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Interrogating Parenting Representation in Internal Diasporic Situations in Shilpa Raj's *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter*

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Abstract

Parenting representations have always been quite intriguing and inviting simply because ideas which shape up the contour of parenting are consequent upon a number of socio-cultural and economic variables. The issue of parenting is nowadays being explored from several theoretical standpoints. For instance, the act of parenting is contingent upon both how parents negotiate various problems that spring up occasionally during the time of parenting and how children respond to parental care and affection. The act of parenting becomes more problematic when both parents and children have to strive to come to terms with diasporic situations. The problem of acculturation invariably leaves impact upon parenting, which leads parents to make necessary alterations in the act of parenting, which is required to conform to diasporic situations. The act of parenting in diasporic situations is as problematic as it is in the case of internal diasporic situations. In other words, parents who migrate from one state to another within a nation-state, have to negotiate acculturation-related problems due to cultural heterogeneities pervasive across a nation-state. The impact of internal diasporic situations upon the act of parenting is worth exploring and thus cannot be left out of consideration. Shilpa Raj emerges as one of the young novelists who has understood the worth of exploring the act of parenting in internal diasporic situations and therefore has penned down *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* – a brilliant fictional manifestation of variegated parenting representations in internal diasporic situations. Shilpa Raj lays bare different dimensions of parenting in the fictional narrative and unveils how parenting leaves impact on the growth of the protagonist of the novel. Most interestingly, Raj has brought out the need to put emphasis on internal diaspora so far parenting is concerned in this novel. Along with it, the issue of border is entwined with internal diaspora so much so that it cannot be left out of consideration while examining parenting practices in internal diasporic situations. The notion of

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border which connotes a line of difference between two contesting spaces has been exquisitely explored by Raj in connection with the parental representations in internal diasporic situation. This article is intended to problematize parenting representation by pitting it against the backdrop of internal diaspora. It aims to argue that the intricacies germane to internal diaspora are bound to affect parenting and therefore can tenably be subjected to theoretical deliberations.

Keywords: Parenting, Acculturation, Border, Internal Diaspora.

I

John W. Berry in the seminal essay "Acculturation and Adaptation in a New Society" has raised the importance and relevance of acculturation for those immigrants who want to settle down away from home, crossing the borders of their nation-states. He argues that immigrants have to alter their certain behavioral traits while trying to get used to a multicultural land. Berry has laid emphasis on acculturative stress in "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation" that immigrants have to negotiate while adapting to cultural heterogeneities. In the case of parenting, parents have to encounter a number of challenges conditioned by acculturation. Diana Baumrind and Ross A. Thompson in "The Ethics of Parenting" bring into comprehension the issue of ethics while parents deal with acculturation related problems. They hold that acculturative stress often puts ethical solidarity of parents at jeopardy and thus seems to be worth considering in this regard:

> Ethical parenting above all is responsible caregiving, requiring of parents enduring investment and commitment throughout their children's long period of dependency. The effort people put forth to be responsible parents, as in other areas of their lives, is a function of their self-attributions concerning the relation between their effort and outcome . . . . The ethics of parenting begins, therefore, with the assumption of responsibility for children. (3)

Keith Crnic and Christine Low in "Everyday Stresses and Parenting" subscribe to the pertinent observation of Baumrind, et al by stating that acculturation problem is a hard reality and leaves telling impinge on parenting undoubtedly. Marc H. Bornstein and Linda R. Cote cogently put forward in "Parenting Cognitions and Practices in the Acculturative Process" that parents need to be aware of the challenges that they might encounter while indulging in parenting.

In *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory*, Jeremy Holmes has assessed the significant effect of 'maternal deprivation' on budding children, while contextualizing the pertinence of Bowlby's perception of attachment theory: ". . . the idea of maternal deprivation as acause of mental illness was in its day a revolutionary concept which became a paradigm. . ." (38). It connotes that if a child is deprived of getting maternal care right from his childhood, it will invariably impact upon the psychic developments of that child. Rutter is one particular critic who has expressed his dissents on semantic interpretation of the term 'deprivation' and has argued that the total lack of maternal care might be vicious to the upbringing of a child whereas 'deprivation' is a

problematic term which cannot be easily defined. Holmes sums up the view of Rutter in the following terms:

> The distinction is important because, as we shall see, there sults of the complete lack of maternal care are almost always damaging to the child and have severe long-term consequences, while deprivation is less easy to define and much less predictable in its impact. (38)

What Holmes has meant to say is that the concept of parenting is loaded with connotations and therefore contentious.

The importance and relevance of internal diaspora gradually becomes an irrefutable reality and thus needs to be recognized. Avtar Brah in her celebrated work *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* has implicitly suggested at the multidimensionality of the term diaspora which incorporates internal diasporic 'configurations of power' as well:

> Rather, the concept of diaspora concerns the historically variable forms of *relationality* within and between diasporic formations. It is about relations of power that similarise and differentiate between and across changing diasporic constellations. In other words, the concept of diaspora centres on the configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another. (180)

This excerpt divulges that diasporic dislocations within a nation-state are as important as diasporic shifts across the globe inasmuch as, according to Brah, diasporic identities ". . . are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing 'imagined' and 'encountered' communities" (192). Mohan Ramanan is another renowned scholar on Diaspora Studies, who has implicitly argued in the article "Diasporic Meditations" that the presence of internal diaspora cannot be done away with in as much as:

> We are all, I am convinced, Diasporic in one way or the other. It has to do with the shrinking of the world and the effects of globalization. No one really lives at home, everyone is abroad, even if abroad is the next town or city. I myself grew up in Kolkata and the Tamil Brahmin community, to which I belong, did feel keenly its difference from the larger Bengali community out there. (37)

Angshuman Kar has strongly corroborated the observation of Prof. Ramanan in the Introduction to *Contemporary Indian Diaspora: Literary and Cultural Representations*, which is entitled as "Literary and Cultural Representations of Indian Diaspora: New Perspectives" and has implored scholars to investigate it further: "Mohan Ramanan has argued that nobody is at home, everybody is abroad. True, in a sense. In a sense, everybody is in exile. But the context and degree matter" (6). What he meant to say is that internal diaspora is contingent upon a combination of cultural dislocation, acculturation, historical specificities, geo-spatial diversities, to name only a few. Gloria Anzaldua in *Borderlands: La Frontera* has divulged border as a trope and argues that border exists where two contesting spaces meet each other. Metaphorical dimensions of border are supposed to leave impact upon one's understanding of parenting in internal diasporic condition. The existence of state border presupposes

the possibility of internal diaspora at praxis. One may here critically argue that it is the border that problematizes parenting in internal diasporic situation in that crossing over the border parents have to try to get acculturated to the cultural heterogeneities of that particular land where parents settle down, otherwise, children might suffer a lack of parental care. In other words, in order to ensure flawless parenting, parents have to find ways through hard realities. Thus, the thrust of this segment is that parenting, unequivocally, is a problematic exercise in internal diasporic conditions following the contentious configurations made by border and acculturation.

II

Shilpa Raj's *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* turns out to be an impressive exposition of how parenting representations get twisted while running into internal diaspora. This novel reckons on the subjective experiences of the author and spans from her early childhood right up to her entrance into adulthood. This novel relates how the protagonist of the novel has to take on a number of challenges to strive to get admitted in a reputed school away from her immediate vicinity while living in a south Indian village in the childhood period. Raj delves deep into the issue of parenting possibly because she might have wanted to underscore loopholes in parenting practices that she experienced. She has ingeniously put parenting in domestic space in contrast with that of in a private boarding school. When the protagonist gets a nice opportunity to take admission in a private boarding school, she faces a lot of resistance at home following her parents' prejudiced suspicion that she could be kidnap. Raj points out that it is because of sheer lack of education coupled with an inability to anticipate the immense importance of education, her parents at first show strong reluctance to let their daughter go in a private boarding school situated away from their residence. As she is a girl, she is pulled back from making familiarity with boys in her village. Raj admits that her father had "driven her away, calling her a prostitute and beating her. But no one would blame him for being strict with a rebellious daughter. It was totally unacceptable in our village for a girl to be involved with a man before her marriage" (7). What it implies is that parenting is influenced by surrounding ambience. On the contrary, the protagonist's experience in that boarding school is starkly different following the disciplined lifestyle. To substantiate it, one may refer to the following experience of the protagonist when along with others she is let loose to run into her parents:

> Plenty of confusion erupted since some parents could no longer identify their children. We looked so different to them, drastically transformed by our clean clothes, full cheeks, haircuts, and huge smiles. Some mothers embarrassed themselves by grabbing the wrong child. (45)

She could not receive parental care in her initial days in the school possibly because she might have found it hard to acculturate. She said: "I missed my grandmother's loving gestures and Amma's warm embrace at night as she sang to me…. Now, all I had were dolls to hug and a bed that, at first, was terribly frightening because it seemed so high off the ground" (37). What it brings out is that the

protagonist experiences the gaps in parenting representation in different space and time. At this point, one may argue that parenting is subject to time and space, and is consequent upon how well parents come to terms with the requirements of children. In order to problematize the issue of parenting representation, one may refer to the impact of internal diasporic condition. It is the protagonist who experiences gaps in parenting while switching between home and boarding school. She has to negotiate varied parenting practices following her frequent shifts. The culture of village leaves significant impact on parenting and it leads the parents of the protagonist to mull over her marriage:

> No news is kept secret in the village; there are happy stories of young girls getting married, and sad stories of their broken relationships. Women seem to enjoy talking about other women and their children, especially about those who are not married by sixteen. As for men, prosperity meant more money in their hands… (205).

On the contrary, in the boarding school situated away from the village, school authority pushes children to run after their aims instead of indulging in socio-cultural duress. It shows that parenting practice within a nation-state is varied and variegated.

III

Finally, at the close of this account, it can be argue that parenting representations conditioned by internal diaspora are at times problematic. For instance, neither parenting in village nor in the boarding school is free of flaws. Although it seems that parents are more liberal than school authority, they are actually just the opposite of it. They do not let her opt for her choice and put certain restrictions on her life so that she cannot get rid of patriarchal periphery. Even in the school, in the name of giving pure care to children, school authority keeps strong and rigid surveillance on the lives of children. They do not allow children to take delight in freedom at their will. What is clear out of it is that parenting is fraught with flaws in the both the cases. Raj could be question on the ground that as she has to hinge on her memory while recounting her spent days, her parenting representations are bound to be incomplete and hence problematic.

End Note

1. In this regard, one may be reminded of Avtar Brah's intervention into the intersectionalities among border, diaspora and politics of location:

   > Together, the concepts of border and diaspora reference a politics of location. This point warrants emphasis, especially because the very strong association of notions of diaspora with displacement and dislocation means that the experience of *location* can easily dissolve outof focus. Indeed, it is the contradictions of and between location and dislocation that are a regular feature of diasporic positioning. . . . Out of these debates emerges the notion of a 'politics of location' as *locationality in contradiction*-that is, apositionality of

dispersal; of simultaneous situatedness within gendered spaces of class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality, age; of movement across shifting cultural, religious and linguistic boundaries; of journeys across geographical and psychic borders. (201)

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