

## MIGRATION LITERATURE: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

Creative or imaginative literature has a power to reflect complex and ambiguous realities that make it a far more plausible representation of human feelings and understandings than many of the branches of scientific researches. In migration, above all topics, the levels of ambivalence, of hybridization and plurality, of shifting identities and transnationalism are perhaps greater than in many other aspects of life. The significant point that this research emphasizes is the fact that writing of biographical circumstances by the migrant writer does not include his work in the category of migration literature. This study attempts to clarify the thematic and structural characteristics of the literature of migration besides showing the ways the migration phenomenon – the displacement of the individual from its own country to a strange one – influence literature and literary productions in a society.

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, we live in a world of constant changes and movements, the immediate result of which is that nothing is stable and borders have become mixed. The outstanding developments in the field of communication technology such as satellite, TV, Internet and the modern means of transportation followed by the globalization of the world economy are all the influential factors in making our age the age of mobility and borderlessness. The traditional settler life-form has given its place to a new nomadic life style and migration has become a familiar trend. Sten P. Moslund (2010) gives a vivid picture of the 21st century through the following passage:

It seems that we are witnessing a massive international and transnational defeat of gravity, an immense uprooting of origin and belonging, an immense displacement of borders, with all the clashes, meetings, [...] reshaping the cultural landscapes of the world's countries and cities (2).

Migration has come to play an increasingly significant role in relation to such basic social foundations such as politics, economics, geography and culture. However, movement and human

restlessness has had a remarkable effect on literature (as a particular cultural production) as well. The appearance of a new kind of writing, called literature of migration is the manifestation of this impact.

The term migrant literature implies that subject matter will be about migration and the culture and tradition of the host nation. However, the fact is that although the description of the migration experience and the difficulties of adaptation play a primary role in this literature, actually, migrant literature can be very diverse, either thematically or structurally.

Postcolonialism and its prominent theorists have contributed to a great extent to migration literature by identifying a framework of features and principles – either thematically or stylistically – for it. The inherent characteristic of this literature, namely its primary focus on the marginal group of every society – here the migrants – brings it under the shadow of the postcolonial theory. Moslund justifies the above association through this statement: "post colonialism is, admittedly, an important element of the overall image of the twentieth century as the age of wandering"(11).

The two prominent features of postcolonialism are Edward Said (1935-2003) and Homi Bhabha (b.1949) who besides others, have made a lot of contributions to shape the migration literature principles. The most significant characteristic of this literature is taken from Bhabha's "hybridity" and emphasizes the fact that the migrant individual is appreciated, in the present world, not by his clinging to his pre-given ethnic morals and cultural traditions, but by "the power of tradition to be re- described through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority" (Bhabha, 2). Thus human identity, the ways migrant characters cope with their new life places, the uncertainties and insecurities they suffer from and the communication problems are regarded as the major themes of migration works. Here, the important matter to note is that the happy memories of the lost home land and the nostalgia the migrant characters experience for their past life are of very less emphasis in the migration literature. The protagonist of the migrant work endlessly recreates itself. Through its encounters with cultural complexities and discriminating experience of being among the minorities, its identity goes beyond the memories of past and reaches a sort of maturity.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Migration, the phenomenon that is defined as "the movement of large numbers of people, birds or animals from one place to another" (Oxford Advanced Dictionary, 7<sup>th</sup> ed.), has a history of hundreds of years. In its modern usage, it refers to the trend of displacement and movement made by individuals

with the hope to find more personal convenience or better their material or social conditions. To Salman Rushdie, "the distinguishing feature of our time is mass migration, mass displacement, globalized finances and industries" (425). Several historical events are behind this mass migration that has picked up speed and volume since the second half of the twentieth century. Among them one may refer to "the second world war, the demise of the British Empire and the subsequent migration from the former colonies to the west" (Moslund, 1). To these reasons, other factors such as "the emergence of totalitarian regimes" and "technological developments" (Frank, 1) can be added. Among the huge amount of the migrants, there have always been intellectuals and artists who had left their land willingly or by force and chosen another spot of this infinite world to live in. Examples can be taken from among Arab, Lebanese or Palestinian poets who desperately left their homelands after their occupation by the colonizers. Edward Said, the Palestinian literary theorist and public intellectual who is a founding figure of the critical field of post colonialism, migrated to America in his youth and is known to world through his powerful storytelling of the characters who are migrant like himself, and for his fundamental role in the struggles of the Palestinian people to regain their cultural identity (Bove', 8).

However, the migration of the intellectuals is not limited to the third world countries and this trend includes the developed countries such as Ireland, Spain, Greece and the old Soviet Union. As a result, such great figures as James Joyce, Milan Kundera, Alexander Nabokov and Joseph Conrad could successfully gain the universal attention by creating memorable masterpieces and even win the Nobel Prize for literature.

That's how a new type of literature has emerged which is called the literature of migration and whose aim is to illustrate various narratives of the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of the migrant's lives in their alien conditions of the host societies.

To speak generally, migration literature would have to include all works "that are produced in a time of migration or that can be said to reflect on migration" (Adelson; Cited in Walkowitz, 533). This means that to be a migrant writer or even describe the character's experience of migration in the work of literature does not necessarily classify the author's work as the literature of migration. A work has to possess some certain characteristics in order to be considered as a migrant piece.

The aim of the present study is to clarify those features that cause a work to be classified as migrant literature. It attempts to emphasize the fact that the expression of nostalgic feelings and homesickness in literary works does not entail the title "migration literature" to those works and the

migrant artist does not merely recall the past with sentimental nostalgia. This can be a crucial point for the researchers who mistakenly believe that every work which is produced by a migrant author can be called a "migrant work".

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Like no other age, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century are characterized by large – scale migration across the world. Bringing about waves of migrants, refugees and exiles, these historical and social events have made the migrant "the protagonist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Frank, 1).

Naturally, the phenomenon of migration has influenced the different aspects of social and cultural life, one of which is literature. For more than two centuries the authors and poets have examined in their stories, novels and poems, what it means to be uprooted, willingly or by force, from one's homeland as well as the problems of adjusting to an entirely new environment. This tradition has a long record in the history of literature and is considered to be one of the influential social and cultural issues of every society.

Taking into account the fact that postcolonial studies, the theory that has become so expansive to cover a number of diverse issues and therefore occupy a prominent position in the contemporary world of literature, deals with "cultural contradictions, ambiguities and perhaps, ambivalences" (Shrikan, 126), literature of migration is considered by the critics to be a branch of it which investigates what happens when two cultures clash.

The significance of postcolonial theory in the cultural studies of our time highlights the necessity for the critics and scholars to study the basic principles and different aspects of the theory of migration literature and criticism with care and precision, in order to keep pace with the universal developments in the literary theories and movements.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF POSTCOLONIALISM**

Theories of colonialism have been hugely influential in the development of postcolonialism, because it deals – in a very general term – with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. The term was originally used by historians after World War II as "post-colonial state", in which the prefix "post" had clearly chronological meaning, indicating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss various cultural effects of colonization.

The term is sometimes spelled with a hyphen, post-colonial, and sometimes without. There is no strict distinction, but generally, the version with hyphen is often used to refer to the condition of life

after the end of colonialism, as is suggested by phrases like "after independence", while the non-hyphenated version refers to the theory that tries to study the cultural and intellectual realities and tension in this period.

As a historical period, postcolonialism stands for the post-second world war decolonizing era. The fact is that although colonialism vanished from political point of view, the cultural values of the colonial period remained and manipulated the lives of the individuals who were celebrating their independence and freedom. According to Bill Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, "the semantic basis of the term 'post-colonialism' might seem to suggest a concern only with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power" (1).

Meenakshi Mukherjee also observes:

Postcolonialism is not merely a chronological label referring to the period after the demise of empires. It is ideologically an emancipator concept particularly for the students of literature outside the western world, because it makes us interrogate many concepts of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us not only to read our own texts in our own terms, but also to re-interpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and geographical location (3-4).

It seems that postcolonial theory has its roots in the frustration of the colonized and the tensions and clashes between their culture and that of the dominant group. It also deals with the oppressed group's fears, hopes and desires for their future and their own identities and by regarding them as individuals worthy enough to be discussed and talked about gives them the authority and political and cultural freedom to gain independence by overcoming political and cultural dominance.

This wide range of applications and the interplay between various aspects of social life is the source of the affinities between postcolonialism and the cultural studies, to the extent that many critics have considered postcolonialism as a branch of the deep-rooted tree of cultural studies. Jonathan Culler in his *Literary Theory* (1997) defines the project of cultural studies as "to understand the functioning of culture, particularly in the modern world: how cultural productions work and how cultural identities are constructed and organized, for individuals and groups, in a world of diverse and intermingled communities, state power, media industries, and multinational corporations" (51).

If we compare the above definition with that of postcolonial studies by various critics who call postcolonialism a theory about "the significance of gender and sexuality; about the complex forms in which subjectivities are experienced and collectivities mobilized; ... and about the ethnographic translation of cultures" (Ania Loomba et al., 13-14), it will be well justified that former can include and encompass the latter.

Although it is publically known that postcolonialism deals with literature produced in countries that once were colonies of other countries, especially of the European colonial powers Britain, France, and Spain, it is a complicated theory with incredibly diverse meanings. Commonly accepted, in literary studies, postcolonialism has come to mean what used to be identified as Third World literature. Here the term is used to describe the conditions of migrant groups within First World states and serves to emphasize "oppositional reading practices, exposing power relations constructing meaning in a given text" (Abrama, 380).

Gradually and through the time, postcolonialism has gone beyond its temporal denotation which regarded the case of study within the confines of history, and even literature (as a substitute for Third World literature) to become a "general" theory about what Ania Loomba et al. (2005) call "the shifting and often interrelated forms of dominance and resistance" (13). In other words, to record the histories of the struggles in colonies, the anti- colonial and nationalistic movements, and the condition of the states after independence, all are not subject matters, specified to the past era of colonialization; writing about the above matters – as is often considered the ultimate goal of postcolonial theory – requires "an awareness of the struggles that define the present as much as of those that characterized by the past" (Loomba, et al., 14).

Thus postcolonialism, in its most recent definition shows a deep concern for the perspective of persons from regions and groups "outside the hegemonic power structure" (Kenzo, 329). That is, its interest is in the oppressed minority groups whose presence is not only crucial to the self-definition of the majority group, but also critical, "placing the subaltern group in a position to subvert the authority of those who have hegemonic power" (ibid). It is no wonder then that postcolonial studies have come to be identified with "subaltern studies". This is how the theory of postcolonialism has moved beyond responding to the merely chronological construction of post-independence, and to the limited discursive experience of colonialism and Imperialism. That's why G. Rai (2005) regards postcolonialism as "an enterprise which seeks emancipation from all types of subjugation defined in terms of gender, race, and class" (2). Thus, the theory does not introduce a new world which is free from the tyranny of

colonialism; it rather suggests both continuity and change.

## **THE BIRTH OF A NEW MOVEMENT: THE FORMATION OF THE MIGRATION BRANCH OF POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE**

Postcolonialism is a way to look at a history from different perspectives. Postcolonial studies, the ideas of which are represented in the writings of Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others provide an alternative approach to understanding the features of a new phenomenon in the present world: Migration.

The theoretical assumptions of postcolonial studies can be applied to the topic of migration because migrants are predominantly positioned at the margins of society and are subject to the hegemonial claims of the majority.

In its traditional usage, migration refers to very specific events – for example, the seasonal migration of birds or the (voluntary or involuntary) geographical uprooting of people. However, etymologically the concept of migration originates from the Latin *migrare*, meaning simply to "wander" or "to move". While it is no doubt true that people have always "migrated" in the broadest sense of the word, from one settlement to another, from village to village, and from town to town, it would be a mistake to assume that migration as it is practiced or experienced today is the same as it has been in the past. The word "migration", nowadays, possesses a wide range of complexities of meaning and covers such significant issues as the economic and social ones. Soren Frank (2008) refers to the modern application of this term in literary studies as "the oscillatory and inconclusive processes that manifest themselves on different levels in the literary work – for example, in relation to personal, national, and cultural identity, language, narrative form, and enunciation" (8).

Whatever may be the geographical location of the migrant writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever entangled among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. Even if a writer intentionally attempts at justifying one end, simultaneously, but unconsciously, there arises a longing for the other. This is the point that the fascination of the literature of migration lies in and that's the point that cultural theorists and literary critics all agree.

As the result of the review over the critics' classifications and various categorizations of the functions of migration in literature, the present research tends to present a list of three general themes that are of relevance to migration literature. Furthermore, to each of these subcategories belong certain criteria or qualities that determine what distinguishes migration literature from other kinds of

literature.

## HYBRIDITY

Thematically, the literature of migration portrays characters who try to cope with migration in different way. This reaction varies from the experience of the uncertainty of the displaced characters as "destructive, agonizing, and painful" to the experience of migration as "productive, fascinating, and appealing", both of which work towards the same end of "rewriting identities in order to evoke their impure and heterogeneous character (Frank: 18-19).

The protagonist of the migrant work endlessly recreates itself through its encounters with cultural complexities and discriminating experience of being a minority, which results in its identity to go beyond the memories of past and reach a sort of maturity or as Frantz Fanon admits to participate in the "creation of a human world – that is a world of reciprocal recognition" (Cited in Bhabha, 8). It should be reminded here that for Fanon, the way to reach this personal maturity and multi-layered recognitions passed through clinging to cultural traditions and lost or repressed – in the case of colonized migrants – histories. This is in contrast with the principles of migrant literature which emphasizes on "un-homeliness". Bhabha declares that sticking in to past histories and cultures would bring about dangers of "fixity and fetishism of identities" (9) and as a result prevents that illuminated experience of recognition for the artist which moves it beyond the borders of this nation (his homeland) or the other (his new home). The migrant writer reflects a "transnational" tradition in his works, which means neither the superiority of national traditions nor the universality of human traditions, but a representation of those in-between spaces that go beyond the existing binaries and makes a bridge "between the home and the world" (Bhabha, 13).

This is how un-homeliness no more suggests a negative connotation, but a condition of "extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (9). This distinguishing feature of contemporary migration literature is cultural "hybridity" which manifests itself in the experience of "cultural in-betweenness, processes of intermixture, fusions or doublings of two or more cultures or two or more systems of significations" (Moslund, 4).

Sten Paultz Moslund (2010) speaks of Roy Sommer's novel labeling of the migration works with the central theme of hybridity. Sommer uses the term "transcultural" literature as equivalent for hybrid work of migration literature and believes that this name can illuminate the cultural up-rootedness of this kind of fiction as opposed the stability of homeland and rootedness in traditional works. Among other characteristics, Sommer sees the transcultural, hybrid literature as involving "visions of the

dissolution of fixed cultural identities and the assertion of cosmopolitan hybridization and ethnic fragmentation" as counter-models to "exclusive national or ethnic identities" (Sommer, 2001; cited in Moslund, 5). He advocates the fluid nature of this fiction because of such inherent features as "in-betweenness", "borderless cosmopolitanism" and "transitory identities" as inseparable parts of the theme. These features – which have their root in Bhabha's concept of hybridity – have now become the basic characteristics to classify a literary work as the literature of migration. These capacities of migrant literature has made it the hero of the present fictions; a new kind of literature that deals with multiple, fluid identities, replacing the old identities of stability and belonging. Due to these qualities, the hybrid migrant hero is supposed to possess – in Moslund's words – an "inclusive vision and sensibility, a double vision that is particularly conducive for the heterogeneous complexity and perspectival uncertainty of novelistic modes of representation" (6).

The migrant writer should not limit himself in the borders of the cultural engagements, because they risk the experience of development and recognition. The implicit consequence of accepting this definition for literature of migration is, in Leslie Adelson's words, the statement that "the literature of migration is not written by migrants alone" (Cited in Walkowitz, 533). Opposingly, a writer can be accounted as a migrant artist in his own homeland, because what distinguishes the migrant writers from the non-migrant is not the geographical borders and places, but the hybrid nature of their works. Carine Mardorossian (2003) proposes that being a migrant writer or even writing about the experience of migration does not guarantee that one will produce migrant literature. This means that even nonimmigrant writers who portray characters crossing the geographical boundaries and cultures, and who demonstrate the formation of a hybrid selfhood from the heart of cultural conflicts, could be producers of immigrant fiction. In this respect, the old notions that a migrant moves between two distinct worlds and the migrant writer brings with himself a completely distinguished unique literary system to the new land is no more applicable in the comprehension of a work of migration. In other words, what has happened to the writer – his biography and past memories – is much less important than the ways that the writer shows mobility, hybridity, transnationalism and in-betweenness in his work.

### **AMBIVALENCE AND ADJUSTMENT**

Ambivalence, as the character's reaction towards any complex, confusing or emotionally charged social phenomenon, is another theme of the migration literature. In this regard, the migrant character's experiences are analyzed in the light of ambivalence as either an enduring emotion, a situational,

specific attitude, or even as a permanent life condition.

The confrontation between the two opposing affections is visible in immigrant's typical life experiences, which are marked by contrasting and sometimes contradictory roles taken by the migrant in the social life. The resolution to these struggles is achieved when the migrant willingly adjusts himself to the new environment, forgetting the either roles and choosing the third space: the hybrid in-betweenness. These are the complexities of the migrants who move between identities, experiencing the exile's desire to retain cultural roots, whilst at the same time, being drawn to the acceptance of and integration to the new culture. A common feature of many of migrant writing, therefore, is ambivalence. By focusing on the theme of ambivalence, the writer chooses to tell the readers that the migration event does not end when the individual leaves the homeland and enters the host society. Yet the event lies at the center of a long-drawn-out web of personal reflections, adjustments and reactions that start within the individual even before the move and which play a central role in his life for many years afterwards. The insights of migration literature provide a commentary on these processes. That's why Paul White in his well-known article "Geography, Literature and Migration" (1995) claims that migration literature foregrounds the complex worlds that we all inhabit. It can provide important insights about the way in which self-identity is enacted and the context which shapes identity formation:

Creative or imaginative literature has a power to reflect complex and ambiguous realities that make it a far more plausible representation of human feelings and understandings than many of the artifacts used by academic researchers (15).

Migrant literature, in White's idea, is of special interest because it makes explicit the way in which our sense of self can be destabilized by such great changes as moving from one country to another. Literature in this genre provides an excellent pattern to reveal the fragmentation of the self and the generating of feelings that can be stirred up by migration. Some of these feelings, to return to the main topic of this section, include ambivalence, alienation, excitement and joy. In other words, "the experience of migration acts as a catalyst and conduit for nascent feelings, a re-conception of our sense of self and our relationships with others" (Jacobs, 2011:142).

However, ambivalence acts as a passage which should be crossed by the migrant character to reach the more secure coast of adjustment, and adjustment is achieved, in most cases, when the character becomes successful in contacting with diverse cultures within a created hybrid space. That's how our discussion of the second dominant thematic aspect of migration work – ambivalent and adjustment – meets the first and most significant them, which is "hybridity", experience of being neither

the one, nor the other.

### ABANDONMENT AND RETURN

A further theme approached only very narrowly by the writers of migrant fiction in their work, concerns the detailed description of the journey from homeland to the new land and the notion of return, which portrays the migrant character's feeling aroused by a visit to the former home. This aspect usually deals with recounting the diverse experiences of the flight of migrants and the terror and humiliation that the refugees (in particular) suffer from when seeking sanctuary. The focus is often on the "pressing flood of emotional upheaval confronted with the decision that takes a moment to make but which has immeasurable consequences" (White, 13).

Reason behind the manifestation of this theme in the migrant literature is the increasingly interconnected world that has made the choice of returning or staying more tangible than in previous periods.

Jacobs (2011) depicts the dilemmas of migration by referring to a novel written by the contemporary novelist Graham Kershaw, entitled, *The Home Crowd* (2002). By choosing a young migrant English man in Australia who desires to return to England to reconnect with his former life, the author could be successful in exploring the emotional responses generated by the act of returning. The central attention of the novelist is on the description of the protagonist's journey back to England only to find that he had left behind far more than he realized. He had a life in Australia but still feels a desire to relive his earlier experiences before migration:

In Fremantle it would be different, I knew; the humid aftermath of summer would be blowing away. Fresh afternoon breezes and maybe showers at last, giving the lawns some respite. "Three days", I kept saying to myself, "I'll be there in three days". But no matter how sweet the thought of sunrise there, and no matter how cold my aching feet, the thought brought no joy; only the creeping sense of time overtaking me, panicking me to... what? What was I rushing back to? (Kershaw, 2002:112; cited in Jacobs, 151).

The above novel and the similar works of migration can be read as meditations on the ties and bonds that arise from intense relationships that are so difficult to break. Adjustment does not complete, and the ambivalence prevails. Unable to attain that in-between space of hybridity, the migrant yearns to return his homeland, to his ties and bonds from which separation has not been possible.

## CONCLUSION

Creative or imaginative literature has a power to reflect complex and ambiguous realities that make it a far more plausible representation of human feelings and understandings than many of the artifacts used by academic researchers. In migration literature above all topics, the levels of ambivalence, of plurality, of shifting identities and interpretations are perhaps greater than many other aspects of life. The relationships between people and their contextual societies and places (homelands) are so intimate that would affect the whole life of migrant after displacement. This causes ambivalence for the migrant unless the struggles reconcile after adjustment process is completed and he reaches a hybrid, heterogeneous character. Migration literature has often been regarded as being an outcome of tensions between the individual's desires and opportunities – as a reflection of past circumstances and of expectations for the future.

However, this is different from biographies or memoirs, which deal merely with the migrant author's memories of the lost past. To be more clearly, the expression of nostalgic feelings and homesickness in literary works does not entail the title "migration literature" to those works. The migrant artist does not merely recall the past with sentimental nostalgia. It should renew the past and recreate the lost identities by a deep perception of an "in between-space", the experience of hybridization.

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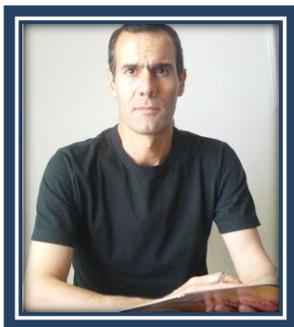
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