DIASPORA AND MEMORY IN SOME AFRICAN AMERICAN NARRATIVES.

Ashma Shamail
Dept. of English Language & Literature, University of Dammam, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
Email: asmaishrafi@yahoo.com

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Abstract
Diaspora is a term practically applying to any population considered ‘deterioralised’ or ‘transnational.’ As a social construct, scholars define diaspora referring to individuals living in various societies and cultures, who maintain links with their place of origin emphasizing their sense of belonging and of course, identify with the society in which they currently reside. The recent academic interest and scholarship on diasporas has produced an enormous literature across a variety of disciplines. The African diasporas are now being identified all over the globe, existing as both academic project and social and historical agenda. The case of African Americans and their visible links to the scattered communities dispersed from homeland (imagined or real), has emerged as an urgent area of critical study. Focusing on memory as vital and important in studying and analyzing the diaspora concept, the paper attempts to create a conceptual space examining the incorporation of memory into history.

Keywords: Diaspora, Memory, Past, and African -American women writers.

INTRODUCTION

A map of the city, colored to designate nationalities, would show more stripes than on the skin of a zebra, and more colors than any rainbow.
--- Jacob Riis

And my special geography too; the world map made for my own use, not tinted with arbitrary colors of scholars, but with the geometry of my spilled blood
---AimeCesaire, Notebook of a Return to the Native Land.

In mapping or narrating one’s continent and geography denotes not just ethnic groups living in a city, but seeks to provide global context for examining and exploring experiences rooted in history and culture. The diaspora debate, the emerging genre of historical and cultural studies has been witnessing and experiencing widespread critical acclaim for the past decade. The term ‘diaspora’ earlier referred to the specific migration of Jews, later extended to the Greeks, and Armenians (Saffran, 1991), has become a global context suggesting the range of linkages worldwide that may be elicited through studies of the diaspora. Since the 1960s, the term has expanded universally applying to all groups of migrations and settlements operating beyond the native borders, scattered across the globe. Many social scientists have posed questions pertaining to the inclusion of all transnational migrant groups belonging to this term, irrespective of the migration circumstances. In essence, the popularity of the term relegated to representations of ‘identity’ and ‘culture’ in international arena has led to its increasing relevance. In fact, the meaning was systematically extended, expanded, and elaborated applying to the dispersal of Africans, the Irish, Indians, Palestinians, and Cubans.

The diaspora concept has been widely adopted in academic discourses, and debates on the scope of analyzing the concept, and case studies on the historical dynamics is an emerging field of scholarship. Recent works on diaspora studies, has produced insights into the historical and cultural connections, comparisons and linkages, and questions concerning the Diaspora/Homeland binary. However, many social scientists have stated certain characteristics to describe diaspora which involves:

- Dispersal from an original homeland to two or more countries. The reasons for dispersal may vary from traumatic experiences to trade, in search of work, or personal ambitions.
- Retention of collective memory/vision about the homeland, especially about the place, it’s history, events, and achievements etc.
- Idealizing the ancestral home and imagining a ‘return’ to their home (keeps them grounded), prevents them from absorbing in their host societies.
- Maintaining group solidarity and ethnic consciousness based on shared history, culture, heritage, and religion with members of the group living elsewhere. (Cohen, 2008, p.16, 17).

Indeed, the very idea of Diasporic unity, integration, and solidarity are the key factors reconnecting Diasporans to their imagined homelands. This ethno communal consciousness was, and is, a Diaspora construct.

In essence, Diaspora is a term practically applying to any population considered ‘deterioralised’ or ‘transnational.’ As a social construct, scholars define diaspora referring to individuals living in various societies and cultures, who maintain links with their place of origin emphasizing their sense of belonging and of course, identify with the society in which they currently reside. In addition, intellectuals from various fields started exploring the relationship between motherland and host society, migration, immigrants and other experiences. Gradually, the concept has evolved and developed focusing on processes of transnationalism, de-territorialisation and cultural hybridity – terms that are opposed to discourses such as regions and nations. Thus a growing interest in these discourses,
evolving and changing identities, and the relation between host and home has been vast and rapid. Diasporas affect the economies, politics, and social dynamics of both the homeland and host country, playing significant role in national and international relations.

But, despite the expanding definition and the growing acceptance of the word, social scientists question whether the Indian, Armenian, African, Chinese, Greek, or perhaps any other transnational migrant group, be complemented alongside the Jewish Diaspora. The extensive research and articles published on diasporas (in Social Sciences) from 2002 till date, have doubled when compared to the publications carried out between 1998-2001. Simultaneously, issues of race, gender, and identity; forced displacements, dislocations; and reconnections (especially historical and cultural connections than genetic connections), have broadened the field of diaspora studies offering new perspectives and suggestions, alternative definitions and different approaches for more research, critical and case study. Indeed, the ‘diaspora’ concept cannot be viewed for research by excluding any transnational migrant groups. Diasporas are essential factors in reconfiguring transnational communities and societies.

The recent academic interest and scholarship on diasporas has produced an enormous literature across a variety of disciplines. In the last three decades, scholars from history and anthropology, have conducted extensive and massive research on the African diaspora. The term ‘Africa’ (if one could memorize) dates back to school days, especially in geography when one heard it while simultaneously referred to it as a ‘Dark Continent.’ The African Diaspora centers on the migration of African descended populations (both voluntary and involuntary), and on Africans (internal migrations) of the African continent or African homeland. Most notably, the term ‘African diaspora’ came into use from the mid 1960s, referring to “the forced dispersal of African peoples in the Atlantic World, especially in the western hemisphere” (Alpers, 2001, p. 1). The African diasporas are now being identified all over the globe, existing as both academic project and social and historical agenda. According to Alpers (2001), the term ‘African Diaspora’ first employed by George Shepperson in a paper presented at the International Congress of African History at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, in 1965. As a historian, he drew parallels between the Jewish diaspora and the dispersal of Africans as a consequence of the slave trade. Nevertheless, Shepperson asserted “the concept of the African diaspora” to that “which is the study of a series of reactions to coercion, to the imposition of the economic and political rule of alien peoples in Africa, to slavery and imperialism” and that “the period of almost four hundred years of the European enslavement of Africans remains the heart of the African diaspora” (cited in Alpers, 2001, p.4).

Indeed, the historical relationship and the transatlantic kinships that continental Africans and diasporans operate is complex with a long history of enslavement, dispersion, denigration, and exploitation. In his introduction to Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora, Joseph Harris (1982), who chaired the panel in which Shepperson presented his Dar es Salaam paper, states:

- The African diaspora concept subsumes the following: the global dispersion (voluntary and involuntary) of Africans throughout history; the emergence of a cultural identity abroad based on origin and social condition; and the psychological or physical return to the homeland, Africa. Thus viewed, the African diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic, continuous, and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class, and gender (p.3-4).

In fact, Harris’s views clearly expand the concept to identify and understand the African diaspora. Situating the African diaspora in global and transnational context, various scholars have contributed to its expansion.

Much scholarship and critical study carried out on African diaspora focuses on how the descendants of Africans rebuilt their cultures, and identities away from home. These enslaved people and their descendants who resettled around the world constitute the modern African diaspora. Hence, the growing interest in African culture and history, the critical theories in studying racial and ethnic groups, and in viewing culture as an entity for transmission calls for understanding the concept of the diaspora. In mapping or narrating the African diaspora one cannot ignore the Middle Passage (the journey from Africa to the Americas), especially the horrors and sufferings experienced by the slaves in the tightly packed slave ships. Though unofficial by counts, the forced dispersal of African peoples in the Atlantic world needs special scrutiny. The Middle Passage and its long history of turmoil and suffering, rooted in historical experiences, emerges as a space between Africa and the Americas. The field of African American studies in particular, is rich with issues of racism, displacement, quests, topics of ‘return’ to homeland, and histories of imperialism, colonialism and capitalism. The case of African Americans and their visible links to the scattered communities dispersed from homeland (imagined or real), has emerged as an urgent area of critical study. Intellectuals, sociologists, historians, artists, and writers have contributed largely to the field of African American studies. However, the scope of the paper is limited to African American women’s literature, who maintained the African presence in their host society as a lived reality.

However, in addressing their collective narratives, and differing relationships to their homelands, Africans dispersed all over the globe stressed their desire for a ‘return’ and reconnection to their original homeland. Diasporan Africans address the concept of ‘return,’ spiritually, socially, politically, and economically to their sources as a vital component in reconstituting their identity and the establishment of transnational communities. In fact, memories give shape to identities fragmented by immigration, displacement and diasporic living. An understanding of how memory works within diaspora studies, opens a space for posing broader aspects about the expanding field of African studies. The paper attempts right at this juncture, focusing on memories vital and important in studying and analyzing the diaspora concept, as it is largely connected to the historical and political struggles.

Memory is an act of remembering that connects the past and the present. It plays vital role in the individual’s struggle for personal identity, and hence was traditionally thought of as a solitary experience. A cursory glance at memory and the way it operates within diaspora studies is essential. While personal memory constitutes the memory of an individual, based on his/her first-hand experience, cultural or collective memory encompasses the memory of many people involving many generations. Collective memories are shared representations of past events that have been constructed collectively. According to sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980), collective memories are memories of a shared past retained by members of a group, class, or nation. They can be found in oral and written stories, rumors, gestures, cultural styles, and institutionalized cultural activities.

Both individuals and groups construct, perform, and maintain the
remnants of their shared past, cultural inheritance, and self through memory. Memory connects an individual as well as a community to history, traditions, customs, rituals and ceremonies. Represented through sites, images, and objects, memory is varied and includes collective desires, needs, struggles, and triumphs. Through cultural practices and norms, individuals and groups recall past into present consciousness through memory. Hence, these acts involve the dynamic negotiation between past and present, personal and collective, living and dead, myth and reality. As Marita Struken (1997) writes in her introduction to her book *Tangled Memories*:

"[The] process of cultural memory is bound up in complex political stakes and meanings. It both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed. To define a memory as cultural is, in effect, to enter into a debate about what that memory means. This process does not efface the individual but rather involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of meaning. Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history (p.1)."

Memory as an imaginative form of recollection operates both individually and collectively with a specificity, reconstructing and mirroring images of the past. The field of memory studies is rich and vast involving various thought processes, but the scope of this study is limited. Memory as a carrier of diasporic identity, is a means to pass cultural mores, collective histories, and rituals.

Many African American women writers played a pivotal role in foregrounding the functioning of oral memory and their literature contributes in understanding and studying the concept of memory and resistance, especially since women have been the oral transmitters of their histories for centuries. Their stories of the past – storied accounts of memories thus became vital records of personal as well as communal histories. A contemporary recognition of this can be rightly found in novelist Toni Morrison’s works. Morrison (1987) asserts that her job as a writer is to "rip that veil drawn over, proceedings too terrible to relate." She continues, "The exercise is . . . critical for a person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" ("The Site of Memory" p. 110-11). Memory is how the past is recalled; memory is also how we heal from the past. Thus, Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* (1987), makes re-memory central to the experience of that novel. Re-memory is a combination of historical memory and the imagination. It not only acknowledges history, but involves re-membering or bringing back all the parts together. Mae G. Henderson (1990) addressing Morrison’s *Beloved* engages and expands the process of rememory and says it “functions to re-collect, reassemble, and organize into a meaningful sequential whole through the process of narrativization” (p.71). Morrison also refers to memory returning to the “archaeological site.” This archiological sense of place addresses what the “memory” and its image are really about ("The Site of Memory" p.114-115). The return provides access to meaning and allows certain truths to surface. In further discussing this memory process, Morrison uses the image of the river that is engineered, straightened out to make room for modern development. “Occasionally,” she says, “the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was” ("The Site" p.119).

In a broader sense, Morrison’s views have been shared by many writers who are unraveling women’s histories and memories in new and exciting ways.

Like Toni Morrison, novelist Paule Marshall shapes her memory field from the “poets” in the Brooklyn kitchen. “What I did with my mother’s voice is to transform it. I was using her approach – her care with telling a story well, finding the telling phrase – I retrieved these things. I am using the voice of the community” (Washington, 1988, p.165). Marshall speaks of Barbados constantly because of the powerful reflections on home by her mother and the African-Caribbean women, who congregated in her kitchen. Marshall conveys through her writings the interconnectedness with both her “homes” (the United States and the Caribbean), advocating on the preservation and celebration of the African past. Traditionally dominated within cultures by patriarchal norms, women have been silenced for ages. The retelling of the past by them not only validate memories of women’s everyday experiences, but also provide resistance to dominant narratives and present new ways of conceiving stories, memories, and identities. The storied memories are not simply a picture of the past, but encode the present state as well. As theorist Daniel Schacter (1996) explains, memory “is constructed from influences operating in the present as well as from information [that has been] stored about the past” (p.8).

Every form of memory – the individual, collective, cultural, or mythic memory that links transmutations and transgenerations, enables participation, as well as preservation of the past. Many recent African American Women’s narratives, have emphasized the role of past in constituting identity through acts of remembrance. The past as it pertains to slavery becomes embedded in the unconscious, and memory with its complex relations to individual experiences, shared histories, and myth represents a privileged site of diasporic identity. By revisiting and reconfiguring the past, scholars have mined into aspects creating new understandings of the idealized past. Feminist Gayle Greene argues that women writers turn to the past as a means of effecting change in the present, focusing on remembering not as a static but transformative activity.

All most all of Paule Marshall’s works address the need to ‘return, (to homelands) in rewriting and re-creating history. Marshall observes that the past figures prominently in her work, but not to the exclusion of the present or the future. Marshall addresses the concept of return, to the sources, giving precedence to the spiritual. Marshall (1973) contends that:

The spiritual return is a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual return back over history, which I am convinced Black people in this part of the world must undertake if we are to have a sense of our total experience and to mold for ourselves a more truthful identity. Moreover I believe this exploration of the past is vital in the work of constructing our future (“Shaping the World” p.107-108).

The “Black people in this part of the world” that Marshall talks about are the people who constitute the diaspora, those who share a common history of oppression, and despite the oppressive atmosphere, the past has to be confronted to foster creation of the self – for knowledge of one’s cultural and historical past is the key to understand the self.

Marshall stresses the need to remember history, the events, achievements, and of course the sense of belonging. Storytelling, song, and dance which function as historical records by defining and
keeping alive the essence of the past and which connect the African diaspora to history, tradition, self, and community are analyzed in her third novel Praisesong. Hence, the past figures prominently in all her writings, and her novels map the preservation of unique African past and culture. Marshall addresses the incorporation of “folk and historical material” in her works indicating her struggle to maintain an African dimension in diasporic literature. Frantz Fanon (1963) writes that the oppressor “is not merely content to impose its rule... By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (p.169). Hence it is for the oppressed people to examine their past history because “by ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes” (Lorde, 1984, p.117). Marshall’s contention is that memorizing the past is the key of the present and mirror of the future, therefore the black people should learn to judge the future by the history of the past.

Commenting on the incorporation and recapturing of the past in women’s works, Karla Holloway (1992) argues that memory and myth are key components in black women’s writings. In a close reading of Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow, she contends:

- The presence of mythologies in black women writers’ text points toward the elements of myth – metaphor, spirituality, and memory – as they appear in the systems of literature, rather than toward individual myths of West Africa. The cultural presence within literature acknowledges spoken languages as its source. The potential to reformulate story, not into constituent patterns but into frames that reconstruct more ancient patterns of memory and telling – mythologies – is of interpretive significance. Texts by black women writers privilege an older understanding of literature. Because their structures acknowledge the mythic traditions that have generated them, these works are not distinguished from their ancestry (p.89).

Through oral cultures, the past is recalled by memory into present consciousness. Dance, music, customs, and festivals describe not only events of cultural importance inscribed in memory and passed through generations, but serve to express or record the hardships of the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (p.169). Hence it is for the oppressed people to examine their past history because “by ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes” (Lorde, 1984, p.117). Marshall’s contention is that memorizing the past is the key of the present and mirror of the future, therefore the black people should learn to judge the future by the history of the past.

The continuing debates on the social, political, and cultural connections among historically constituted communities of African ancestry is rapidly emerging. While a growing body of research about their migrations across Europe has increasingly led to the rediscovery of diaspora, a large section of people are able to claim their linkages in new places. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, many authors are expanding the contours of their African roots. Today, there are scholarly journals, conferences, seminars, research programs, courses, and a host of books on African culture and literature. Hence, the growing interest in African culture and history, the critical theories in studying racial and ethnic connections among historically constituted communities of African ancestry is rapidly emerging. While a growing body of research about their migrations across Europe has increasingly led to the rediscovery of diaspora, a large section of people are able to claim their linkages in new places. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, many authors are expanding the contours of their African roots. Today, there are scholarly journals, conferences, seminars, research programs, courses, and a host of books on African culture and literature. Hence, the growing interest in African culture and history, the critical theories in studying racial and ethnic groups, and in viewing culture as an entity for transmission calls for understanding the concept of the diaspora.

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