



Diasporic themes in Nell Freudenberger's 'The Newlyweds'

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Abstract

The Research paper analyses Nell Freudenberger's 'The Newlyweds' from the diasporic perspective. Diaspora refers to communities of people living away from their homeland. This state of living bears the negative connotations of being in exile. This feeling of being in exile evokes a sense of nostalgic longing for the lost homeland. Trying to adjust with the culture of the host land, there seeps in the feeling of loss of cultural identity. The researcher has traced these feelings of nostalgia and loss of cultural identity crisis in the novel 'The Newlyweds' by Nell Freudenberger

Keywords: Diaspora, nostalgia, identity crisis, cultural, differences

1.1 Introduction

“ so , here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here.
Never enough for both . ”

-Ijeoma Umebinyuo, Diaspora blues

Diaspora has become an important aspect of academic studies today and it has been offered as modules or as independent courses by universities in India and around the world. The researcher has taken up theory of diaspora and applied it to analyse 'The Newlyweds' by Nell Freudenberger and Life in Diaspora: A Woman's Story by Juliana Duru. However it is important to know - the beginnings of this academic studies, how this branch of studies emerged, what are the theoretical concepts behind this branch of study.

A 'diaspora' is a large group of people with a similar heritage or homeland, who have since moved out to places all over the world. The term 'diaspora' has its origin in the ancient Greek word **Speiro** meaning "to scatter about or to sow" (Cohen 2008: xiv; Dufoix 2008: 4). While the earliest occurrence of the word 'diaspora' has been traced to its use by Sophocles, Herodotus and Thucydides in the 5th century BC. When people of Greek city states captured new territories, the Greek population scattered and settled in the new territories. This scattered and settled population was called as diaspora population. Eventually as the Bible was translated into Greek, especially the old Testament, then the term diaspora very strongly A 'diaspora' is a large group of people with a

similar heritage or homeland, who have since moved out to places all over the world. The term ‘diaspora’ has its origin in the ancient Greek word **Speiro** meaning “ to scatter about or to sow ” (Cohen 2008: xiv ; Dufoix 2008: 4). While the earliest occurrence of the word ‘diaspora’ has been traced to its use by Sophocles , Herodotus and Thucydides in the 5th century BC. When people of Greek city states captured new territories , the Greek population scattered and settled in the new territories. This scattered and settled population was called as diaspora population. Eventually as the Bible was translated into Greek, especially the old Testament, then the term diaspora very strongly got associated with the Jewish Diaspora .- the eviction of the Jewish people from Levant. And hence whenever in literary studies or cultural studies, diaspora is written with a capital D, it means the Jewish Diaspora . Its modern interpretation is more closely linked to its use in Jewish literature.

1.2 Methodology used

The Researcher has used the method of close textual analysis and applied the theory of diaspora to analyse Nell Freudenberger’s ‘ *The Newlyweds* ’

1.3 About the Writer

Nell Freudenberger born in New York city , is an American novelist , essayist , and short- story writer . She has been known for her travel writings and short stories as well.

Her fiction writing constitute the following novels:

- Lucky Girls (2003)
- The Dissidents (2006)
- The Newlyweds (2012)
- Lost and Wanted (2019)

According to Nell, “The only thing a reader needs is an authentic voice- the ability to make someone feel that the things you’re telling is worth hearing. “. She perfectly has managed to prove her word when it comes to convince the reader to get engaged in the characters of her stories. All her novels have a character that she as a writer seems to know more deeply than anyone can actually be known in life. The characters she presents in her stories appear so real and of acquaintance to the reader. Such convincing is her style of expression. Nell’s strong narrative voice delivers a successful immigrant story.

1.4 Diasporic Aspects in *the Newlyweds*

The researcher looks at the novel with the focus on issues of **nostalgia** and **cultural identity crisis**, that is evident in the storyline. The researcher has applied the afore mentioned aspects of diaspora theory to ‘ **The Newlyweds** ’ through a detailed textual analysis.

‘**The Newlyweds**’ tells the story of Amina, a young woman who leaves her village in Bangladesh to marry George Stillman , a plodding engineer from Rochester, after meeting him on AsianEuro.com. With great sensitivity and psychological subtlety, Freudenberger charts the misunderstandings and disappointments and also the occasional rewards experienced by the couple in their first few years together.

George is a thirty four year old American engineer and Amina is a twenty four year old Bangladeshi. They met via an internet site. George wants a stable home life and a family. Amina wants the chance of American education and career. They form a mutually beneficial alliance. However, neither gets quite what he or she expects. For Amina the struggle begins right from the time that she moves in with George in his apartment at Rochester. A finely woven web of **cultural differences** and **nostalgia** come in way of her efforts of settling, in the new place. **The cultural differences range from linguistic trifles to their notions of family.** In the early days when some mischievous kids damage their mailbox, George addresses them as ‘thugs’ and Amina misinterprets ‘thugs’ as ‘dacoits : bandits.’

“**Thugs had a different meaning in America, and that why she’d been confused. George had been talking about kids, trouble-makers from East Rochester High, while Amina had been thinking of dacoits : bandits who haunted the highways and made it unsafe to take the bus.**” (pg 4 NW)

American English was different from the language she had learnt at Maple Leaf International School in Dhaka. George corrected her and kept her from making embarrassing mistakes. She learnt many new facts about the new culture that she had entered, “**Americans always went to the bathroom, never the loo.**

They did not live in flats or stow anything in the boot of the car, under no circumstance did they ever pop outside to smoke a fag.” (Ibid). Hence linguistic diaspora was experienced by Amina.

Here is another instance that very clearly reflects her **linguistic confusion**. When Amina had joined her new job at Mediaworks – a store that dealt with sale of CDs and media articles; she had heard that her co-worker Charlie was thinking about Plan B for his girlfriend. The next morning, when she is in conversation with her husband about how she could manage to get admission in the university and simultaneously continue with her job, she asks about his opinion and says that if it did not work they would need Plan B. Her husband gets upset and asks her, how she could be so sure that she needed Plan B. Amina had anticipated that Plan B refers to another alternative plan for her. But she is surprised to gather from her husband George, that in Rochester Plan B was not any kind of Plan but an abortion pill.

The **cultural differences** that Amina experiences, every time originate from **nostalgia**. Her thoughts go back to her past life, imagining how it was in her homeland; be it her wedding preparation, relationships between family members, religion, food, definition of family or her own self.

In Bangladesh, when George and Amina had planned for their wedding, George had kindly promised that, he would convert to Islam and they would get married in a mosque at Rochester and also in the Church. But even after two months of her arrival in Rochester, they fail to search for a proper mosque. This upsets her, she misses her Allah's blessings and the Islamic rituals that she had always dreamt of since her childhood days. When she is accompanied by George's mother, his cousin Jessica and aunt Cathy to the tailors shop for buying the wedding gown, she starts marking the difference between the ways in which wedding shopping for brides was happening. She recollects how the bride is pampered and surrounded by various relatives and also how the different wedding celebrations are exclusively scheduled days before the D day. She is **nostalgic** about the Mehendi and the red sari with loads of gold jewellery that a bride adorns on her wedding day. The wedding shopping involves the entire invited crowd. While in Rochester only the three ladies accompany her and decide for her white gown, compromise on her hairstyle and makeup, stating that she did not need much. At the same time she also marks the difference between the financial part of the wedding. The groom's side, George was paying all the bills for the shopping and the bride's side had nothing to pay at all. She finds this overwhelming.

”Amina tried to explain how this manner of working differed from what she would have encountered at home – where extra goods and services would have been pressed on the family of the bride from the moment they walked in the doors of the shop” (pg 21NW)

Amina is nostalgic about wedding as an important elaborate event. When her cousin Ghaniya gets married in Bangladesh, Amina interestingly goes through her 1678 wedding photographs posted in a website. She had already heard the details about food, saris, jewellery and the arrangements. Nevertheless, she is eager to skim through the thumbnails: Ghaniya having her

hand decorated with 'goye holud', Ghaniya in front of the mirror with an artificial apprehensive expression, Ghaniya laughing as she is dancing with her little cousins, the groom dressed in orange silk kurta. She senses all that she has missed in her wedding.

“ It wasn't only the crimson red sari, the makeup and generic backdrops: Amina had turned her back for a moment, and Ghaniya had been transformed into a bride just like the ones the two of them had been admiring in photographs since their childhood.”(Pg 83NW)

The researcher very clearly notices the cultural difference depicted related to the attitude in people with regards to their family members. There is a big difference seen when it comes to the definition of family and the responsibilities they share. Amina is the only child to her parents. They have gone through many hardships to bring her up. They have always dreamt of sending Amina to a foreign country to study and settle, so that they too can join her and live a settled life. Amina has always taken her role as a daughter responsibly. She has worked hard and followed every tiny advice her parents gave her to move towards her educational goal. They have dreamt of staying together in the foreign land. Amina has discussed this thought with George long back when they communicated through emails. After getting a job, she starts planning on how and when her parents could join her in Rochester. She is shocked when George makes her aware of the American culture regarding family and the

idea of staying with parents. George explains that “**Americans didn’t like to stay with anybody besides their spouses and children.**”(pg65) George’s own mother, Eileen, was sixty six years old, was staying independently managing herself. It turns out to be a big cultural shock for Amina, as she could never dream of staying away from her aging parents and leave them on their own. That is how parents are taken care of in Desh .

Another cultural shock comes her way , when Amina enquires about old people in America, she gathers that the existence of old-age homes was not a myth.

“**If an old person stayed in his home sometimes a person would be hired by the family members to take care for him.**” (Pg 65NW) .Amina referred to them as ‘servants’ so George corrects her and terms them as “nurses’ or “caretakers”. She was sad to learn that not all old people can afford hiring caretakers so they wind up in old-age homes. She realised that it was American culture to shut up their parents and grandparents in old-age homes even when there was nothing wrong with them. Taking care of parents was very normal in her country but in America , the parents would feel lucky if their child chose to look after them- almost like a lottery.

Similar to this is the **cultural difference** that Amina experiences when she compares the **mother- daughter relationship** between George’s aunt Cathy and her daughter Kim and the relation between her mother and herself. Amina had been very close to her mother throughout their lives. Her parents could not afford her fees when she was thirteen, so she was home tutored by her mother. She managed to cover all the subjects upto the mark. Her mother accompanied her to the British council once a week following her cousin’s syllabi from her school. Mother and daughter sat at the table with Functional English and Cambridge English Dictionary. When Amina came across a new word while reading, her mother would underline it very faintly with pencil and find the meaning in the dictionary. Amina had passed her O level and her mother had proved to her relatives that Amina could succeed without formal schooling. Amina and her mother had always had a **special mother-daughter bond**, partly

because Amina was her only child, and partly because they had spend so much time together after she had to leave school. When she and George had begun writing to each other , she had translated his e-mails for her mother , and they had analyzed them with the same care they had once devoted to the textbooks. Amina hadn’t hidden anything from her mother. They had been a team, discussing every new development, and so it was very strange , once things were finally settled , to realize that her mother would not be coming with her to America. Visa versa George’s aunt Cathy and her daughter Kim shared a very different and contradicting relation. Aunt Cathy never knew what Kim is doing or where she would be. They both stayed at different addresses and could not stand each others company. If ever they were in the same room and into conversation, they always ended their talk arguing. Kim had not completed her high school as she had no interest in studying. She had visited India as a tourist and had met Ashok there. She had fallen for him and got married to him in India. She had moved to New York, Ashok had moved back to India due to their differences, Kim had returned to Rochester, but she didn’t get in touch with her mother. It took her four months to call Cathy. According to George, “**It is very common, not talking with your parents .**” (Pg 54) . To this Amina replied that she could not imagine any such thing ever. So when she thinks about herself as a to- be mother , she questions herself whether it would be wise to raise her children in America where parent- child relation was so hollow, with no density.

For Amina, **religious differences** also play a role in making her yearn for her small village in Bangladesh. They had not been able to locate a mosque near their place so they get married in the church following all Christian tradition. Even then she feels they are not married in the complete sense. During the ceremony when the Priest announces them Man and Wife , and George leans towards her to kiss her, Amina leaps back , causing an embarrassing moment for George , his family and herself too. For her, kissing before marriage and that to in the presence of all relatives was a big no-no in Islamic rules.

Many a times when they had conversations or arguments George always made her feel like an outsider and it also offended her when he referred to Islam as ‘her religion’. As if he had nothing to do with her identity or her presence in his life as his partner. At times she grooves upon the words of a book “The lawful and Prohibited in Islam’ gifted by her childhood acquaintance and crush Nasir . The book explained why a muslim girl should not marry a non-muslim. According to the author, there were two reasons a muslim woman couldn’t marry a non-Muslim. The first was the fact that a child would likely be brought up in the religion of its father . The second

reason was one she hadn't anticipated, but couldn't help appreciating for the elegance of its logic. Since a Muslim respected all of the prophets – not only Mohammed, but also Moses, Jesus, Abraham etc – a Muslim man could respect the beliefs of his Christian wife. But since Christians believed in only one prophet, Jesus Christ; a Christian husband would have to disdain his wife's prophet as a false one. She keeps reminding herself of her decision of marrying George of being a carefully thought step that would promise a good life for her parents and herself too.

With regards to religious practices, George's relatives too exhibited the same treatment at many instances. They had issues with her not having pork. Whenever they had meals with George's mother, his mother had to specially prepare a separate dish for Amina as most of the menu consisted of pork portions. And aunt Cathy would comment on that in a sarcastic manner pointing that the pigs back there were living in dirt and filth, while it was very clean and hygienic in Rochester. Their neighbour Dan Snyder, once is admitted in the hospital for cardiac issues and is advised for a surgery. Amina becomes so uncomfortable when she comes to know that his heart would have a placement of a pig's heart valve. The entire episode of a pig valve existing in human body makes her thank God, that he was not a Muslim.

George's relatives always made Amina feel belittled when they talked about her homeland. They compared Rochester and its resources to her homeland. They showed amazement in hearing from her that they had basic amenities in that small village. During the wedding preparation, Eileen and Jessica had been so surprised to hear that there were beauty shops in Bangladesh at all. They also commented on why the females needed them, as they were always covered head to toe, almost taunting over the Islamic chador attire.

Food also made its impact on Amina's cultural identity crisis. Amina preferred to cook at home than eating out at fancy restaurants. She starts gardening for fresh vegetables. George comments on this when he talks to his cousin Kim about Amina's view about American foods, he said **“Our grocery store isn't up to her standards”**. To which Amina comments **“The large sized vegetables are not as tasty as homegrown.”**(Pg 47NW)

Amina charts out many differences in the social circle among the people around her. Amina many times assures herself that she was right in choosing George as her husband as she draws clear lines of differences between American and Bangladeshi husbands. Bengali husbands don't listen to their wives, instead try to change their wife's mind while American husbands shake their heads and look put-upon. She thought that it was better to have an American husband who spoke less during a conversation than to have a Bengali husband who couldn't keep his mouth shut boasting and posturing.

The specific behaviour of people in both the lands also creates a visible difference in their attitude towards life. Amina notes that pregnant women in her homeland would not be visible around cause they would not venture out often and if they did, they would cover themselves in layers of loose clothes to hide their bump. While in America they were seen everywhere- circling the tract in their jogging clothes, obstructing the aisles of the supermarkets, and arriving in droves for the new prenatal class that an was offering.

Finding oneself out of place is not just experienced by Amina but also three other characters in the story. One is Ashok, George's cousin Kim's husband Ashok, an Indian who married Kim and moved to New York for further studies. Ashok belonged to a very rich business family living in a big bungalow with spacious rooms. When they shift to New York in an apartment, he thought that the small bedroom was claustrophobic and the AC was too strong.; he would constantly walk around in a wool sweater. He also thought that the bathroom ought not to be next to the kitchen. This points towards cultural diaspora. Kim thought that Ashok was a Brahmin, and that was the reason for his obsession with hygiene. His enemy was not only dirt but clutter. Ashok insisted that Kim should put things away immediately after using them and to wash pots as she cooked, Since it was hard for him to enjoy a meal if he could see dirty pots sitting in the open kitchen. He washed his feet more thoroughly in New York even though he was wearing socks and shoes. He would choose to dine at an Indian restaurant and order dishes as if they were in Bombay and might as well have a taste of everything..

Similar kind of cultural diaspora is experienced by Kim when she returns back to Ashok at his residence in India. She writes to Amina stating her lonely condition as a housewife. Ashok was always unavailable owing to his film making. Whenever she asked him about the movie, he would reply that she wouldn't understand since she was

not from India. Kims's mother-in-law did not allow her to get a job. Kim was frustrated and she desperately wanted to move out and breathe in free air.

Experiencing the effects of diaspora is the third character Nasir, who has a crush over Amina since childhood. Nasir moves to London for a job but due to religious and cultural confusions he moves back to his native land. He expresses his views on this as **“ I couldn't stop thinking of home. It's like a girl . She is perfect while you are away, then you come back and she's changed so much. I used to dream about my mother's pulao when I was over there. In the dreams I would be a little boy in a tupi, going to the mosque with my father . Then we'd come home and eat.”** (Pg 249NW)

Amina had brought in many changes in herself in order to adapt in the new host land. Be it her dressing sense or taste for food. Unknowingly she had even missed her prayer sessions in America, of which she was ashamed of. In the early days she missed her parents, her village and most of the times felt lonely and sad. She would finish her daily chores and for a moment she was a newcomer again, alone in the house after George had gone to work. She felt not only invisible but also incorporeal and doubted as she made her way from one room to another. When she returns back to her village after four years, she realizes that there is a great difference between the two Aminas, the one from Dosh and the one in America. She fails to identify which one is her true self. She had returned back to her village but she felt homesick. She missed the silence of her home at Rochester, her job at Starbucks and her husband. Her grandmother Nanu, Aunt and other relatives were looking at her as a foreigner and commenting on her dress and style. She did not feel like the old Amina, instead like a visitor who was supposed to leave after a specific time.

She writes to Kim, **“Something I found in Rochester is that its hard for people to remember that you belong to one place when you look like you're from another.”** (Pg 291NW)

During her stay in America, Amina could not follow her religious practices because she failed to locate any Islamic centre near her house, where she could meet and pray with her community. Difference in the religion of the couple made this task impossible for her. Her Christian husband did not accept her religion. She realized that she was the only Muslim in their social circle. Amina missed celebrating all festivities, that kept her feeling guilty as well as frustrated

Hence the researcher has illustrated how Amina experiences nostalgia and loss of cultural identity crisis when she moves to America, in hope of a peaceful settled life in the company of her parents and her foreigner husband.

1.5 Conclusion Having analysed the novel 'The Newlyweds' 'through the lens of diasporic issues namely Nostalgia, loss of identity and Cultural identity crisis, it is evident that diasporic elements of nostalgia and cultural identity crisis run throughout the novel.

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