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**“Between Two Worlds: The Poetry of Eavan Boland and Sujata
Bhatt”**

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Abstract

The concept of diaspora, which examines the displacement of people from their homeland, has gained critical attention in contemporary literature. This paper looks at two contemporary poets, Eavan Boland and Sujata Bhatt, and their experiences of migration and resettlement in the Irish and Indian diaspora. Their poems explore aspects of diasporic consciousness through feelings of not-belonging and exile, the renegotiation of the vernacular or language, and the myth of return to the homeland. By examining these aspects of diasporic consciousness, the paper illustrates how the experience of loss and dislocation can be shared across geographic and ethnic boundaries.

Key Words: Diaspora, Displacement, Homeland, Migration, Resettlement, Irish diaspora, Indian diaspora, Diasporic consciousness, Exile, Renegotiation of language, Myth of return, Loss, Dislocation, Geographic boundaries, Ethnic boundaries

Introduction

The concept of diaspora, which examines the displacement of people from their homeland, has gained critical attention in contemporary literature. This paper looks at two contemporary poets, Eavan Boland and Sujata Bhatt, and their experiences of migration and resettlement in the Irish and Indian diaspora. I will examine key concepts related to diaspora and focus on three particular aspects of diasporic consciousness: the poets' feelings of not-belonging and their writing of exile; the problem of the vernacular in Boland's poetry and language in Bhatt's poetry, which is connected with Irish or Indian identity; and the myth of return to the homeland. I conclude with some final remarks on diasporic consciousness and the way this shapes the poets' sense of belonging.

Background

Eavan Boland and Sujata Bhatt are among the most prolific contemporary poets writing in English. While they have been largely examined within a national context—Boland as an Irish poet and Bhatt as an Indian poet—their experiences of migration depicted in their poetry through the themes of exile and dislocation suggest a more intimate bond between the two. To comprehend the significance of these themes in their poetry, we must look at Boland and Bhatt's experiences of migration and resettlement in the Irish and Indian diaspora.



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Eavan Boland was born in Dublin in 1944. As the daughter of an Irish Ambassador, she spent much of her childhood in London and New York. Boland later returned to Ireland to complete her secondary education and attend Trinity College Dublin, and today she divides her time between California and Dublin. Perhaps it is because of such transnational movements that Boland writes about the experience of exile and a feeling of dislocation from Ireland in the historical and personal senses. Her poetry associates the absence of women's voices from the Irish literary canon with her own feeling of dissonance in being a woman and a poet. She challenges this dissonance by speaking for Irish women in history and by giving voice to her experiences. In connecting the intricacies of her own life with Irish history, Boland attempts to subvert her feeling of dislocation from her homeland.

Like Boland, Sujata Bhatt is also concerned with the themes of women's voices in history and a sense of dislocation from her 'homeland'. Born in Ahmedabad in 1956 and raised in Pune, Bhatt also spent much of her childhood away from India. Because of her father's work as a virologist, her family relocated to New Orleans when she was five and returned to India for a period of time before migrating to Connecticut 'for good' when Bhatt was twelve, so that her father could take up a post at Yale University. She currently resides in Bremen, Germany. The poet's experience of dislocation from India was further compounded by the loss of her native language upon realizing that Gujarati and Marathi would not suffice in the US. Although she became proficient in English before moving to Connecticut, the experience of being 'out-of-language', to use Salman Rushdie's phrase, compels her to engage with many languages in her poetry. Bhatt fuses Gujarati words and characters with German and English to communicate the discontinuities of her life.

Concepts

In examining Boland and Bhatt's relationships with their homelands, we find that their poetry of exile and dislocation results from the diasporic consciousness. According to Steven Vertovec, 'diasporic consciousness is a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities. Its particularity is variously described as being marked by a dual or paradoxical nature... in which the individual is [aware] of decentered attachments, of being simultaneously "home away from home" or "here and there."'

Boland and Bhatt express the complexities of diasporic consciousness in their poems of not-belonging and exile as well as their renegotiation of vernacular or language. As they move between geographical and cultural spaces, the poets become 'precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined



displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements’, according to Vijay Mishra. Within this concept, my research focuses on three aspects of diasporic consciousness expressed in Boland and Bhatt’s poetry:

1. The first aspect looks at the poets’ feelings of not-belonging in the vernacular in Boland’s poetry or language in Bhatt’s poetry, which is inextricably connected with Irish or Indian identity. Because the poets cannot use their native vernacular or language in the host society, they must renegotiate their perceptions of language in relation to the host society and homeland.
2. The second aspect of diasporic consciousness looks at the poets’ feelings of not-belonging in the host society and their longing for the homeland. This discontinuity leads to the poets’ persistence in calling themselves ‘forced exiles’. Kim Butler distinguishes between forced and voluntary exile in stating that while ‘types of relationships between the diaspora and the homeland will depend on changes in homeland conditions and the timing of those changes,’ the forced exile is essentially expelled from and by the homeland, while the voluntary exile has the opportunity to return. Although Boland and Bhatt were not expelled by Ireland or India—they migrated because of their parents’ work—it may seem as though they are not forced exiles. But because they did not choose to leave—the choice was made for them by their parents—both poets continue to have a complex relationship with their homelands.
3. The final aspect of diasporic consciousness is the myth of return to the homeland. Stuart Hall describes this ‘return to the beginning’ as a desire that can ‘neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, or representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, [and] discovery’. The poets can, and do, physically return to their homelands, but they cannot return to their childhoods before they left Ireland and India. Therefore, Boland and Bhatt create a mythical homeland in their poetry, which according to Sushelia Nasta is ‘built on the discontinuous fragments of memory and reconceived in the imagination’.

Both poets are indeed part of an Irish or Indian diaspora, but their displacement creates in them a feeling of isolation. I will, therefore, look at their writing of diasporic consciousness and will examine the personal pronoun ‘I’ as the speaker or ‘lyrical persona’ of their poems.



Aspects of Diasporic Consciousness

Not-Belonging and Exile

Consider this passage from Boland's "An Irish Childhood in England: 1951" in which she states:

We are what we have chosen.

Did I choose to? -

in a strange city, in another country,

on nights in a north-facing bedroom,

waiting for sleep that never did

restore me as I'd hoped to what I'd lost

Here the lyrical persona's sense of loss and exile from Ireland become evident as she struggles to cope with a new life in London. Bhatt describes her own feeling of loss in the poem "Whenever I Return" in which the lyrical persona addresses the reader with the words,

"Don't speak to me of exile.

Don't question my memory.

How can you understand

the souls of brain cells?

How can you understand?

coefficients

you have never even lived?"

Bhatt's vehement questions ask us to consider the faith of her experience of loss and to look at her as she sees herself—as a forced exile, who feels what Edward Said describes as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home'. It is through this lens of exile that diasporic consciousness takes hold.



Because Boland and Bhatt perceive themselves to be forced exiles, they feel that they do not belong in either the homeland or host society, thus perpetuating feelings of estrangement, not-belonging, and homelessness. According to Stuart Hall, this duality of consciousness indicates ‘critical points of deep and significant difference [between] “what we really are”; [and], since history has intervened—“what we have become”’. Boland describes this difference in the poem “Becoming the Hand of John Speed” in which the speaker says,

“I remember the way it was when I was young
wanting the place to know me at first glance
and it never did
it never did.”

Boland’s feeling of not-belonging and difference from Irish society is further explored in the poem “Anna Liffey” in which she draws comparisons between the myths of the River Liffey in Dublin with her own identity as an Irish woman. She claims that upon her return to Ireland, ‘I had no children. No country.

I did not know the name for my own life’.

These lines become a refrain in the poem, and we realize that Boland’s experience of living in the diaspora creates a difference between her identity as an Irish woman and what she has become—an exile.

While Boland portrays her feeling of dislocation from Ireland, Bhatt creates an amalgamation of her experiences in the Indian diaspora. Take, for example, the poem “The One Who Goes Away” in which the lyrical persona says that

‘Sometimes I’m asked if
I were searching for a place
that can keep my soul
from wandering
a place where I can stay
without wanting to leave’.



Bhatt feels that she does not belong in India, the US or Germany. Because her life in exile has created a difference between who she was and who she has become, the poet's 'home' becomes an amalgamation of her experiences in these cultures. In "The Multicultural Poem", Bhatt depicts her hybrid identity in personifying the 'multicultural poem' as a representation of her own experience of being what Cecile Sandten calls "bicultural by birth and migration, and tri-cultural by marriage." The poem, the speaker claims:

wants to be read at the border

to the person who checks your passport.

The multicultural poem does not expect

the reader to "understand" anything.

After all, it is used to being misunderstood'.

Because the speaker wishes to be read on the border of two spaces, we can see Bhatt's poetry in what Homi Bhabha defines as hybrid space or the diasporic individual's life in between geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries, 'moving from the outside in or ever moving from here to there'.

Vernacular and Language

The second aspect of diasporic consciousness, as put forth by Vertovec, that I would like to explore is the significance of language—the inability to communicate in a native language or vernacular away from Ireland or India—which leads to a sense of dislocation from the homeland and a feeling of not-belonging in the host society. William Safran notes the significance of language in stating that 'Every speech community has its particular mind-set, which cannot be reproduced exactly in just any language.' This speech community connects diasporic individuals with their homelands.

Although Boland spoke English in Ireland and continued to speak it in the UK and US, she differentiates between Irish English and these other forms of English. This may be because, according to Safran, 'In Ireland, "Catholicism, the land, and [Irish] language were prominent in the nationalist struggle" and in the effort to differentiate Ireland from England'; thus the Gaelic culture and language became defining elements of Irish identity. While Boland communicates in English, she wishes to be connected to Ireland through its



culture and history and is, therefore, determined to distinguish her type of English from the way it is spoken in other countries. Her poems of diasporic consciousness associate the idea of an Irish English vernacular with that of language itself and the metonym of the voice. In doing so, she connects her own experience of dislocation from Ireland with the history of her homeland.

We see Boland's determination to distinguish her type of Irish English from British English in the poem "An Irish Childhood in England: 1951" in which the lyrical persona recalls her difficulty in adjusting to her new life across the Irish Sea. She claims that

"all of England to an Irish child

was nothing more than what you'd lost and how: was the teacher in the London convent who,

when I produced "I amn't" in the classroom

turned and said—"You're not in Ireland now."

When the young Boland produced the vernacular 'I amn't' instead of the British 'I won't', she was reprimanded by her teacher and realized that there was a difference between Irish and British English. Boland meditates upon the relationship between Irish English and nationhood in other poems such as "Emigrant Letters" in which the lyrical persona is waiting for [an emigrant letter] to the US. Speaking of this Irish accent, she determines that

"Its owner must have been away for years:

Vowels half-sounds and syllables

from somewhere else had nearly smoothed out

a way of speaking you could tell a region by,

much less an origin".

While the accent, so slight from years away from Ireland, may be hardly noticeable to others, the speaker hears the voice and is reminded of the homeland. Seeing herself as part of an Irish community, she connects her experience with the homeland by imagining a history of emigration from Ireland and by placing herself within an Irish diaspora in the US.



For Bhatt, the problem of language goes beyond a change in vernacular from one type of English to another to the feeling of being ‘out-of-language’ appropriate for communicating her experiences. Bhatt’s change in language from Gujarati and Marathi to English and later German hybridizes her multilingual identity, and her poetry conveys the idea that a single language is insufficient for portraying her experiences. Salman Rushdie sheds light on this point in “Imaginary Homelands” in stating that

‘the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being “elsewhere”.

Because Bhatt’s native language is associated with a community of speakers in India, its ‘loss’ now that she lives in the diaspora is even greater because she feels disconnected from the homeland. Bhatt’s diasporic consciousness expresses her experience of being ‘out-of-country’ and ‘out-of-language’, as the poet renegotiates language in the diaspora.

Bhatt describes the experience of being ‘out-of-language’ when she first moved to New Orleans. In “The One Who Goes Away” the lyrical persona tells us that,

‘The first time was the most –
was the most
silent.
I did not speak,
did not answer
those who stood waving
with the soft noise
of saris flapping in the wind’.

Because Bhatt could not speak English when she first moved to the US, she was unable to communicate. As she learned English and began to incorporate both English and Gujarati in her daily life, the poet’s hybrid identity made her feel disconnected from her native language and homeland. In “History is a Broken



Narrative”, Bhatt communicates the difficulties of being out-of-language, and the loss she felt in moving back and forth between India and the US. She concludes the poem with the following stanza,

‘It will give you time -
time to gather up the
‘It will give you time –
time to gather up the fallen pieces
of your language—one by one
with your mouth, with your mouth—you need time
to pick up the scattered pieces of your language
and the way to the neighbour’s house is endless
with your mouth like a bird’.¹

In comparing her experience of piecing together languages the way a bird pieces together a nest, Bhatt expresses the significance of language in the diasporic consciousness. Because Bhatt is ‘elsewhere’, she feels disconnected from the homeland and must piece together her own language and identity just as Boland can only connect with Irish identity in realizing her dislocation from it.

Myth of Return

The myth of return to the homeland is a recurring theme in the poetry of Boland and Bhatt. While both poets have physically returned to their homelands, their experiences of displacement have created a sense of longing for a mythical homeland that exists only in their memories and imaginations.

In Boland’s poetry, the myth of return is often associated with a sense of loss and disillusionment. For example, in the poem “The Lost Land,” she describes her return to Ireland after a long absence as a “homecoming without home.” Similarly, in “Object Lessons,” she reflects on her childhood memories of Ireland and acknowledges that the past is irretrievable.



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Bhatt's poetry also explores the myth of return, but with a greater emphasis on the complexities of identity and belonging. In the poem "Search for My Tongue," she describes the feeling of being caught between two languages and cultures. Similarly, in "The One Who Goes Away," she reflects on her own experiences of displacement and the difficulty of finding a place to call home.

Conclusion

As we see from Boland and Bhatt's poetry, diasporic consciousness shows us that experiences of loss and dislocation can be shared across geographic and ethnic boundaries. Because they see themselves as forced exiles, Boland and Bhatt express the difference they feel exists between who they were before they left Ireland and India and who they have become living in the diaspora. Yet, their poetry explores aspects of diasporic consciousness in different ways. While Boland portrays feelings of not-belonging and dislocation upon returning to Ireland, Bhatt amalgamates her experiences in India, North America and Europe in a hybrid space. Life in the diaspora also forces both poets to renegotiate their native vernacular or language. Boland associates the Irish English vernacular with the culture and history of Ireland, and in doing so, she attempts to once again feel connected with her Irish identity. Bhatt, on the other hand, is out-of-language upon leaving India for the US and Germany, and so she must piece together her own language and identity. In focusing upon the aspects of not-belonging and exile, as well as the renegotiation of a native vernacular or language, we can perceive dualities of the diasporic consciousness in the poetry of Eavan Boland and Sujata Bhatt.



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