Diaspora in the Cyberspace: Assertion of Identity, Virtual Home, and International Politics

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Abstract

Developments in the field of science and technology revolutionized the field of information technology that culminated in the superhighways of internet that enabled not only the fasted transfer of information but also the cyberspace, a virtual world parallel to the physical world. However it is not a neutral space the same power struggles, hierarchies, and hegemonies which are present in the physical world also contaminate the virtual space. This parallel universe though owned by transnational capitalists provides a space and means to register dissenting voices which is central to diaspora narratives along with many other dissenting groups. It provides an opportunity to the otherwise dispersed diaspora groups to meet each other, unite as a comprehensive community, and constitute a virtual nations in the cyberspace. Though it provides a platform to the dissenting voices, it is not neutral and completely benign. According to some scholars it is the strongest tool of neo-colonialism. Despite its negative aspects the cyberspace has emerged as an alternative space alongside physical space and its physical and ideological dimensions are felt across all spheres of life ranging from economic, political, and socio-cultural to innumerable other spheres. To understand this complex relationship between citizens, nation states, indigenous communities, and diaspora in the cyberspace this research paper brings in Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities along with Michael Foucault's idea of knowledge and power and foregrounds the complexities of the diaspora's relationship with it.

Key Words: cyberspace, hegemony, cyber-technologies, virtual imagined communities, ideoscapes, mediascapes, and virtual realities.

Owing to the communications and transportation revolution, today's

international migrants are, more than ever before, a dynamic human link between cultures, economies and societies. Penny-a-minute phone cards keep migrants in close touch with family and friends at home, and just a few seconds are needed for the global financial system to transmit their earnings to remote corners of the developing world, where they buy food, clothing, shelter, pay for education or healthcare, and can relieve debt. The Internet and satellite technology allow a constant exchange of news and information between migrants and their home countries. Affordable airfares permit more frequent trips home, easing the way for a more fluid, back-and-forth pattern of mobility. (Kofi Annan: 7)

Revolution in the field of communication technology has led to the evolution of cyberspace, a universe parallel to the physical world, and a highly contested space. This space is utilized by the marginalized sections especially Diaspora for establishing communities in the virtual space as well as physical space. It helps in developing solidarity and generating material benefits, along with negotiating hybrid identity. High connectivity through cyberspace helps diaspora evolve a new space for communication and simultaneity, both at an international level and local level. Cyber technology enables interaction and sociability across borders and allows them to maintain ties to a distant community.

However the development of cyberspace is not neutral and without hierarchies and hegemonies. To understand the implications of cyberspace it can be likened to the establishment of super-highways of marine navigation in the fifteenth century which turned out to be a decisive moment in the world history as it established European hegemony in the entire world however the same super-highways facilitated the movement of non-Europeans as well, similarly the development of cyberspace established the hegemony of America in the world despite that fact that it facilitate communication for non-American and non-European people as well. This paper looks at how the non-American and non-European people especially diaspora are influenced by the cyber-technologies and how they modify the cyberspace to their advantage.

The cyberspace has emerged as an alternative space alongside physical space and its physical and ideological dimensions are felt across all spheres of life ranging from economic, political, and socio-cultural to innumerable other spheres. To understand the complex relationship between citizens, nation states, indigenous communities, and diaspora in the cyberspace it is necessary to bring in Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities along with Michael Foucault's idea of knowledge and power. The insights provided by these two pre-internet ideas foreground the intricate relationship

between colonialism, nationalism, and citizenry in the cyberspace as well, that has witnessed the emergence of virtual imagined communities. The patterns that exist in the physical space are translated into the cyberspace as well, as M. I. Franklin in his "Digital Dilemmas: Transnational Politics in the Twenty-First Century" foregrounds:

> Virtual imagined communities are where digitally constituted, computer-mediated practices of authority and belonging, from which rights and obligations along with kinship-patterns flow, are forming an additional geography to Andersons initial conceptualization of the nation-state as a territorially bound community has to be "imagined" in particular ways if it is to successfully contain, and then govern what were once disparate or scattered peoples and communities answerable to any number of other authorities on the ground. (74)

Imagination in the virtual dimension just like imagination in the physical dimension plays a very important role in establishing relationships at various levels and are replete with power struggles and hegemonies as Arjun Appadurai in his article "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" foregrounds:

> Nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer. These landscapes thus are the building blocks of what. I would like to call imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe. An important fact of the world we live in today is that many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds (and not just in imagined communities) and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them. (50-51)

Arjun Appadurai in his article "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" further describes different "–scapes" "(a) *ethnoscapes*, (b) *mediascapes*, (c) *technoscapes*, (d) *financescapes*, and (e) *ideoscapes*" (50). These "-scapes" are essential to understanding the global flow of capital, hegemony, and culture. Out of these "-scapes" two "-scapes" "*technoscape*" and "*mediascape*" are very closely associated with the emergence of cyberspace and its role in the contemporary world. The

evolution of "*technoscape*" and "*mediascape*" are more important in understanding the emergence of digital technologies because technology in general and cyberspace in particular has rendered the world fluid however easy to contain as Arjun Appadurai in his article "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" foregrounds, "By *technoscape*, I mean the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries" (50). The further evolution of technology especially in the field of information technology brought out radical changes in the world, this particular development is called "*mediascape*" by Arjun Appadurai while discussing the nature and scope of "*mediascape*" in his article "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" he foregrounds,

> *Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media. These images involve many complicated inflections, depending on their mode (documentary or entertainment), their hardware (electronic or preelectronic), their audiences (local, national, or transnational), and the interests of those who own and control them. What is most important about these *mediascapes* is that they provide (especially in their television, film, and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and *ethnoscapes* to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed. What this means is that many audiences around the world experience the media themselves as a complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens, and billboards. (52)

To the five "-scapes" discussed by Arjun Appadurai one more "-scape" can be added i.e. cyberscape which came into being due to development of a completely new technology known as digital technology. As a result of digital technologies a new and parallel space known as cyberspace has come into being and the people of new millennia live in both spaces simultaneously therefore along with the real physical space the virtual space is also a contested space. M. I. Franklin in his "Digital Dilemmas: Transnational Politics in the Twenty-First Century" foregrounds that different stakeholders claim their share in this space:

> The avatars populating virtual worlds such as Second Life or games

like World of Warcraft, participants of longstanding "postcolonial diasporas" who sustain each other online and on-the-ground, emergent sorts of web-based activism or community-building where (re)embodied participants engaging with each other along axes of ethnicity, subculture experience, political projects, or shared interests are cases in point that require closer and more analytically attuned attention. (79)

Therefore since the dawn of twentieth century cyberspace has emerged as the predominant global space governed by national, transnational and supra-territorial organizations. It is national, international, and transnational at the same time. On the one hand it is comprised of multiple, territorially defined cyberspaces which is ruled both along the lines of traditional nation-state boundaries and by transnational non-state actors. M. I. Franklin while deliberating on the significance of cyberspace in shaping the realities in his "Digital Dilemmas: Transnational Politics in the Twenty-First Century" foregrounds that, "emergent post-human, post-national, and supraterritorial "virtual realities" have been reshaping the very notion of national sovereignty, authority, statecraft, personhood, and community for some time" (20). Despite the fact that the local actors play an important role in shaping various dimensions of cyberspace, it is controlled by very big multinational corporations. However despite the dominant role played by the big players the communities of people well versed in digital technologies play an important role in constructing this virtual world. Diaspora play an important in shaping and modifying the cyberspace and hence asserting non-European voices in this space.

There are many similarities between diaspora and cyberspace because for both of them space, no-space, and dislocation are important as Victoria Bernal in her research paper "Eritrea on-line: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and the Public Sphere" foregrounds:

> Cyberspace and diaspora are interesting to think about together for several reasons. One conceptual link between diaspora and cyberspace is that of "displacement." Cyberspace involves displacement in that cyberspace is no place or any place; it is an imaginatively constructed space. This is so even though computers and servers are situated in specific locations. People in diaspora have experienced displacement; they cannot fully understand themselves by reference to their present location and context. They feel out of place, and to make sense of who they are, they must construct a social context for themselves that transcends

their location. (661)

This particular dimension of diaspora in cyberspace helps in understanding diaspora in digital spaces and digital technology in the hands of diaspora. Victoria Bernal while this discussing this aspect in her research paper "Eritrea on-line: Diaspora, cyberspace, and the public sphere" foregrounds that, "as a self-conscious diaspora, they see themselves as members of a dispersed community that, in effect, has no location. In both cyberspace and the spaces of diaspora, then, location is ambiguous, and to be made socially meaningful, it must be actively constructed." (661)

The diaspora make diverse use of digital technologies and cyberspace ranging from familial communication to political projects. The diaspora once trained in digital technologies they take up political projects not only in the host country but also in their native country when they start creating digital databases, interactive multimedia projects, and cultural mappings to represent, circulate, and at times, exclude various cultural motifs, norms, values, and folklore belonging to their own communities. The major problem for diaspora and indigenous communities is that on the one hand digital technologies enable them to share, communicate, and hence catalyze identity formation on the other hand as the digital platforms are directly under the control of transnational capitalist forces which happen to be part of formerly colonizing world therefore the danger of neo-colonialism is imminent as Harald Prins in his "Visual Media and the Primitivism Perplex: Colonial Fantasies, Indigenous Imagination, and Advocacy in North America" foregrounds digital colonization:

> Clearly, the Internet provides indigenous peoples powerful new means of self-representation, but as its use expands and intensifies, so does the "overseeing gaze" of encapsulating polities and transnational corporations. This given, the current relief form from visual imperialism afforded to indigenous peoples by the web may be phantasmagoric and the "visual performative" alone will not overturn their subaltern positions in the political arena. (71-72)

In a way cyberspace like the physical space is a contested space with diverse uses. On the one hand it is a space wherein the fight against injustices of various kinds can be initiated on the other hand it is accomplish with the post-Fordist capitalism.

As mentioned above there are many similarities between cyberspace and diaspora especially with regard to location/dislocation in space therefore cyberspace is not less important than the physical space when it comes to search for home and assertion of identity by the diaspora. It is so because for Diaspora home is not just a concrete geographical place rather it exists in the

realm of memory and nostalgia. Cyberspace just like the psychological space is a virtual space and attracts the Diaspora instantly due to this likeness. Further, it facilitates the formation of contact zones that lead to the emergence of cyborg Diasporas or digital Diasporas. Radhika Gajjala describes the nature and scope of digital Diaspora as:

> Digital diasporas occur at the intersection of local-global, national-international, private-public, off-line–online, and embodied-disembodied. In digital diasporas, a multiplicity of representations, mass-media broadcasts, textual and visual performances, and interpersonal interactions occurs. The material and discursive shaping of community through such digital encounters indicates nuanced and layered continuities, discontinuities, conjunctures, and disjunctures between colonial pasts and a supposed postcolonial present. (Gajjala: 211)

She further delineates on the location of Indian Diaspora in the cyber space in the following terms:

> "Indian" digital diasporas occur within racially, geographically, culturally, ecologically, and socioeconomically marked configurations of the local, which in turn exists within a power structure that conflates a certain specific sociocultural, urbanized way of living as "global." As various transnational subjects travel through cyberspace—that is, through mouse clicks and keyboard taps, multitasking between various online and off-line activities, conversations, and "windows"—they negotiate an online existence within such technological environments in different ways. (Gajjala: 211-212)

The emergence of digital diasporic spaces leads to the creation of not only social and digital spaces of cultural representation but also contact zones of "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Louise, 1992: 4). Mary Louise Pratt associates these spaces with phenomenon starting from colonialism to the present time when she calls these contact zones,

> the space[s] of colonial encounters, the space[s] in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (Louise, 1992: 6)

Technology has always been a vital tool for connecting people among themselves and with their homelands and internet is the latest invention for connecting and empowering people as Victoria Bernal says, "Many

discussions of cyberspace focus on the empowering potential of computerized access to information" (Bernal: 661). In the same way, Nicholas Negroponte celebrates it as "the instantaneous and inexpensive transfer of electronic data that move at the speed of light [through which] information can become universally accessible" (4).

World Bank report also highlights the equalizing power of the cyber technologies for the subaltern and more so for the Diaspora because it can "put unequal beings on an equal footing and that makes it the most potent democratizing tool ever devised" (Wheeler 2001:187). The cyber technologies not only democratizes the space but also creates an interphase between the real space and the virtual space as Wilbur points out, "Many computer users seem to experience the movement 'into' cyberspace as an unshackling from real-life constraints" (Wilbur 2000:48).

Diaspora are situated in peculiar socio-political and geographical locations they experience displacement across time and space therefore, they cannot completely understand themselves by reference to their present location and milieu. It is their predicament to feel out of place, and therefore they strive to make sense of their socio-cultural and political loaction. In their bid to understand their cultural location, they construct a social context for themselves that transcends their physical location. This particular predicament of location, dislocation, and relocation in space they share with the virtual world of cyberspace, which is an appropriate analogy to diaspora because it is no place or any place; it is an imaginatively constructed space though just like diaspora people computers and servers are situated in specific locations. Therefore, location is ambiguous for both cyberspace and the spaces of diaspora, which has to be actively constructed and made socially meaningful.

Cyberspace and diaspora forms of social belonging emerge out of the dual processes of technological advances in communications and the movement of populations across of geographical and political borders. On the one hand, Diaspora and dispersal involve networked forms of community, and relations on the other hand Internet involve connections among dispersed users. Therefore, Diasporas and the Internet are homologous to each other because both reflect the shifting social establishments of postmodernity. Pippa Norris highlights the empowering nature of cyber technology:

> The more utopian visions of the Internet suggest a future society in which virtually unlimited quantities of information become available, civic society flourishes, government decision making becomes more open and transparent, and nation-state borders are eroded as people build virtual communities for work, learning, and leisure, spanning traditional boundaries of time and place. (Pippa, 2001: 232)

In Bendict Anderson's words, nations are imagined communities, and then one should not see the imaginings of diaspora simply as a feature of diaspora, reflecting the nostalgia of people far from home. Therefore, the homeland may have created the diaspora, but the diaspora is also "something that creates homeland" (Axel 2002:426), and tries to develop a connection with the homeland as Gabriel Sheffer says, "Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands" (Sheffer, 1986, 3). Robin Cohen gives a list of features that makes any community 'Diaspora':

1. Dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions;
2. alternatively, the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambitions;
3. a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements;
4. an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity, even to its creation;
5. the development of a return movement that gains collective approbation;
6. a strong ethnic group conciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate;
7. a troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance at the least or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group;
8. a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and
9. the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism (Cohen, 1997: 26).

Diaspora of all types makes use of internet to confirm and assert their identity because it helps them connect their culture back home even while living abroad they feel a living bond with their homeland. Due to developments in the transport and communication technology information and people, cross international borders at great speeds and in numbers unimagined previously and the virtual space of internet makes the geographical and political borders disappear and bring people from far-off places and from divers political units together on the same platform, which is not possible in the physical space. Diasporas have always played an important role in the

international affairs and the telecommunication advancements make them even more relevant to international affairs. However, some thinkers have a different view and hint at another dimension of relationship between Diaspora and cyber technology for instance Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff says,

> Some see the accelerated movement of people and information as cause for alarm, particularly after September 11, 2001. Globalization has enhanced economic and political interdependence and, at the same time, has afforded opportunities for some countries and communities to advance while leaving others behind. The resulting marginalization exacerbates the potential for conflict, nationally and internationally, on economic, political, and/or social grounds. The first decade of the new millennium was fraught with conflict. Already in the 1990s, ethnic conflicts became much more numerous and severe in several cases spilling over into neighboring countries and international policy deliberations. Social tension leading to conflict inside nation-states is not new, though the consequences and potential for conflict escalation through external intervention have increased through globalization. (4)

Scholars like Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff feel that use of cyberspace by Diaspora can unite them in the form of a powerful international group that may threaten global security. The use of cyber technology can transform them "From Victims to Challengers" (Cohen 1996, 507). Source of this transformation lies in the power of internet to penetrate the political borders of nation states that poses a threat to the sovereignty of nations as John D. Montgomery and Nathan Glazer say, Information Technology has "exposed the porosity of geographic and political borders and the limited extent of any national jurisdiction" (Montgomery 2002, 26).

Therefore the most important dimension of digital diaspora is to restrict advances of digital colonialism therefore they should understand that what Roopika Risam in her book *Postcolonial digital humanities in theory, praxis, and pedagogy* foregrounds when she says,

> Thus, postcolonial digital humanities is not only a theoretical or analytical approach to the digital cultural record. Rather, it requires praxis at the intersection of digital technologies and humanistic inquiry: designing new workflows and building new archives, tools, databases, and other digital objects that actively resist reinscriptions of colonialism and neocolonialism. Consequently, postcolonial digital humanities explores how we might remake the worlds instantiated in the digital cultural record through politically, ethically, and social justice-minded approaches to I digital knowledge production. (4)

To conclude it can be said that digital diasporas are comparatively recent Development, growing in tandem with the evolution of digital technology. Previously Diaspora could only participate in physical diaspora communities, however with the advent of digital technology individuals within and across such communities can generate supplementary, online communities, and can assert identity.

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