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### ***TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY: THE CASE OF SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA LIVING IN BRITAIN***

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**Abstract:** *Global shifts, deterritorialization and reterritorialization allow a move beyond restricted notions of place and region by offering alternative narratives to idealist accounts of European identity. In recent years border crossings in the movement of people have transformed old nation states into new heteroglossic cultural spaces and fusion of different chronotopes has given way to new types of consciousness. Diasporic communities across the world have provided critical spaces for both essentialist and traditional binary frameworks of ethnicity, nation and identity encapsulated in colonial and nationalist metanarratives. This dialogic interaction, never ending back and forth movement, has a productive potential to subvert the essentialist and totalitarian national identity. In the last few decades, “after the confrontation of Occidental with Oriental; or in other words hybridism of East and West, Britain has become inalienably mixed, suffused with the pulse of difference” (Young 2). South Asian communities living in Britain are fine examples to define the diasporic experiences and movements of the rapidly changing world. The fusion of past and present, home and host chronotopes explores the consequences of migration, the new time-spaces of minorities in Britain and the production of new forms of identities. This paper intends to decipher questions of South Asian diasporic identity through dialogic and chronologic lenses.*

In the last decade, diasporic studies and theorization of diaspora offer new critical spaces for thinking about the massive migrations, contemporary forms of movement and dislocation that have defined the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Diaspora is an “ancient word” which is derived from the Greek word diasperien - combination of dia (across) and sperien (to sow or scatter seeds) (Gilroy 207). Originally the term was used to define the Hellenic Jewish communities living in exile from the homeland of Palestine (Brazier 1). The scattering of seeds has been associated with people dislocated from their homelands through migration or exile. Thus, the term suggests dislocation from the “nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries” (Durham 23).

Once depicted as a nostalgic exile from the native homeland, diaspora has gained new dimensions in the cultural constructions of identity with regard to “nationality, diaspora, race, gender, and sexuality” (Brazier 5). After the mass migration from the formerly colonized countries, especially after the independence movements, and mass economic migrations in the post-World War II era – from the late colonial period to the twenty-first century- the term diaspora has been extensively used by literary theorists, anthropologists and cultural critics so as to define the changing parameters of the newly emerging social networks. Diasporic communities across the world and global shifts in the movement of these people have provided critical spaces for both essentialist and traditional binary frameworks of ethnicity, nation and identity encapsulated in colonial and nationalist metanarratives. These innovative currencies have challenged the limitations of the essentialized binary logic of Orientalism, such as colonizer/colonized, West/East, white/ black; homogenizing forces of Eurocentrism, fixed notion of diasporic identity, and nationalism. Today the term diaspora has been moving away from its static definition as forced displacement (home and away places, self and other or home and alien place) toward transnational, fluid and multiple movements resulting in contemporary transnational diasporic conditions and identities.

South Asian communities living in Britain are fine examples to define the diasporic experiences and movements of the rapidly changing world. Currently, four different categories shape Britain’s South Asian population, “Gujaratis and Punjabis from India, Punjabis from Pakistan and Bangladeshi” (Ballard 202).

These minority groups are mostly “the product of migration started in the 1950s”, the post-independence era (Hussain 1). Currently, four different categories shape Britain’s South Asian population, “Gujaratis and Punjabis from India, Punjabis from Pakistan and Bangladeshi” (Hussain 1). Presently, South Asians living in Britain number over 2.2 million, with Indians just over 1,035,807 as the largest group, followed by Pakistanis 714, 826 and Bangladeshis 280,830 (Hussain 19). These immigrants display dissimilarities in their lifestyles, clothes, foods, and languages; moreover, these communities’ understanding of themselves “affects their culture in a number of ways, including cultural formation, reproduction and dissemination” (Gilroy 50).

The South Asian diaspora in Britain includes diverse groups of immigrants, different generations and various diasporic cultural practices with different orientations. Even in the same cultural community, generational gaps play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between the cultures and reception of the social contexts. Thus, one cannot reach a homogenised view of diasporic identity to define the people of this signifier. Opposed to the classical unified and unchanging post-colonial West/East binary relationship, the quest for individual identity in the heterogeneous South Asian diaspora is multi-dimensional and fluid. Although these communities form a heterogeneous group, in Western discourse, the South Asian diaspora used to be a monolithic, homogenizing umbrella term for the immigrants coming from different cultures. To illustrate this, all South Asians “were defined in Britain as Indian before 1945 and subsequently re-defined as Pakistani and Indian. Bangladeshis were only categorized as such from the 1970s onwards when West and East Pakistani were divided so that Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation” (Hussain 2). Moreover, historical backgrounds of South Asian Diasporas in Britain reveal heterogeneous dynamics of these minority groups. In the wake of the Nationality Act of 1948, citizens of the former colonies gained the right of residency in Britain. The mother country Britain opened its door because of its need for labour in the immediate post World War II era; and a number of immigrants arrived from India and Pakistan. The other reason for the mass immigration from South Asia was the desire for fleeing from the turmoil of partition. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Britain accepted a large scale of immigrants from South Asia and its sub-continent. Following this, in the 1970s a large number of economic immigrants arrived from Bangladeshi, fleeing from floods and civil war.

The concept of “nation”, shared culture and its location on the map are central in the discussion of cultural identities for the South Asians. Crossing the borders allows a move beyond restricted notions of place and region by offering alternative narratives to idealist accounts of identity. Homi Bhabha discusses this transition with regard to understanding of nation by focusing on “the enunciative and identificatory processes in the narrow passage in-between the discourse of rootedness, and the ‘affect’ of displacement” (191). Like everything which is historical, nations and their imaginary fixed locations undergo “constant transformation”; far from being “eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power” (Hall 236). As suggested by Kristeva,

[The] nation – dream and reality of the nineteenth century – seems to have reached both its apogee and its limits...[when] the Second World War, thought fought in the name of national values...economic homogeneity, historical tradition and linguistic unity...brought to an end the nation as a reality: it was turned into a mere illusion (188).

The demise of the centre-periphery model as reality reveals that nation cannot offer an “organizing principle of collective belonging” (qt in Leonard 77). Just like colonial domination, the nation produces its stable narratives to fix the identity of people in a location in order to reach cultural homogeneity. These narratives cannot produce a holistic cultural entity for the South Asian immigrants; in contrast, they always “produce a continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation...or cultural difference in the act of writing the nation” (Bhabha 140). The third space for these immigrants within the concept of diaspora opens up a place where different elements encounter each other and inscribe new patterns of representations.

Worn out researches, dealing with fixed positions of the colonizer and the colonized as well as stable bond between the border and culture, carried out in the field of post-colonial studies have emphasised

identity formation of immigrants as a linear process in which non-Western European immigrants reconstitute their identities as citizens of the First World especially by focusing mostly on Edward Said and his *Orientalism* which directs its attention to colonial discourse and Western style of thinking about and studying the Orient and how the colonizer and the colonized evolved within the unequal power relationship. In the wake of increasing global interactions and border crossings, various discursive practices, cultural and personal positions of the diasporic communities have led to the construction of hybrid<sup>1</sup> or hyphenated identities. Rather than thinking of immigrants as moving in a linear trajectory from a formerly colonized culture (minor) A to the superior (major) culture B, identity and acculturation issues require more dynamic definitions which fuse constant mixing and moving (Bhatia 57). This productive hybridity opens up dialogic spaces for diasporic subjectivity where discussions about “identity” challenge unchanging narratives of the stable self and welcomes multiplicity of continuous and discontinuous selves in relation to “other”. This point of view, by challenging set boundaries and silenced others, uncovers the importance of different voices in the evaluation of the ‘self’. For Hermans, dialogical relationship does not try to detain different voices into violent hierarchies; in its place, the dialogic relationship encompasses self-negotiations, self-contradictions and self-integrations (251). As opposed to the monologic assimilation, the contemporary condition of South Asian diaspora perspective promotes the adoption of a critical voice which is aware of the collision of different cultures, voices and histories. Cross-cultural interplay between the immigrants and their host and home cultures creates multiple centres. In this sense, the identity formation of South Asian diaspora living in Britain is a dialogical process which involves multiple cultures and histories; and thus, it is a never-ending, back-and-forth movement between incompatible cultural and discursive positions. Different ideological, racial, social, cultural, familial and national contexts influence South Asian individual voice; as a result, dynamic movement between dialogic voices involves “negotiation, disagreement, power, play, negation, conflict, domination, privileging, and hierarchy” (Bhati 58). Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia is an excellent metaphor for describing the complex experiences of the diaspora as voiced by varying elements within the never ending construction process.

Diaspora is usually regarded as displacement in space (homeland) and this space is again usually taken as the initial point of defining diaspora; however, the temporal dimensions of movement are always privileged by spatiality. Movements “occur in space as well as in time, and the mechanisms and processes according to which movements are orchestrated and actuated in both dimensions are of crucial importance” (Spearey 151). The chronotopical understanding of diasporic identity prompts a frame focusing not only on removal from a space but also from a particular time-space construction through which “a community conceptualizes its surroundings” (Peeren 58). In his definition of chronotopes, Bakhtin asserts that the time-space matrix governs all texts. Being dialogic in nature, chronotopes provide the necessary frameworks and means for understanding all human experience. In the chronotope,

the blending of features of time and space takes place in a single whole, endowed with sense of concreteness. Time here is solid and compact” and “becomes artistically visible; space is intensified and enters into the movement of time...Time features are manifest in space, to which time gives sense and measure. This intertwining of planes and blending of features characterize the...chronotope (Bakhtin 1979 231-2).

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<sup>1</sup> Bhabha’s notion of hybridity remains central to his resistance to the hegemonic assumptions of cultural identity and a pre-shaped division between the “metropolitan centre and a colonial periphery” set by the early post-colonial assumptions especially by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup> (Leonard 133 qt. in *Post Colonial Studies: Key Concepts*). The radicalism of Bhabha’s hybridity theory lies in its use of the idea of *différance* within the analysis of colonialism as a cultural text, and his emphasis on the contemporary performative dimension of cultural articulations. Bhabha draws upon Jacques Derrida’s method of deconstruction, his challenge to narratives of fixity that have been marking points for the colonial conceptions of non-Western cultures and also his idea of *différance*.

Bakhtin advocates that time and space are intimately connected; since any movement in space is also temporal and any temporal experience can be perceived in space. Bakhtin's definition of chronotopic existence presents "a new image of a person with an organic sense of creativity" embedded in "the inner linkages with temporality and locality and in the interplay between individual and social changes" (Wang 2). Such a definition of the chronotopic self invokes that the past cannot be erased completely or reduced to "remembrances"; it constantly reproduces its effects on the present and also on the future (Wang 2). Thus, diasporic identity formation as "becoming" is not a fixed linear process; instead, it refers to the interconnectedness of the past, present and the future. In the dialogic negotiation undertaken in diaspora there may be "I positions that may be relevant at some point in an individual's past but no longer hold any importance in the present so they are backgrounded...it is also possible that a particular I-position of an individual's past is foregrounded and used in a present state" (Bhatia 71). This chronotopic view of diaspora encompasses a never-ending mediation of here and there, past and present, self and other. Homeland is "not a pure, untouched place left behind and also a point of reference on the map" but "a construct symbolically kept in place by the out of place subjects" (Peeren 71). The dialogical self grapples with multiple subject positions in between different chronotopes so identity does not refer to a linear and universal process but to a continuous transformation between past and present, self and the other, home and host land, tradition and modernity; in other words, it refers to multiple cultures and times that seem incompatible with each other.

For Bakhtin, the subject does not master chronotopes but moves within them. All cultural formations "originate and develop not on the level of individual or collective consciousness: but on the level of practice" (Peeren 69). The chronotopic view of diaspora prompts a sense of identity not "as a true self" that can be recovered by returning to the "homeland" or re-enacting the homeland chronotopes "presumed to have stayed frozen in time-space, but of identity as a continuous becoming that is predicated on the various constructions of time-space encountered and performatively<sup>2</sup> enacted" (Peeren 75). So, the chronotope travels with the immigrants, interplays with the new chronotopical organizations of the new place and moves between multiple cultural spaces and histories. There is no transcendental signified "I" rooted in a "true home" chronotope and there is no "native place" that can be re-created in a new space. "[Home] is not really a place with which [immigrants] can form a national identity, because it has always been an artificial construct...It is not a thing that exists" (Spivak 39). The dialogic identity evolves within these never-ending spatio-temporal movements. In this sense, the time-space constructions governing identity, community and memory in the homeland and their differences in the new place can be regarded as double-consciousness. Thus, South Asian migrant identity between incompatible voices is not fixed and frozen in chronotopical looking; it refers to continuous becoming bound to various constructions of time and space. It is plural and does not only belong to realm of past but also to a "yet-to-be futurity" (Peeren 73).

The South Asian diaspora in Britain explains and explores the creative clash of different cultures and multitude of spatio-temporal forms. The fusion of past and present, home and host chronotopes explores the consequences of migration, the new time-spaces of minorities in Britain and for the production of new forms of identities. For Hall these dialogic interactions stem from the interconnected movement between two terms; sameness and difference. His "sameness" refers to immigrants' past chronotopes that are strongly related to idea of national identity:

The first position defines cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self", hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people", with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (222).

<sup>2</sup> For Judith Butler social categories can be constructed only through performative acts. Conceiving identity as performative means that identities are not reducible to what is visible, to what is seen on the body, but rather, they are constructed by the very expressions that are said to be their results (Fortier 6).

For Hall past chronotopes are essential parts of identity formation and for the dialogic relation of the past, present and future. The second crucial term for identity formation is “difference” or the need for the other “voices”:

As well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather-since history has intervened – ‘what we have become’. Cultural identity in the second definition, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. That is that culture is in constant change from influences of the present but in some respects always remains connected to our historical past (222).

Identity formation thus is having different I-positions while moving back and forth among these different chronotopes.

The South Asian diaspora can be considered as a carnivalesque space for performing various differences. The first settlers from South Asia who straddled the pre-war imperial era and immediate post-war postcolonial period felt deracinated in the diaspora. They held unqualified jobs and worked long hours with little pay. They felt the discriminatory attitudes of the host society in every aspect of social life. For the first generation immigrants, “their participation in British society was limited due to both the external constraints of prejudice and discrimination and the internal constraints embedded within cultural values and norms” (Hussain 20). The strategy of this group was to hold their past chronotopic constructions of the homeland through maintaining strong ties with their ethnic group; in other words, trying to be “same” as stated by Hall. The diasporic experiences of the early South Asian immigrants in the post World War II era were largely shaped by their traumatic immigration process, sense of dislocation and by the national anxiety over them. They were still under the influence of the imperialist Eurocentric discourse and accepted their ethnic identity which was pre-shaped, homogenous and fixed. The relationship between colonised homelands and their British rulers, the transition from the pre-war colonial era to the succeeding post-war postcolonial period along with the exploration of these epochs were shaping the experience of the first generation of immigrants.

Britain was a new space for those people whose “narrative of displacement, that gives rise so profoundly to certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning” but return to lost origins “can neither be fulfilled nor requited and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire” (Hall 245). For the early immigrants of the post-independence era, implications of geographical dislocation - due to being away from the centre as well as the mythic idealization of homeland - resulted in the denial of the present, that is, of their actual situation in Britain. Their main concern was to make money and to return to their home country. Thus, homeland was one of the central motives in their identity formation process since their sense of belonging mostly evolved around the idea of having an identity “rooted in a geographical origin” (Hussain 7). The first generation’s interaction with the host culture was limited especially for two reasons. The first reason was that they were still sharing the influence of internalized oriental inferiority, imposed I-positions and imperialist domination over them. Secondly, they were confronted with racial prejudice and discrimination since they were regarded as the coloured immigrants from the colonial land which once was ruled by the host country. Especially during the years of racist, violent and anti-immigrant practices, some of which were legalized, those immigrants tried to be close to their ethnic community finding comfort in their own kinship in Britain and accepting the major culture as a kind of threat to their homogenous group identity. South Asianness was a unifying presence which provided the first immigrants with the sense of origin. They struggled to keep the idea of South Asia alive as a homogenous and ahistoric chronotope in the midst of their present situation. Since the difference between the home and host chronotopes was great for the early comers, the daily participation in the host chronotope could not be facilitated much.

The offspring of the first immigrants are hybridized identities. As a part of growing up in a different culture and receiving education in the new home, the second generation identifies less with the concerns of their predecessors. The integration of the British-born children of the immigrants into the educational system and various social contexts during the late 1970s and the following years have produced critical questions on identity. For this generation border crossing is also a metaphor referring to critical questions on identity, nationality, sexuality and ethnicity. For different utterances of different speech genres metaphor of border crossing refers to the never ending back and forth movement between the binaries and constant re-definition of the identity formation with regard to sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. It is impossible to classify these British South Asians and their in-between-ness either as Asian or as British. The new social context in which the early immigrants were living was totally different from the one they shared with their parents in their homelands. However, the descendants of this first generation have paved new ways in cultural formations and continuously re-defined the idea of South Asianness since they have been raised in the country which was the “host country” for their parents but is a new homeland for them. The second generation constantly moves between various past and present chronotopes. It is these younger immigrants who are more critical of what old chronotopes of the home country has to offer. The contested chronotopes of the “homeland” narrated to this generation by their families through some mythical stories and some cultural practices. Asianness, which was internalized by the first generation as something fixed and pure, in the context of second generation becomes British-Asianness and refers to a dialogic and metaphoric border crossing that produces identities never complete, constantly re-defined and always in relation to differences. The voice of the parents, cultural practices in the home, British society, different chronotopes of the cultures are all represented in the dialogical self. This act of subversion disputes the ethnic norms and stereotypes made available by the dominant culture; furthermore, it also highlights contingencies of those fixed stereotypes. Rather than offering forms of assimilations into the major culture, bilingual and bicultural diasporic subjects are engaged in redefining both South Asianness and Britishness. The first generation immigrants’ focus was mostly on dislocation, cultural difference, and belonging to “root”. However, by recognizing many-faceted cultural practices, their children have developed a more positive sense of self in Britain. Repudiating pre-given cultural identity, the younger generation foregrounds networks of cultural differences in dialogic ways. As Kwame Dawes clarifies:

They write about Britain as home. They were born there or have grown up there all their life. They are uncomfortable with the notion of a home elsewhere for they have no sense of exile. Their sole exile is the exile within their own country (261).

For the South Asians living in Britain this transcultural experience is like a carnival where identity is not singular or monolithic and is instead “multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory. . . made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class” (Tucker 7). Narratives of this new diaspora in Britain are not only concerned with nationality and ethnicity, but also with contemporary issues of difference in a progressive and multidimensional way. Shared cultural codes and common historical frames of a static understanding of nation have a tendency to impose artificial oneness or a fixed chronotope. Rediscovery of this nostalgic sense of shared identity - pure otherness - is often the object of the early post-colonial studies. However, contemporary trans-cultural states of these immigrants articulate “cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories...Like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation”; far from being “eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of [different time-spaces], culture, and power” (Hall 236).

To conclude, South Asian diasporic identity does not have a fixed point of reference since it is never wholly part of either the home or the host chronotopes. The South Asian diaspora in Britain explains and explores the creative clash of different cultures and a multitude of spatio-temporal forms. The heteroglossic nature of chronotopic dialogism has the potential to express “a powerfully syncretic dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and creolizes them, disarticulating the given signs and rearticulating their symbolic”; in other words, the subversive force of this hybridizing

tendency “creoles, patois...decenter, destabilize, and carnivalize the [any] domination” (Mercer 255). In this sense, a chronotopic view of diaspora prompts a sense of identity as a continuous becoming.

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