Diaspora in William Shakespeare’s HAMLET
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Abstract: The Emergence of the study of Diaspora is fairly recent. The world today is being progressed by leaps and bounds. In the current scenario Diaspora has become a blanket term absorbing a variety of experiences of alienation, political compulsions, ambition and material pursuits. The term ‘diaspora’, from the Greek, meaning dispersal, distribution, or spreading has been applied for many years to the world wide scattering of the Jews. In the current trend every literary text has become a political. Diaspora is playing a vital role in the literariness of a text. William Shakespeare was born of middle-class parents at Stratford-on Avon, a provincial market town of some importance, at an uncertain date between April 24, 1563, and April 23, 1564. Diaspora was prevalent in the Shakesperean play too. This paper tends to show the diasporic consciousness in the play Hamlet.

Keywords: Diaspora, Political compulsions, ambition, William Shakespeare, Hamlet

“Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world”.

-Martin Heidegger

The Emergence of the study of Diasporic studies is fairly recent. Diaspora today has become a blanket term absorbing a variety of experiences of alienation, political compulsions, ambition and material pursuits. The ‘expatriate’ has assumed importance in the modern times. The expatriate may dwell on the ‘ex’ status of the past, but in recent writers the expatriate sensibility instead of being a destabilising force is increasingly a valorising experience. Their writing no longer entails a forced interaction with colonial hegemony nor do they regard themselves as uprooted in search of an imagined homeland nor are they mired in nostalgic memories of a lost past. Diaspora was prevalent in the ancient days too but it was not well known to the world. The advent of Globalisation has paved way to the diasporic studies. Diaspora was prevalent in the Tamil Sangam Literature too. This paper discusses how Shakespeare has employed Diaspora in his work Hamlet.

William Shakespeare is unquestionably the greatest of dramatists in any language, ancient or modern. His plays as human documents and as works of art are unparalleled and were are performed throughout the world more frequently than those of any other playwright. Thirty seven plays comprise the Shakespeare canon. His English chronicle plays will continue to live for their power of characterisation. The Portrait Gallery of Shakespearean Characters is the most impressive one. Shakespeare never wrote plays to present a case or plead a cause: so he has not projected in his plays any ‘type’ characters who can usually be taken for granted. Shakespeare’s great tragic heroes are of magnificent stature and nobility; they are intensely human too. The character of Hamlet has been the most puzzling problem of the play of Shakespearean critics. He has been variously described as one whose genius renders him superior to decision and incapable of action; his antic disposition has been analysed as a symptom of abnormality and a device for seeming mad; Hamlet has been called the best of men and the worst of men.

Today in Commonwealth literature, the phrase ‘the diasporic or expatriate sensibility’ is considered to be a legitimate literary term. Diaspora is a complex state of mind and emotion, which includes a wistful longing for the past. The diasporic writer undergoes the pain of homelessness. He/she struggles to maintain the difference between oneself and the new environment. He/she has to meet with unfriendly surroundings in the new country. He feels alienated and rootless because of the cultural dilemmas and the experienced hostility in the country which they live. Faced with rejection the new comer clings to his ethnic identity. The tremendous difference between two ways of life leads a person to feeling of depression and frustration. This can be called cultural shock. When a person leaves his own culture, and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new others he finds. To understand the expatriate sensibility it is necessary to understand the psychology of the artists too. Diasporic Sensibility is found in Hamlet too. It is evident through Hamlet when he talks with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Guildenstern. Prison, my lord!
Hamlet. Denmark’s a prison.

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Hamlet remarks that Denmark is a prison to him. Hamlet could not digest the sinful things which had happened in Denmark. The gruesome death of his father and the villainy of Claudius and his mother’s adultery. These things can be viewed as a cultural shock to Hamlet in terms of Diasporic Consciousness. Hamlet being a philosophy student he felt that he would have been happier in Germany itself. Hamlet who portrays the archetype of modern man betrays his subjectivism here. He too is infected with the ills that he deplores to set them right without disaster or delay. Shakespeare presents Denmark as the Microcosm of a general corruption; this was a world more essentially flawed than any he had depicted in his plays hitherto. Hamlet can be categorised into Homeland Diaspora. To put it in the words of Salman Rushdie for hamlet “ Both Home and Homeland has become a Ghost. 

According to Salman Rushdie “ Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times ,that we fall between two stools”.(4) It is true, the sense of homelessness and nostalgia for lost home is one of the important element in the Diasporic writings. While some writers regret the loss of land they left behind mythologizing through memory, nostalgia and imagination, others make expatriation a positive act of distancing, conducive to an expanded view of human experience and diverse cultures. It is evident in Hamlet too. Hamlet is an extra ordinary person who cannot have no identity in the sense that he feels that the devastation which had happened to him made him to feel the idea of displacement and the irony is that his own homeland has become a prison to him. Even though it is a prison to him yet he stays in Denmark. Diasporic personalities are the one who is caught between the two cultures and where here hamlet faces it. Being a student of Philosophy where his surroundings were of moral conduct and whereas in Denmark the moral code of conduct had lost its value. At a particular stage Hamlet felt that he would have been happy if he had been in Germany itself. Diasporic Writing brings into focus, as a matter of fact, not merely the role of the intellectual or the relationship of teaching to the evolution of democracy, but also the intellectual’s need to move away from a mere language of critique for a redefinition as part of a language of transformation and hope. It is only on this premise that the struggle against racism, class structures, sexism, and other forms of oppression would gather new momentum. The idea of home as an ambivalent location shows that identities are not fixed but stay in transition, drawing on different cultural traditions at the same time. It may be tempting to think of identity as destined to end up in one place or another, either returning to its roots or disappearing through partial assimilation in a hermeneutic “fusion” that is possible because of the supposed translatability and commensurability of different cultures. According to Homi Bhabha “ The migrant culture of the “in-between” dramatizes precisely the activity of cultural untranslatability.”(5) It is true, where hybrid identities are metaphorically subverted by interpenetration and reversals of different cultures, where subjectivities are shifting, epistemologies are questioned, and homogeneity is replaced by heterogeneity. Hamlet starts to behave so strangely that Gertrude and Claudius first suspect that he is mad, and then suspect that he knows their secret. More than Hamlet’s vision to take revenge it is also the trauma of the diasporic sensibility. Homeland is not providing a good space to him and out of that their arises the idea of despair and dislocation too. Through hamlet it is evident that Living in Diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from old and new cultures and homelands. Therefore most diasporic writing is suffused with identification consciousness and the problem of living in an alien society. Thus the concept and interpretation of ‘home’ becomes vital in all kinds of diasporic writing. The Diasporic condition remains under –theorized for apparently two reasons. One is its constitutive mix of contingency and instability, which afflicts it with a radical undecidability. The other is the logic of academic culture under multinational capitalism. The invocation of Martin Heidegger’s thought is, hence meant to be a reminder and a provocation for thinking. A provocation to think forward, and back. As the first philosopher of the diasporic condition, Heidegger looms over the discourse of diaspora as its disavowed but exorcized other. In order to recuperate itself, the thinking about the diasporic condition must respond to his thought, for it is in his thought that an endeavour first gets underway to thoughtfully confront the gloom of modern man’s ontological homelessness in a world abandoned by the gods. Heidegger’s thought is an endeavour not only to fathom the abysses of man’s homelessness in the world but also to comprehend it historically. And it is an affirmation of the need for care of the human. In this affirmation, it attains the magnitude that co(r)responds to the diasporic condition.

Articulating the Expatriate experience is a sort of exploring ‘the other’ – ‘the other’ being the psyche of the immigrant whose acceptance or negation of homeland, search for routes and identity, nostalgia and memory,
hyphenated entity, sense of dislocation and loss. Past and Present become concurrent to make a move towards the future. The narrator weaves stories one after the other that generate out of his memory – stories of the past, of shared moments, of interpretations of other characters which effortlessly come alive to discourse with the present. The narrative is thus presented in a series of segments of recollections and events which make time and space unsuspended to the immediate present.

According to Samuel Johnson “Hamlet is, through the whole piece, rather an instrument than an agent. After he has, by the stratagem of the play, convicted by the king, he makes no attempt to punish him; and his death is at last effected by an incident which hamlet had no part in producing.” (6) It is evident and through hamlet one can understand that Diaspora is seen more in terms of journey into eternity, rather than journey into a different culture. It is seen more as a metaphor of de-contextualisation than re-contextualisation; more as a process of deterritorialisation than re-territorialisation. Instead of realignments, what emerges is detachment in the form of quasi- spiritual escape.

According to J.R Lowell “Hamlet among all the characters of Shakespeare, is the most eminently a metaphysician and psychologist. He is a close observer, continually analysing his own nature and that of others, letting fall his little drops of acid irony on all who come near him, to make them show what they are made of “. (7) It is true, Dislocation, disjunction, instability and double vision have generally characterised the diasporic writing. Often they are records of courage and endurance. Diasporic writing acquires an appeal because they deal with the universal problems. Immigrant histories need not necessarily be poignant biographies of loss and homelessness; they could well be stories of fortitude and indomitable spirit and it is evident in the Hamlet. Diasporic writing too is double faced: there is the preoccupation with home for a variety of different reasons, but there is also the cultural representation of a society. The body of writing Diaspora needs continuing Institutional thrust to engage the audience attention more systematically and analytically.

According to Edward Said “Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot’s phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the “other echoes that inhabit the garden”. (8) These connections between things, across space and time, especially across both simultaneously, constitute the primary characteristics of Hamlet. The treatment of the migrant condition, which has become a natural phenomenon in literature, is the most engrossing topic, and an exciting and intellectual debate. The postmodernist world has chosen the interdisciplinary and cultural studies as the major thrust areas. Some literary men distinguish expatriation from immigration. The Expatriate builds a cocoon around Himself/ herself as a refuge from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness which they experience. Meditated by the experience of migration and diasporic locations works of such writers reveal crucial relations between their protagonists and the land. The interdisciplinary and cultural studies is the much probed area in the academic exploration of the postmodernist world. In this context identity and origin become structureless and assemblages.

Many critics hold the view that Hamlet is Shakespeare’s study of the unpractical temperament, the portrait of a dreamer. Many others have denied this and refer to the many instances where hamlet has exhibited extraordinary courage and promptitude in action. He is intellectually alert throughout and knows what he is after. Cultural identity of an author or the character in a work of art involves much more than the question of citizenship of a particular state or religion. Still, national or cultural background of an author cannot define or limit the aesthetic appeal or ideological impact of a work. An author’s relationship to a particular nation or to a third world or postcolonial state, by birth or citizenship, or one being an exile or a migrant representing a particular diaspora cannot determine the nature, appeal or aesthetic merit of a work.

To conclude Hamlet is not merely an entertainment; it is an experience almost a duty and it never palls. In my paper the diasporic element is culled out. Every time one sees it, every time one reads it, one discovers something new, something one had never fully appreciated before. It is the highest point reached by the world’s greatest dramatist.

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