Of Roots And Routes: Conceptualizing Exile

Dr Neethu Tessa Baby, Dr Minu Mary Mathew

Assistant Professor, Assumption College Autonomous, Changanassery
Assistant Professor, Assumption College Autonomous, Changanassery

ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the multifaceted nature of exile, exploring its historical roots, contemporary manifestations, and literary representations. It argues that while humans have inherent roots in specific geographical locations, spatial shifts and diverse forms of mobility have led to various experiences of displacement throughout history. Through an analysis of key terms such as refugee, migrant, immigrant, expatriate, and diaspora, the article illuminates the complexities of the exile experience, including alienation, fragmentation, and identity crisis. The paper calls for a re-examination of exile beyond simplistic categorizations, emphasizing a deeper understanding of its impact on individuals and societies. By shedding light on the intricacies of exile, the article contributes to broader discussions on migration, identity, and belonging in today's global landscape.

KEYWORDS: Conceptualizing, contemporary.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have temporal and spatial existence. While temporality is a fact of life, spatial shifts are the inevitable consequence of life. Even in hunter-gatherer societies men had had to traverse, in search of food and shelter. When the nomadic way of life gave way to settled lives, getting anchored geographically became commonplace and a person's life and identity revolved around a specific place or location. These geographical centres had much to do with defining his or her identity. Thus later human beings became more defined by their roots, rather than routes.

Nevertheless, historical necessities and personal needs compelled later human beings to travel far and wide, away from the geographical centres and identity points, thus getting 'displaced' from their original culture and society. Such displacement and de-centering often entails a sense of alienation, fragmentation and identity crisis. "Depriving subjects of the topographical, cultural, spiritual and linguistic centres in relation to which they have defined themselves, exile can provoke a feeling of fragmentation" (Stock 59). This de-centering may further create new identity points in terms of one's region, language and culture. Owing to the multiple centres of anchorage and a divided mindscape, displacement results in identity clashes.

Human displacement and mobility come in varied forms and stem from a wide range of reasons such as trade and commerce, violence and oppression, natural disasters and climate change. The different forms of human mobility include migration, exile, deportation, diasporic movement, so on and so forth, and this study attempts to throw further light on the area of exile. Before proceeding, it is important to define some key-terms related to exile and migration: A 'refugee' is someone forced to flee his or her country of origin, especially because of persecution for the reasons of race, religion, membership of a particular social group and the like. A 'migrant' is any person living outside of his or her country of origin, but especially a non-skilled worker moving for economic reasons, while an 'immigrant' is a person of any origin, pursuing long-term residence or citizenship in another country. An 'expatriate' is someone staying abroad temporarily or for an undetermined period, especially a white-collar professional ("Migrant, Refugee, Immigrant and Expatriate: What Is the Difference?"). Another significant term is 'diaspora', which fundamentally denotes a group, rather than an individual. Diaspora refers to "migrants or descendants of migrants, whose identity and sense of belonging have been shaped by their migration experience and background." ("Glossary on Migration 2019") A diaspora is hence, a group of people who have been compelled to, or chose to, leave their homeland to settle

in other lands. Diasporic populations usually preserve and celebrate the culture and traditions of their native land. Diaspora may be formed by voluntary migration or by compulsion, as in the case of war, enslavement, civil conflict or natural disaster. Originally, the word 'diaspora' was used to refer to the mass dispersion of a population from its ethnic territories, especially the dispersion of Jews from Israel. Now, the term is generally used to describe those who identify with and can relate to a geographic location, but reside elsewhere as of present. Thus the term diaspora describes "group exile", both voluntary and forced.

The exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the wanderings of Odysseus, the diaspora of the Jews all speak to a fundamental sense of loss, displacement and a desire to regain a paradisiacal sense of unity and wholeness, whether spiritual or secular. For many, though, that loss is from the pain of dispossession into an alternative way of seeing. For Joyce's Stephen Dedalus the "silence, exile and cunning" of his self-imposed expatriation provides the means to express untrammeled his artistic vision. (Ouditt xii)

From the times of Homer, down to that of Salman Rushdie, exile writing occupies a significant position in world literature. These and other exile writers have borne the brunt of oppressive social systems that resulted in their banishment. Exile and displacement are universal themes in literature. The history of exile writing is presumably as old as writing itself. Critic George Steiner considers modern Western culture as largely the work of exiles, emigres and refugees and he calls it "extraterritorial" (xii) - a literature by and about exiles. Salman Rushdie's views on exile support the creative benefits of exile, but include its negative consequences also. In the influential essay "Imaginary Homelands", he claims that the author in exile will always be influenced by the distance to the home country, a distance which will influence his writing no matter whether he/she defines himself/herself as exiled, emigrant or expatriate.

To delve deeper into the nuances of exile, a foray into the etymology and evolution of the term would be a fruitful enterprise. In early Greece and Rome, exile implied banishment of a person who fell out of favour of the ruler, to a land outside the territories of the state. Thus, exile involved a forced uprooting and elimination, as well as, displacement and transplantation onto a foreign land. The exile's ties with the native land were severed in this process and not infrequently, he/she would then encounter an alien culture and an unknown language as Homer, Ovid and Cicero had. The exiled would lose his moorings, his homeland and his group identity. This state of being came to be known as 'exile' and the person also came to be called 'exile'. Thus, the term exile – derived via the Middle English 'exil' from the Latin 'exilium' (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary) – encompasses both a person who has been separated from his or her home territory, as well as the state of separation itself. These two primary meanings of the word 'exile' exist to this day; however, many new layers of meaning have been added to it. However, before proceeding further, it would be worthwhile to see two relevant definitions of exile. Jo-Marie Classen defines the state of exile as the "condition in which the person is no longer living, or able to live, in the land of his birth" (9). Paul Tabori in *The Anatomy of Exile* (1972) defines an exile as "a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion" (27).

Historically speaking, exile was a means of eliminating 'unwanted' and potentially 'dangerous' persons from exerting an influence on the nation-state. This early conception of exile characterized the exiled person as an outcast, who posed a menace to the existing order and upheld potentially subversive ideas. The exile was regarded as disruptive to the well-being and unity of his society and thus had to be done away with, like how a diseased part of the body would be amputated. The ancient Greek society which had no extensive prison system, had only two punishments for major crimes - exile or death. Exile was the worst punishment in medieval Europe, where a person's identity was largely defined by one's role and status in society, and to lose it was akin to a kind of "psychic and social death" (Hoffman 23). Dante, who was banished from Florence, suffered such a tragic condition, and though he lived less than a hundred miles away from his city-state in exile, his dream was of return. Thus, it was customary that, whoever challenged the existing power structure or became a threat to the status quo, was sent into exile. The banishment served the purpose of a punishment. The exile would lose group identity and get displaced from his/her original culture. In *Richard II* in the third

scene of the first act, Shakespeare eloquently expresses the exile's dilemma, as Mowbray laments his banishment: "Turn me from my country's light/To dwell in solemn shades of endless night" (157).

The meaning of the term 'exile' has also changed temporally. The socio-political and cultural phenomena of the last few centuries have clearly altered the idea of exile. The massive re-configuration of political order and national boundaries in the last two centuries have altered the signification of the term 'exile'. Rapid scientific progress coupled with globalisation have changed lives and migratory patterns. War, internal strife and revolutions create thousands of refugees every year. Edward Said believed that the twentieth century was a century of migration and notes that "our age – with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers – is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person [and] mass migration" (174). The shifting terrains, networked cities and receding borders call for a re-analysis of what exile means today. It is in this context of contemporary displacement patterns that exile and exile writing need to be re-examined and studied.

An exploration of twentieth century exiles, leads one to the insight that totalitarianism breeds exile. According to Eva Hoffman:

In our own century [twentieth century], the two great totalitarianisms, Nazi and Soviet, produced the most potent forms of exile, although the Soviet expulsions proved more permanent. The refugees from Nazi Germany, with their bright galaxy of artists and intellectuals—Hannah Arendt, Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and others—were pushed from their country by a vile regime, but once the war was over, they could go back, and some chose to do so. The exiles from Eastern Europe—Vladimir Nabokov, Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, Joseph Brodsky, and others— thought that their banishment was for life, though history reversed it for some of them in the end. (25)

This brings one to the realization that contemporary exile is far different from that of ancient writers such as Homer. Today's world, in many instances, offer possibilities of return - though not for all exile writers, Salman Rushdie or Taslima Nasrin, to reckon a few instances. Given an opportunity, would an exiled writer choose to return or not is the question. While some choose to stay back, some return; while, some others divide their lives between the two worlds. Each exiled writer's underlying reason of exile, nature of exile and choices available in exile – especially, the choice of return - are different. With regard to the nature of exile, an oft-used but problematic concept is that of voluntary and involuntary exiles. Exile could be either involuntary – as a result of force or compulsion - or voluntary, a deliberate decision to stay in another country.

Involuntary exile occurs when the laws of the land compel 'unwanted' citizens to leave and seek asylum elsewhere, often to forestall imprisonment in the home country. Interestingly, though such exile may seem voluntary, it may still be rooted in political, personal or ideological persecution. In that case, the nature of exile – whether strictly voluntary or not – becomes problematic. Be it voluntary or involuntary, the state of exile engenders a host of troubles. "Emigration from a homeland, no matter the cause, results in social changes that can lead to agitation and a disturbance in matters relating to identity and hyphenated existence, as well as psychological distress and cultural depletion" (Hwang 111).

In the present world, the number of voluntary exiles far outnumber that of involuntary exiles. The growing number of voluntary exiles, indicate that exile comes with some benefits so to speak. Had exile been exclusively destructive, there would be no instance of voluntary exile.

However much the process of exile seems voluntary, there must be many reasons in the form of unfavourable conditions in one's homeland that compel a person to go in search of better opportunities. This suggests that no exile is wholly voluntary. Even the mythical Ulysses is driven by a nagging force to explore the unknown territories, a force that compels him to travel abroad. Critics remain divided on the concept of voluntary and involuntary exile. It is evident that water-tight distinctions cannot be made between the two. Martin Tucker

states that "voluntary exit is…. as much a form of exile as an involuntary movement if what follows is a pattern of exilic behaviour, namely a sense of separation, alienation, loss, confusion" (xiv-xv). Thus, one need not worry whether exile is voluntary or not; the exilic experience ought to be the centre of attention. Paul Tabori's definition reflects this perception:

An exile is a person who is compelled to leave his homeland – though the forces that send him on his way may be political, economic, or purely psychological. It does not make an essential difference whether he is expelled by physical force or whether he makes the decision to leave without such an immediate pressure. (37)

Tabori is critical of restrictive definitions of exile based on linguistic, legal, and political criteria – i.e. 'purist' definitions (33) – because what is important, he argues, is whether an exile defines himself as such. Thus, it follows that it is more productive and insightful to study the effects of movement than the nature of exit in the first place.

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