

**TRANSNATIONALISM AND HYPHENATED IDENTITIES: A Study of
Benyamin's *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* and *Nishabda Sancharangal***

Anand.R¹

Abstract

This research paper tries to explore and analyse the social, cultural and psychological impacts of migration through the study of Benyamin's novels- *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* and *Nishabda Sancharangal*. Migration brings about a change in the social, cultural and psychological circumstances, which often makes people feel alienated in their lives. They experience a sense of disillusionment and loss of past identity, which gradually leads them to psychological trauma. Diasporic life is characterised by features like nostalgic dislocation from the homeland, repeated memories, estrangement, the notion of imaginary homeland, alienation and identity crisis in a multicultural society and so on. These novels deal with characters who are said to be hailing from various nations and who come in contact with each other to form a multicultural world, representing the modern globalized society. Diasporic identity is hyphenated; hybrid and collective for diasporic people are in an in-between state. Almost every immigrant experiences multiple losses, primarily, the loss of loved ones and motherland and secondarily, the loss of self-respect and identity. For the actualization of life in a strange world, one is compelled to uproot and reroot oneself. This paper aims to analyse the identity crisis of the major characters of the novels on the basis of their transformation in social, cultural and psychological states.

Keywords: migration, hyphenated identity, existential crisis, alienation, loss

It can be argued that migration and nomadic life have increasingly been taking the place of the traditional settler life in the 21st century. The developments in technology along with globalization erased the borders and brought together people from different corners of the world. We are living in an age of mobility and migration where people are constantly moving in search of better opportunities and living conditions. Benyamin's novels *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* and *Nishabda*

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University,
Mob. 7012921556, Email: anandkamballur@gmail.com

Sancharangal demystify the glamour that people associate with immigrating to another nation by showing the difficulties and complexities in mutual acceptance of one another, among the people of different nationalities surviving in multicultural societies.

The tension between assimilation and acculturation to mainstream culture, versus maintaining some kind of racial or cultural integrity brought over from the old land is a significant feature of the migrant identity. Sten P. Moslund in his work *Migration Literature and Identity* says that, “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). This constant movement and borderlessness of human societies have a significant impact on cultural productions which give rise to migrant literature. While *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* focuses on the struggles of a migrated Pakistani family, *Nishabda Sancharangal* explores the migration of Malayali nurses. The terrible dilemma and tormenting feelings of divided identity, suppressed emotions and displacement of migrant characters in these novels lead them to a state of alienation from their family, society and the world.

In *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal*, Sameera Parvin’s father, uncle and many other family members are living as expatriates in an unnamed Arab country. They have come there in search of better employment opportunities and living conditions. For the most part of their lives, Sameera’s family thought of their migration to the Arab country as the best decision they took in their lives for it made them financially secure. Sameera was a girl grown up in a very unorthodox family back in Islamabad. Therefore, the decision to move in to the Arab nation helped her to chase her dreams and get a job as a radio jockey. She was also able to take decisions on her own and use her liberties there which wouldn’t have been happening if she was in her home town. Besides, Sameera could join a music club named “string walkers” and pursue her passion for music. She became financially and intellectually independent after migrating to the Gulf.

In *Nishabda Sancharangal*, the plot focuses on the life of Mariyamma who lived as a migrant nurse in Singapore, Borneo Island and Tanzania. As with Sameera, Mariyamma also becomes financially and intellectually independent after leaving her home to pursue nursing in Singapore. Mariyamma was the first woman to travel abroad from her village. Consequently, she had to tackle the discouragements from different corners of the society. After completing her nursing course, Mariyamma decides to go abroad to bail out her family from economic crisis.

Although she had to work in extreme inhospitable conditions amid the World War, Mariyamma clung onto her job and took her family to financial security. Money sent by Mariyamma became the sole reason for the sudden upliftment and prosperity achieved by her family in Kerala.

Both the novels showcase a multicultural world where people from different ethnicities come in contact with each other. Migrant people who break the barriers and boundaries and move on for personal progress have been termed by Fanon as “individuals without an anchor without horizon colorless, stateless and rootless—a race of angels” (Fanon, 176). Two female protagonists of the novels- Sameera and Mariyamma strive for success in foreign lands even though the loss of much needed anchors in the form of familiar place, landscape, food, language and customs etc. causes pain and leads to both physical and psychological estrangement for them.

Alienation and Identity Crisis

Sameera's pleasures of an independent life in abroad start to wane after the beginning of the agitation and bloodshed as part of the Jasmine Revolution in Gulf countries. All the little miniature worlds that she was a part of like the music group or the team of fellow travelers in the bus, start to break up. The collective groups became increasingly split by factions. The country gets divided into two categories: those who support the revolutionists and those who support the government. Sameera, just like other people who try to find a middle ground in this binary, is forced to pick a side in the tension. Sameera has sympathy for the injustice faced by her friend Ali and other Shiya members, while also having strong reservations against the atrocities and violence committed by them. Sameera is forced to choose among the binary identities created by the distinct political scenario in her country. One can see Sameera's diasporic experiences altering the cartography of her own self (Nandy, 52). Even though Sameera has no intention to take a side in the internal conflicts, Sameera's identity as an expatriate Sunni Muslim makes her a target for the Shiya extremists. While expatriates like Sameera, therefore, try to take an unbiased stand in the revolution, the government sees them as loyal and fearful and forces them to lend their support in the war publicly.

In *Nishabda Sancharangal*, Mariyamma is caught between her loyalty to the British who is her employer and the demands of the followers of the Indian National Army to join Japan who is going to attack the British in Singapore. Mariyamma says in one of her letters, “There is a group called Indian Independence League here who are more annoying than the Pentecostals. A man named Rash Bihari Bose or something is their leader. They try to make the Indian soldiers and others fight for

Japan against the British”¹ (62-63). Since she declines the demands to join INA, she becomes a potential enemy for Japan army. She is distraught to see no interventions from the British army against the Singapore occupation of Japan. She felt that her identity as a nurse irrespective of her nationality and political affiliations would make for an excuse for the Japan-INA army to spare her. When she was taken away as a captive, she feels betrayed by both Britain and the INA.

After her migration to Tanzania, she gets a job in a British hospital where she hopes to work for the poor only to know later that only British officials are admitted there. Mariyamma says, “I thought that this hospital is available for all people. After coming here, I realized that this is accessible only for the European officials. Even Asian people like us are not admitted here, not to mention Africans... Only the white is allowed here, leaving no room for the black and the brown” (220). After resigning from the hospital, she joins to a new hospital in a rural area and becomes a life savior for the poor and deprived people of the village. It is interesting to see that Mariyamma’s family didn’t ever give her the love and respect she deserved for the sacrifices she did for her family. Instead, they tried to conceal Mariyamma’s presence and contributions in fear of societal prosecution. She became just another woman who went abroad and returned in the form of different stories devised by local people to shame them. After their lives, they became only a forgotten story the family members are ashamed of. In this way, Mariyamma was alienated both in her host country and back in her home place.

Sameera’s father too, had to face alienation from both his host land and his family. Being an expatriate working in the police force, he becomes an enemy in the eyes of Shiya supporters who see the migrants as the prime reason for the mistreatment meted out to them. He is not a great friend to his family either as his wife and daughters do not feel any emotional attachment with him. When he comes home, his wife and daughters ridicule and estrange him. Sameera says, “We isolated that man who arrived once in a while like a guest and instantly tried to act as a custodian. We teased him. We baited him with our words. We laughed at his clothes and his poor English” (*Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal*, 535).

Sameera becomes an enemy in the eyes of the government when she shows sympathy to her father’s murderer who was once her best friend as well. Her identity and loyalty are questioned by the government who wants her to be obedient to its commands. She is at a loss in terms of her identity as she is caught up in the binaries of father/friend and government/revolution. She neither wants to support the atrocities done by the revolutionaries nor wants to back the injustices done by the government that create ‘second class citizens.’ In a similar vein, although she hates

Ali for killing his father and the violence his agenda has caused, she also tries to understand the miserable life experiences that led Ali to violence. She suffers more agony when the Government forces her to choose their side if she wants to stay in the country.

In Singapore, Mariyamma stays loyal to the British people during their war against Japan, overcoming the severe pressure from fellow Indians to join INA and help Japan. Yet, British army never comes to rescue her when her life was threatened. Similarly, Manu finds himself tangled in conflicting interests like his desire to find the grave of Mariyamma ammachi, and the urge to go back to his family. The sudden pandemic outbreak pushes him to psychological trauma when it prevents his return to home and leaves him in isolation for multiple weeks. Manu has to undergo quarantine in a friend's flat in a foreign country, thinking about his failure to achieve the goal of his trip. While Manu in *Nishabda Sancharangal* had to endure a covid induced quarantine in a foreign country, Sameera in *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* was forced to stay in isolation in a foreign country by its government.

Nostalgic Dislocation from the Homeland

Memory and nostalgia are some of the essential components of diasporic life. The memories of the past life, homeland and their loved ones keep people motivated to strive in an alien land. In the words of Avtar Brah:

“Where is home? On the one hand, home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations” (192).

Memories of her mother and sisters in Islamabad keep coming to Sameera frequently. She also remembers how inappropriately had she understood the character of her father back in home. She recounts how cruelly she and her mother behaved to him when he came home on vacation. She joined her mother to estrange her father as she didn't have much affection for him at that time. She could not know how much she was loved and cared by her father back in her childhood days. After coming to Pakistan, the affection and support showed by her father took her by surprise. Likewise, Ali's memories of the oppression and mistreatment suffered by

his community in Iran keep him motivated to rebel against the biased governmental institutions. The traumatic memories of losing his father make him vengeful and his mother speechless.

In *Nishabda Sancharangal*, Mariyamma keeps her connection with her family back home through letters. She also writes letters to her lover John frequently who helped her to reach Singapore. In these letters she narrates how fondly she remembers the days she spent with her family and John. It is through these letters that Manu traces the life and struggles of Mariyamma as they are the only documents available about her life.

Many a time, migrants find their new place and life very different than what they earlier dreamt of. Most of the migrant characters in these novels go through a similar situation. Sameera never saw the violence and bloodshed coming, when she boarded her flight from Pakistan. She came to the Gulf, hoping to find a new life without the restrictions imposed by religious fanaticism and orthodox upbringing. She was indeed on cloud nine when she could go to the music group at night and share her passion for music with people belonging to different culture. As days went on, she started smelling the growing unrest among different sections in the society. She was horrified to see all societal structures and systems breaking apart in front of her eyes. Sameera had to end up in home imprisonment after deciding to stand firmly on her convictions against the demands of the government. Other members in the Thaya Ghar fled back to their homeland after the horrible experiences they had.

Mariyamma too, had high hopes of a new life when she migrated to Singapore. But she ended up as a hostage in the hands of Japan army in Borneo Island. She was lucky to escape from a number of circumstances where she met death face to face. Despite all the struggles, she had the willpower to continue to do her job, helping the injured soldiers and her family back home alike. Manu's mother too, didn't end up enjoying a life that she wished for in the Arab country. She had to come back to India with her family when she found herself under the suspicion of police in the host land. "It was really an abscondment or an escape. Even now, my legs shiver when I remember it", says her while narrating her return to the native land to Manu (*Nishabda Sancharangal*, 124). Manu's friend and young nurse Maria's dreams get shattered when she catches Covid after her migration to Gabon.

Loss and Estrangement

Both novels are essentially studies of losses- loss of culture, loss of identity, loss of relations, loss of rationality, loss of peace and harmony, loss of loved ones, loss of faith in each other, loss of emotional connections etc. In *Mullappoo*

Niramulla Pakalukal, Sameera had to suffer the loss of her beloved father during the insurgence. Sameera was just beginning to know her father more when she lost him to religious extremism. Sameera loses her job and her friends when she had to stay back in her home during the riots. Moreover, she loses the companionship of Ali who was her best friend during her life prior to the protests. After that, Sameera becomes increasingly estranged in her family and society, losing all her peace and happiness. Towards the end of the novel, Sameera loses all her connections to the outer world as she was kept under house arrest.

In the other work, Mariyamma loses her lover John, as she decides to take her time to settle in her new job to provide for her family back at home. Finally, she loses her life to the same disease from which she saved many a villager in Africa. Salman Rushdie writes:

“All migrants leave their pasts behind; although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes- but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognize them, because it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked amidst the scorn of strangers...” (83).

It can also be said that Mariyamma lost her place in the hearts of her relatives before Manu intervenes. Losing her past history and identity was the price paid by her for choosing to live abroad. In an interview given to First post, Benjamin says about migrant labourers: “The only living history of their pain, loneliness and agony is the letters they have written home, not much else is left or recorded. We only learn of the brighter side of that story. There is a dark side to it that remains unrevealed” (Sharma). Mariyamma’s letters were kept concealed by her family, making her an obscure presence in the family for the future generations. Loss is considered as an inevitable part of migration and almost every immigrant experience multiple loss, primarily, the loss of loved ones and motherland and secondarily, the loss of self-respect and identity.

Conclusion

Diasporic life is characterised by features like nostalgic dislocation from the homeland, recurring memories, estrangement, the contrast between diasporic dreams and realities, the notion of imaginary homeland, alienation, identity crisis in a multicultural world and so on. In both the novels, we see many migrant characters undergoing these experiences. While *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* talks about the life of migrants during the jasmine revolution in the Gulf countries, *Nishabda*

Sancharangal focus on the life of migrant nurses. Migration brings about a change in the social, cultural and psychological circumstances, which often makes the people feel alienated in their lives. Both the novels are set during the time of wars and internal conflicts. Migrant characters in both the novels are disappointed at having to come to a place which is chaotic and violent. They try to assimilate and adapt to the new culture and circumstances that turn up before them. They come in contact with people from different countries and try to forge healthy relationships with them. Sameera's friendship with Ali, the string walkers, Mariyamma's relationship with Choy sister etc. are examples of migrants trying to form intercultural bonding to assimilate with the global society they are finding themselves with in the host country. However, as things go out of proportions as part of the revolution and the British- Japanese war respectively in *Mullappoo Niramulla Pakalukal* and *Nishabda Sancharangal*, they lose the grip on their lives and go completely estranged in their host nations. They experience a sense of disillusionment and loss of past identity, which gradually leads them to psychological trauma and existential crisis. Benyamin, through these novels, sheds light into the miserable existence of the transnational communities who get caught in the tangle of their hyphenated identities.

Endnotes

¹All translations are done by the researcher

Works Cited

- Fanon, Frantz, et al. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2004.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. Vintage, 1995.
- Benyamin. *Mullappooniramulla Pakalukal & Al-Arabian Novel Factory*. DC Books, January 2020.
- *Nishabda Sancharangal*. DC Books, November 2020.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
- Nandy, Ashish. *An Ambiguous Journey to the City*. Oxford UP, 2001.
- Moslund, S. P. *Migration Literature and Hybridity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Sharma, Manik. "Benyamin on Writing About Migrant Workers, and His Belief in Kerala's Return to Progressive Politics". *Firstpost*. 26 Jan. 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/living/benyamin-on-writing-about-migrant-workers-and-his-belief-in-keralas-return-to-progressive-politics-5942991.html>