Beyond Borders: A Review of Diaspora and Female Immigrant Experience

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Abstract

This article reviews the conceptualization of the diaspora and the inclusion of female immigrants' experiences in diaspora studies. It surveys the changing notion of diaspora with the inclusion of varied groups of immigrants, including females. Then, it examines the previous research about female immigrants' experiences, particularly focusing on South Asian female immigrants. Over time, the conceptualization of the diaspora has evolved from a perspective focused on victimhood to a more socially constructed view of identity formation that transcends the binary distinction between home and host countries. This broader conceptualization of diaspora includes various forms of transborder migration and settlement, allowing for a more inclusive examination of the experiences of female immigrants. In the beginning, women immigrants were often equated with male immigrants. However, as time passed, scholars started linking gender concerns with additional factors like social class, nationality, and ethnicity. In this context, the research on the experience of South Asian female immigrants revolves around changing gender roles and family dynamics, including contradictory aspects of whether migration reinforces domination or provides autonomy to South Asian female immigrants.

Keywords: Diaspora, South Asian female immigrant, intersectionality, autonomy, family dispute

Introduction

Female immigrants face multiple challenges and opportunities while negotiating their cultural identities and gender roles. They often remain somewhere between desires to

belong to the new cultural space of the diaspora and an urge to maintain the cultural identity of the home country. In a sense, they simultaneously follow the practices of the home country and the host country. Following the cultural practices of both cultural spaces, they are constantly involved in the negotiation of their cultural identities and gender roles. A range of factors: including cultural differences, language barriers, financial autonomy, and the process of integration shape their experiences in the diaspora, which varies with their male counterparts. However, "the etymological underpinning of diaspora" regards diaspora as "a male act of dispersal and procreation in a new land" (Mehta, 2018, p. 16). The experiences of females often get homogenized with "androcentric images...and patrilinear descent" (Kosnick, 2010, p. 123). Even in the scholarship of diaspora studies, "gender has remained marginal (Mehta, 2018, p. 16). Nonetheless, "the conditions propelling the migration of women, their experiences during the process of migration, and the subsequent efforts at adaptation and settlement have always been different; rather, they have been unique and very specific to them" (Pande, 2018, p. 1). Recently, the changing conceptualizations of the diaspora have begun to integrate gender perspectives in analyzing immigrants' cultural negotiation.

Conceptualization of Diaspora in Transformation

Diaspora commonly refers to the mass migration of people, resulting in the establishment of settlements and communities. Initially, it was associated with the dispersal of the Jewish community, but later, its meaning expanded to encompass various transnational migrations and community formations. This has led to differing viewpoints among theorists regarding how to conceptualize diaspora. Faist (2010) succinctly outlines three key elements found in various definitions of diaspora: the reasons behind migration or dispersal, experiences across borders, and the integration of migrants into a second cultural context (p. 12). However, theorists vary in their interpretations of these aspects while discussing diaspora.

Cohen (2008) categorizes diasporas into three phases. The first phase, the classical phase, primarily focuses on the causes of migration and dispersal, particularly concerning the Jewish community's forced displacement and their traumatic experiences. In the 1960s and 1970s, the classical meaning extended to include the dispersion experiences of other groups like Africans, Armenians, and the Irish. This phase emphasizes the traumatic reasons behind dispersal, though it overlooks the diversity inherent in the diaspora. Diaspora is not a uniform phenomenon; factors such as time, culture, space, class, gender, and generation influence the experiences of diasporic communities.

The second phase of diaspora conceptualization, introduced by Safran (1991), broadens the scope to incorporate social, cultural, and historical diversity. Safran argues that due to differing historical backgrounds and connections to both their original and new spaces, immigrants form a more varied cluster. Common features of this phase include dispersal from a specific origin, retaining memories of the original space, marginalization and alienation in the new space, a desire to return to the original space, commitment to the prosperity and safety of the original space, and a sense of ethnocultural consciousness. This phase also recognizes feelings of loss, nostalgia, and alienation among immigrants, stemming from their ongoing connection to their place of origin.

Cohen (2008) critiques this and introduces the third phase, which employs a social constructionist approach to the diaspora. This phase challenges the binary distinction between home and host lands, and it explores the construction and deconstruction of identities. Brah (1996) introduces the concept of "homing desire" as opposed to a fixed homeland, emphasizing the sense of yearning rather than a concrete place. This phase emphasizes the diverse narratives within diasporic formations and the construction of a shared identity, though it doesn't fully address the discrimination and injustices faced by these groups

The fourth phase, according to Cohen (2008), introduces economic exploitation and political motivations into the discourse of diaspora. This phase criticizes the earlier social constructionist theories for neglecting the political demands and challenges faced by marginalized groups within diasporic communities. Karl (2007) argues that these theories align too closely with neoliberal agendas, overlooking historical oppression.

In conclusion, the understanding of diaspora has evolved from focusing on forced dispersal to encompass diverse identities within the context of migration and settlement. This evolution involves recognizing the heterogeneity of diasporic communities and addressing their multifaceted experiences. However, in such a theoretical debate of diaspora, the experience and transformation of the subjectivities of female immigrants remain a less explored area. During the 1980s, Diaspora studies began to include feminist perspectives, either from political or cultural perspectives. Various studies (Aitchison et al., 2007; Bottomley, 1992; Christou, 2011; Elmhirst, 2000; Gangulay, 1992; Leurs, 2015) have deconstructed the diaspora as a homogenous group and begun to explore the internal diversities of immigrants, including male and female experiences. These studies and theories have challenged the representation of the diaspora as homogenous. At the same time, female roles, status and experiences, including specific situations and obstacles faced by women have received both critical and theoretical attention (Gupta, 1988; Puwar and Raghuram, 2003). Such female-centric approaches have revealed differences and disparities within immigrants, as well as power-relationships between and among immigrants (Campt and Thomas, 2008). Such studies not only focus on male-female relationships but also focus individual and collective positionalities

Data Presentation

Females in Diaspora

The experiences of female immigrants have frequently been disregarded and conflated with the experiences of their male counterparts in studies related to diaspora. Before the 1960s and early 1970s, the term "immigrants" or "migrants" primarily referred to male migrants and their families, which included their wives and children (Pande, 2018). With the emergence of feminist movements and academic research, the field of diaspora studies began incorporating gender-related issues by giving more attention to the experiences of female individuals. Feminist influence led to the inclusion of female immigrants' issues and experiences within diaspora studies. Historically, the incorporation of female-related topics into diaspora studies can be divided into three distinct phases.

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Evolution of female agenda: Three transformative phases

In recent years, however, positivism has been criticized for failing to consider the context and the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups, its lack of attention to power relations and its assumption that objective knowledge is possible (Fox, 2008; Schrag, 1992). Many social scientists have moved away from positivism and adopted alternative paradigms such as constructivism and critical theory in their research.

Initially, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, females were included in migration and diaspora studies as a binary contrast to their male counterparts. Over time, the field of diaspora scholarship has progressively explored the experiences of women from various perspectives. As the field advanced into the mid to late 1980s, it transitioned into what is known as the "Feminist Standpoint Theory." During this phase, gender became a central analytical category. This theory, rooted in radical feminism, not only highlighted gender differences but also aimed to establish the importance of gender analysis above mere gender equality (Pande, 2018, p. 4). With a strong commitment, feminist studies within diaspora research sought to emphasize female experiences and assert their significance over male experiences. This phase revolved around the binary opposition of male and female that originated in the late 1960s.

The second phase of feminist scholarship within diaspora studies emerged during the 1990s, linking gender with various other categories. For these scholars, the concept of "gender" was not the sole differentiating factor; other distinctions such as poverty, class, ethnicity, and race held equal, if not greater, importance (Pande, 2018, p. 5). Gender, alongside other issues like class and race, was recognized as equally crucial for comprehending the broader human condition. This phase expanded its scope to encompass a wider range of issues. However, gender did not receive primary attention during this period.

In the third and more recent phase of feminist diaspora scholarship, gender's role was highlighted as a fundamental category that shapes how females perceive and understand their experiences, leading to varying outcomes during migration and settlement within the diaspora. Gender was viewed as a constitutive element of society, shaping individual identities through micro and macro levels of socialization. This identity remained crucial for understanding economic, cultural, and societal aspects. In this context, understanding gender intersectionally with other factors like race, ethnicity, and class became essential in comprehending the experiences and transformations of female immigrants (Boyd and Grieco, 2003; United Nations, 28). This phase underscored gender's significant role in comprehending broader social and cultural issues.

Within this third phase's theoretical framework, a significant area of study in diaspora scholarship focused on South Asian female immigrants in First World countries. These immigrants experienced distinct gender dynamics, family relationships, and access to resources compared to their counterparts in their countries of origin. The patriarchal cultural traditions of South Asian societies often marginalize women, subjecting them to fewer privileges and secondary roles. Unlike their Western counterparts, these women faced

various societal and cultural constraints. This context challenged the applicability of theories developed in Western contexts to the cultural formats of Third World societies.

South Asian female immigrants in the West

South Asian female immigrants in the First World share common patriarchal cultural roots and live in the Western cultural environment. They received limited attention within diaspora scholarship, often being grouped under a broader "Asian" category and depicted stereotypically as passive victims. Highly skilled professional South Asian immigrants try to balance their domestic and professional lives. Likewise, semiskilled and skilled women immigrants struggle in the labour market of the diaspora to enhance their career prospects while also providing financial support to their families back home. The women who undertake their journey to the diaspora through their marriage may endeavour to recreate home through their persistent emphasis on native ritual, language, food, and dress in the foreign land. The indentured labourers may suffer exploitation at multiple levels through their employers and fellow male immigrants. Despite such heterogeneities, the process of migration and economic self-dependency allows them to assert independence and redefine roles and perceptions of the self" (Pande, 2018, p. 1). The transformation of female immigrants involves subjective experiences that have varied repercussions in their gender roles and family dynamics. Research on South Asian female immigrants has highlighted three key issues: migration reinforces domination, migration provides a sense of autonomy, and the autonomy of female immigrants contributes to familial disputes, including the difficulties of keeping balance in their lives. The ensuing section discusses the representative studies that explore these themes.

Reinforcement of domination

Over the past two decades, there has been a notable increase in the international migration of women, primarily driven by economic motives (Fleury, 2016; United Nations Migration Report, 2020). This phenomenon, referred to as the feminization of migration (Fleury, 2016), has prompted scholars to analyze migration through a feminist lens. Researchers have explored shifts in gender roles and family dynamics. For instance, Sabri et al. (2018) observed that South Asian immigrant women face distinct challenges, such as financial dependency, abusive treatment from in-laws or family members, and the responsibility of upholding cultural values and honor, which differ from the immigration threats experienced by their partners or spouses. Martins & Reid (2007) highlighted that South Asian immigrant women are predominantly perceived in terms of traditional gender roles—namely, "homemaker, housewife, and caregiver" (p. 204). Moreover, Fleury (2016) noted that numerous barriers disproportionately affect immigrant women, including a lack of language skills, cultural differences, discrimination, and a lack of recognition of educational qualifications. For South Asian women, migration reinforced gender hierarchies and rigid traditional norms, leading to abuse and cruelty (Kang 2003; Kurien 1999; Judge 1992). However, numerous other research papers have refuted these assertions.

Female autonomy

Other researchers considered migration a means of empowerment, enabling women to play stronger roles and fostering new cultural dynamics (Buijis 1993; Levitt & Nadya 2007). Migration studies generally assert that women gain increased autonomy in egalitarian societies, allowing them to become more assertive in relationships (Sabri et al., 2018), compared to their lives in more traditional societies where women have fewer rights. Jibeen & Hynie (2012) conducted a quantitative study in Ontario to measure the life satisfaction and personal autonomy of 102 Pakistani married women living in Canada. Their findings suggested that women who immigrated to Canada exhibited greater personal autonomy and life satisfaction compared to their lives in Pakistan. However, Jibeen & Hynie (2012) called for qualitative research studies to confirm whether women perceived their current increased sense of autonomy. The perspectives on whether migration liberated or further restricted females have become contested issues with their implications for the family dynamics of South Asian immigrants in the West.

Family tension

Other research (DeBiaggi, 2002; Kim, 2016) carried out within the North American context has proposed that the empowerment of South Asian women in Western society often gives rise to tension and conflicts within family dynamics. In many instances, this empowerment results in acculturative stress, potentially leading to instances of domestic violence and abuse. DeBiaggi (2002) identified a common factor contributing to acculturative stress as a shift in gender roles, wherein women take on an active role as breadwinners or contribute to household income. This alteration challenges the traditional male authority within a patriarchal family structure that traditionally expects men to be the primary breadwinners and women to be homemakers. Research on domestic violence indicates that changes in gender roles or relations in the context of immigration are key contributors to instances of domestic abuse (Kim, 2016). Similarly, Hosseini-Sedehi's (2016) study highlighted that many incidents of domestic abuse are indirectly linked to issues in intimate relationships arising from changes in gender roles post-migration. For instance, women adopting more assertive roles in making family decisions can impact family dynamics. Apparently, South Asian female immigrants have been facing the challenges of keeping a balance between their public or professional lives and domestic gender roles.

Difficulties of keeping balance

Thaker's (2011) research on Indian women living in the United States explored the intersection of gender role expectations and acculturation. The study revealed that a significant number of participants faced the challenge of striking a balance between their identities as Indian and American women. Thaker (2011) emphasized that these women felt pressured not only to maintain close ties with immediate family members but also with extended family members, adding complexity to their acculturation process. The burden of meeting gender role expectations, such as being a dutiful wife, selfless mother, or obedient daughter-in-law, contributed to heightened acculturative stress among the study participants. In a separate study by Akram (2012), which focused on Muslim immigrant women from

India and Pakistan in Ontario, Canada, participants expressed being overwhelmed by what Akram termed the 'double burden' since immigrating to Canada. This burden encompassed responsibilities such as managing household affairs, caring for children, and concurrently seeking employment to financially support their families.

Similarly, Premji et al. (2014) conducted a study involving racialized immigrant women in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, representing various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Their findings underscored that these women encountered "triple intersecting layers of barriers and inequalities—grounded in gender, race, and migration/immigration—while navigating the challenges of securing meaningful employment, balancing work and family life, and fulfilling familial responsibilities within the post-migration context in Canada" (p. 137). In a similar line of argument, In Sabri et al.'s (2018) study in the United States among first- and second-generation women from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka also reported that because of the inferior status of women in the South Asian family structure, women face double the burden as men are not expected to contribute to household responsibilities. Such difficulties of keeping a balance between keeping traditional gender roles and enjoying freedom have repercussions in their conjugal lives as well.

In their study, Moghissi et al. (2009) conducted interviews with Muslim men hailing from Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, and Pakistan residing in Ontario, Canada. The research revealed that a significant proportion of these men attributed ongoing tensions in marital relationships to women gaining increased autonomy in Canada, facilitated by government support in legal matters. The findings suggest that Canadian laws addressing domestic abuse have empowered women by providing them with resources to exit abusive households. This underscores the broader concept that women experience substantial benefits when migrating from patriarchal societies to more egalitarian ones.

Conclusion

In essence, the concept of diaspora has evolved beyond its original focus on forced dispersion, encompassing a broader spectrum that recognizes various identities within the realms of migration and settlement. This shift involves acknowledging the diversity inherent in diasporic communities and delving into their complex experiences. Notably, the exploration of the experiences and transformations of female immigrants has emerged as a recent phenomenon within the theoretical discourse on diaspora. The incorporation of female perspectives in diaspora scholarship can be delineated into three distinct phases. Initially, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, migration and diaspora studies depicted females merely as a binary opposition to males. The second phase, during the 1990s, saw the emergence of feminist scholarship in diaspora studies, establishing connections between gender and various other categories. In the third and most recent phase of feminist diaspora scholarship, there is a heightened emphasis on gender as a foundational element shaping how women interpret and navigate their experiences, resulting in diverse outcomes in the context of migration and settlement within the diaspora. Recent studies on South Asian female immigrants have brought to light three significant issues: migration reinforcing domination, migration providing autonomy, and female autonomy leading to domestic conflicts. These diverse perspectives underscore the need for further exploration,

particularly among specific groups of female immigrants who share common cultural backgrounds and navigate similar cultural challenges in the diaspora.

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