Diasporic Identities

Inscriptions of Celebration and Psychic Trauma in Western Locations

Diaspora is a slippery term. It is used to describe the experience of immigrants who have been forced to leave their homeland. It is also used more generally to describe the condition of being an immigrant: the act of negotiating old and new identities, in a practical sense and psychologically. As Crane and Radhika Mohanram contend, diaspora is the “oscillation between the strange and the familiar.”¹ It must be acknowledged, however, that diaspora is “historically laden.”² Its meaning changes according to the culture and period to which it is applied and also in relation to the gender of the diasporic person.³ The diasporic experience can also vary in accordance with the social standing of the subject; the diaspora of a wealthy professional is markedly different from that of a refugee who has little social mobility. The experience of diaspora is also affected by personality traits. Some people embrace the diasporic condition and make a success of it, whereas others fail. This chapter will consider the representation of the Sri Lankan diasporic experience in three novels: A Change of Skies (1991) by

¹ Ralph J. Crane & Radhika Mohanram, “Introduction: Constructing the Diasporic Body,” in Shifting Continents/Colliding Cultures: Diaspora Writing of the Indian Subcontinent, ed. Crane & Mohanram (Cross/Cultures 42; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 2000): x. This description of diaspora is intriguingly similar to literary definitions of the ‘uncanny’ in literature: which “is often associated with an experience of the threshold, liminality, margins, borders, [and] frontiers […] as something not only weird or mysterious, but also as strangely familiar.” Nicholas Royle, The Uncanny (New York: Routledge, 2003): vii.
³ “Introduction: Constructing the Diasporic Body,” xii.
Yasmine Gooneratne; *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) by Chandani Lokugé; and *Love Marriage* (2008) by V.V. Ganeshananthan. Each renders the diasporic condition as a challenging state of being involving the problematic of ‘double-consciousness’, dual and/or multiple states of cultural awareness, and cultural liminality or in-betweenness.

*If the Moon Smiled* by Chandani Lokugé and *A Change of Skies* are both set in Australia, though their representations of diaspora are very different. Gooneratne’s novel *A Change of Skies* involves a comic celebration of a migrant experience that demonstrates assimilation and accommodation to and with the Australian culture by its migrant characters. It uses parody to send up racial stereotypes of both ‘white’ and ‘oriental’ Australians, while evaluating the pros and cons of diasporic consciousness and multicultural identities. In contrast, Lokugé’s novel *If the Moon Smiled* depicts diasporic tragedy; the protagonist cannot cope with the condition of cultural displacement. This novel offers a vision of trauma, despair, and mental illness. It explores the psychological devastation that can manifest when people cannot let go of their imaginary homeland – the vision of what was and what could have been. Ganeshananthan’s novel *Love Marriage* has similarities in this respect, though its setting ranges between Sri Lanka, the USA, and Canada. Its protagonist is an American of Sri Lankan parentage, a young woman who battles with a socio-political double-consciousness that is influenced by her politically divided Sri Lankan Tamil heritage. Ganeshananthan, like Lokugé, tropes the ‘double’ as a means to express the split and/or fractured consciousness of her protagonist. The following discussion will explore the ways in which these novels represent the Sri Lankan diasporic identity. It will compare the authors’ respective use of comedy and tragedy as strategies to explore this subject. It will also consider the way in which diaspora constructs, distorts, and changes the identity of the characters in each novel, the way in which their diasporic condition is negotiated in Australian and Canadian cities, as well as the difference between representations of masculine and feminine diasporas.

**The Mimic in Diaspora**

The experience of diasporics in Western nations generally involves assimilation and accommodation, which can resemble the phenomenon of colonial mimicry as discussed in the first chapter of this book in relation to the theories of Fanon and Bhabha. Indeed, the stereotype of the new immigrant is often strikingly similar to the stereotype of the colonial mimic man as defined by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), as a culturally displaced person