to help them in need and want...to enhance the prosperity and welfare of community...and of all mankind" (Kapadia, 1905:35). It can be concluded that the believers should always think, say, and do of good things to beat the evil deeds which create suffers and destructions of mankind. The teaching is similar to Christian ultimate law of "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strenght. Love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31,KVJ, 2011:59).

The reason why Santa Claus decided to discontinue Christmas celebration is that,"there are any true Christian left. There is no compassion and kindness toward others...greed and selfishness rule people's lives (Mansouri, 1988:3). Before he did it he wanted to hear the opinion of the non Christian whom fortunately she was chosen from a lottery. Eventhough she declared,"I am not a Christian myself (Mansouri, 1988:3)" and it is not her right to judge Christian people, she tried to answer the question by finding what she knew about Christian teaching which inspiring most stories she had ever heard in Persia. She remembered what her daughter, Shirin, said everytime she forbid her to have christmas tree,"... if we must symphatise, and feel the grief and sorrow of all nations, regardless of their religion and culture, then why can't we share in their happy occasions, and feel their joy?" (Mansouri, 1988:2)". Therefore, she disagreed to Santa Claus's decision upon Christian. She remembered *Noruz* and *Amu Noruz* bringing joy and hope to her native land have similar joy and hope of Christmas celebration for Christian people who believe in. Her responsibility of her present identity obliged her to do the good deeds for her present country's welfare and prosperity. In this way, she fulfills her longing for her native land,"I once again remebered Noruz, and saw in my mind the dazzling Spring sunshine on the snow-capped peaks of the Alburz Mountains...As I lay there filled with the dreams of my homeland (mansouri, 1988:4).

She is able to share happiness and joys of Christian community by joining Christmas celebration to show her symphaty while she imagines the similarities of the meaning of Christmas and *Noruz* and *Amu Noruz*. It does not make her a true Christian as English majority, but it makes her aware of herself as a Zoroaster English.

Conclusion

The protagonist diaspora experience is her process of changing her life which full of tresholds should be met through her negotiations and adjustments which are not easy to overcome the ambiguities of being Persian and English, minority and majority, and Zoroaster and Christian. She should be aware of what the differences and similarities of the new land and the native land. The similarities help her to cope with the new life, and the differences should be considered deeply to choose which ones must be kept and not. So in the liminal space she is able to do the rituals of being a good citizen, a good neighbor, and a good person in her betweeness identity as a Zoroaster English not as Christian English yet.

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