

Marginalized Narratives: The Personal and the Political

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Abstract: In this essay, I am going to explore the role of narrative and story telling in documenting and transforming migrant and marginalized women's experiences. Drawing from multiple theorists and writers, I suggest that these stories are a way to move from a space of silence into voice, by creating and confirming identity and self-hood. This agency in self-definition is demonstrated most importantly by the recalling and conceptualisation of 'home' and belonging.

"When she transforms silence into language, a woman transgresses." (Gloria Anzaldúa)

In this essay, I am going to explore the role of narrative and story telling in documenting and transforming migrant and marginalized women's experiences. Drawing from multiple theorists and writers, I suggest that these stories are a way to move from a space of silence into voice, by creating and confirming identity and self-hood. This agency in self-definition is demonstrated most importantly by the recalling and conceptualisation of 'home' and belonging. Yet, it would be incomplete to say that these narratives focus purely on the personal level of perception. The reality is that the racism, operating within the broader social and political systems, shape and distort women's experiences in negative ways. Narrative can be a way to both reveal these injustices and resist them. The possible purposes of story telling and the interpretations of 'home' are in no way limited to those ideas presented in this essay. Experiences are so multiple that they cannot be truthfully and fixedly boxed and categorized. The purpose of this essay is simply to look for some common threads in order to illustrate a sense of a collective, which is the idea behind the various anthologies that were looked at. This paper is a reflection of the different stories and theories of 'racialized' migrant and marginalized women. To avoid running the risk of 'speaking for others' or misinterpretation, I tried to keep true to the women's own words and quotes. I think it's also important to acknowledge my own social location and privileges as a white, middle-class woman and to stress that I am in no way an expert in understanding or speaking to the positions or experiences of the women I chose to include in my essay.

The idea of experience itself is a highly theorized and contested subject. The use of experience in feminist theory has been both important in illustrating women's lives as well as heavily critiqued as being exclusionary and essentialist. The critique is centred on the existence of multiple social locations such as class and race, which have been ignored and erased within the general category of "woman". In order to resist the essentializing of experience, it is crucial to maintain and express experiences coming from a place of oppression, from the space in the margins. The creative narratives and stories from women who carry different and varying identities can be a tool to help them navigate through the dominant meta-narratives which exclude and silence them. Writing their stories can be a way for women to map out and locate themselves and their histories.

In her essay "Chandra Mohanty and the Revaluing of 'Experience'", Shari Stone-Mediatore points out that feminist

identity politics theorists such as Elizabeth Weed and Chandra Mohanty have problematized theorizing around women's experiences because when "[this] is taken as the ground of a common interest...we may reverse hierarchies, positing a different group as the subject of knowledge and politics. But we leave intact the categories for defining group identity, the exclusion those categories entail, and the broader structures of domination and exploitation." (Stone-Mediatore 112) This type of critical analysis has made feminists become cautious in approaching the issue of experience in and of itself. Joan Wallach Scott has attacked the notion of experience by echoing Foucault's claim that we are always constituted within discourse. Thus our 'experiences' merely mirror and are constructed out of these dominant ideologies, instead of reflecting upon and deconstructing them. (Stone-Mediatore) Stone-Mediatore argues that Scott's theory is actually a critique of empiricist experience, which should not include marginalized women's experience-based narratives because they tend to also contain a political element. (Stone-Mediatore) Scott's generalization works to discredit and therefore erase the lived realities of women who occupy different social locations and are trying to speak and (re)define themselves against dominant knowledge, which they ultimately critique by doing so. Stone-Mediatore emphasizes the importance of non-empirical narratives and instead suggests viewing experience not as producing a certain 'truth', but rather as a "resource for critical reflection." (Stone-Mediatore 116)

Story telling is a powerful act because it gives voice to women who have been silenced. It's crucial that women must be authors of their own texts. Hooks stresses that they must resist the appropriation of their experiences by the colonizer. The construction of marginalized women as "Other" allows those in positions of privilege to speak for them and therefore silence them. (hooks) She articulates the dialogue as follows: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak for yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew." (hooks 152) When women speak in their own words, they are re-writing *themselves* back into existence, they are *resisting* definition.

The existence of narratives marginalized women alone cannot be enough to "de-centre" and interrupt dominant discourses, but rather the importance lies in how these histories or "imaginative records" are read, appropriated and interpreted by an audience. (Mohanty) Similarly, Parin Dossa explains story telling as being "for another just as much as it is for oneself." (Dossa 65) Both of

these accounts imply a two-way process of communication between the speaker and the reader. In this sense, the reader must be “active” by engaging directly with the text. In “Making Face, Making Soul”, Anzaldúa draws attention to the very structure and organization of the anthology by pointing out that “the categories in this work reflect our fragmented and interrupted dialogue which is said to be a discontinued and incomplete discourse.” (Anzaldúa xvii) So rather than presenting a finished or static ‘whole’, the text itself is filled with gaps and spaces that can reflect not only women’s silences, but the very journeys these women are embarking on to connect and piece together their histories and selfhood. The text is not complete, but rather fluid and open to further construction. This ‘connect the dots’ approach is acted out not only by the writers, but by the readers themselves. (Anzaldúa)

What if language is not shared between parties? Or what happens to one’s voice when they are not able to speak in their own language? In her poem “Mother Tongue”, Susan Lee expresses the difficulties in adopting a new language and the subsequent detriment to her own: “When I came to this land/I was fed another tongue/and, bit by bit/it filled my mouth/until I could not speak/I was forced to swallow/My mother tongue/to form new words/in order to be heard.” (Lee 77) Communication and language can be tricky subjects to try to navigate around. When one’s own language does not correspond with dominant ways of speaking, their voice can not only be repressed and silenced, but the two-way process of communication between the writer and the reader can be complicated. Language constructs and shapes reality rather than just merely reflecting it. (Hua) There is a power inherent within language so not only can it be used to misrepresent marginalized experience, it can also not be complete or adequate enough to document these experiences. Maria Lugones addresses this issue when she notes that,

when we talk to you we use your language: the language of your experience and of your theories. We try to use it to communicate our world of experience. But since your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion. We cannot talk to you in our language because you do not understand it... [this requires] that we either use your language and distort our experience not just in the speaking about it, but in the living of it, or that we remain silent. Complaining about exclusion is a way of remaining silent. (Lugones & Spelman, 20)

The personal and the political share a history of being in close relation to one another. Mohanty notes that, “feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history. This is a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history, but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicised consciousness and self-identity. Writing often becomes the context through which political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle about reality itself.” (Mohanty 34) Similarly, writer and essayist Salman Rushdie has stated, “re-describing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.” (Rushdie 14) It is important for marginalized women to collectively come together to speak themselves and their histories into existence by challenging both androcentric and imperialist structures and knowledges, which is the aim of these collections of stories. These collections can create a sense of solidarity, while still acknowledging differences

among identities and experiences. This medium can be a way to claim identity/ies and make them selves visible to the oppressive society in which they reside.

One anthology of immigrant women’s writing is appropriately and cleverly titled “When Your Voice Tastes Like Home”. This makes a direct link between narrative and belonging. Story telling can be viewed as a way to locate oneself within space and time, which relies heavily on nostalgia and the act of remembering. Bell hooks reflects on a statement that has been repeatedly asserted throughout the “Freedom Charter” that documented the struggle against racial apartheid in South Africa and seems to be echoed throughout films and books that she has encountered: “*our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting*” To her, this assertion is a “politicisation of memory that distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as it once was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present.” (hooks 147)

The critical feminist race theories of hooks and Mohanty as well as recent feminist analyses of fictional works by women of colour living in North America have worked to explore the concept of home as it pertains to women, by disrupting simplified “return” stories and problematizing dominant androcentric biases that have been used as templates in understanding migrant experiences (Nettles). Not all women have the same experience of ‘home’. It can be conceptualised as a physical location such as a house, nation or soil, or it can be interpreted as something intangible - a space inside oneself that evokes feelings of belonging and well being or even loss and pain. Not only can the concept be theorized and interpreted in a myriad of ways in general, women’s own social positions, histories and various identities create and influence their experiences of longing and belonging. The migrant women that are represented through their stories in this paper are all racialized in their host countries, yet the conditions and unique cultures of their home countries can play a role in shaping their experiences. Class and economic position within both places can influence experience with regards to such things as access to shelter and material comfort. Other identities that women may carry such as sexual expression or spiritual beliefs and practices can also play a determining role in possible further marginalization. Many of the narratives and creative expression that I came across focused on the importance of relation and connection to others. Therefore, the existence of social contact and networks can heavily influence one’s articulation and experiences of place and belonging.

bell hooks’ account of *homeplace* is saturated with feelings and images of safety and renewal. She constructs ‘home’ as both a physical sanctuary as well as a metaphorical space for connection and feeling. She begins her point of the re-telling of experience at the time of childhood. Growing up in a segregated black neighbourhood in the American south, homes were set up as sites of resistance; spaces where they could reclaim their “humanness” and selfhood and a place that provided safety and support. The home was a way to confront the dominant racist, masculinist society by resisting the internalisation of outside definition by defining and preserving their own way of life and practices of community. It was a place to heal wounds afflicted by racism by creating a sense of renewal, transforming the fragmented pieces of self and making them whole. (hooks)

In her narrative, hooks conjures up the powerful image of journey. It is a physical journey that was carried out by the trip from her family’s neighbourhood to the poor, white community where her grandparents resided. This trip is characterized by both

“sweetness and bitterness” (hooks 41), by a sense of danger and not belonging and ending with a sense of relief and security. These positive feelings are punctuated by images of connection and familiarity. “Oh! That feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edges of her yard, when we could see the soot black face of our grandfather, Daddy Gus, sitting in his chair on the porch, smell his cigar, and rest on his lap.” (hooks 41) This sense of safety is obtained by the crossing of a physical and socially mapped out threshold, which in this particular context works to regulate who can occupy certain spaces. Home and belonging are thus created within specific imagined boundaries constructed by broader social structures.

Home can also be experienced as a place of pain and loss for those who have migrated across borders and boundaries. Dossa defines displacement as the “rupturing of relations wrought by colonization” (Dossa 16) The colonial histories of home countries have had devastating effects on the sense of identity and the loss of culture on both an individual and a collective scale. Yet, this colonial process can still be carried out even after the individual or family migrates. Both overt and systemic racism work to regulate and pressure marginalized people to adopt the dominant culture’s ‘norms’. The creation of the “Other” and the constant operation of the “Us vs. Them” dichotomy are colonial tools that valorise cultural characteristics of the West and impose these qualities and values onto those who do not possess them. This process can be seen operating in the fictional account of one woman’s visit to her parents home, where Rosemary Cho Leyson illustrates a vivid portrait of attempted assimilation and disconnect within a family who have migrated to the United States from Korea. From the narrator’s point of view, the trip is experienced as one to the past, which is “filled with sorrow, shame and broken dreams, in a pit with no bottom or top.” (Leyson 97) The assimilation of her mother into North American culture and the quiet depression exhibited by her father creates a disruption in communication within the family. The pressure to integrate and the repression of cultural identity cause the family to become emotionally fragmented and separate from each other. The pain of this loss is illustrated when “she reminisces about her early childhood in Manila, where except for her dad who was stateside, her family was together. They ate together and stuck up for each other. Nothing was ever the same after they came to the States. The home her family made here is not a place saturated in painful and unhealed experiences of growing up in a country that didn’t want her or her family.” (Leyson 100) The home is constructed as a shameful place because of a society that has robbed her family of the desire to express and celebrate their cultural past. In contrast to hooks’ experience, home is a place of forgetting rather than cherishing culture and community. Yet resistance is exercised as the narrator attempts to preserve and hold onto her Korean culture by emphasizing the use and importance of language and food. “She almost feels like crying as the sensation of the food sinks into her taste buds. It is an old, familiar feeling, one too precious to ever take for granted. It is the only link she has to who she is and where she is from.” (Leyson 100) Her narrative thus illustrates that it can be by way of the senses that powerful memories are often evoked and produced. These memories and fragments of the past can be a way for her to achieve a feeling of comfort in a space that is hostile and unwelcoming.

Migrants occupy an ‘in-between’ space, where they are dislocated from their homeland yet may not feel quite at ‘home’ in their newly settled place. The feeling and reality of constantly being

in ‘transition’ can be something very painful or destabilizing, yet in the narrative “Disappearing Trails”, Alison Chan and her family portray their experience of this space as something playful, where they can exercise choice in expressing their “Chineseness” or their “Englishness”. She simultaneously inhabits both worlds that work to shape different parts of her self. She confesses, “[c]rossing two borders, the borders between countries and the legacy of a mixed heritage, has heightened my sense of the ephemerality of place and belonging, of cultural identity. I exist in places where you normally never look. One moment I am here, the next I have vanished, reappearing over there.” (Chan et. al. 109) This seems to connote moments that are brief and sweet, yet as she points out, they still remain out of her control. (Chan et. al.)

Halleh Ghorashi expresses this idea further in her article *Where the Boundaries are Blurred*, where she talks about her own experience of migrating from Iran after the Revolution and occupying spaces in both the Netherlands and Los Angeles. She conceptualises her idea of home as constantly fluctuating and shifting from one place to another. She illustrates these moments as fleeting when she says, “nevertheless, the feeling of home for a refugee is fleeting and momentary. It is something that one searches for, but it does not last long. Home and homelessness become feelings of mere moments for migrants, moments one cherishes and dislikes at the same time. Feeling closeness but fearing betrayal, the question that keeps you busy becomes: will this moment betray me?” (Ghorashi 9) This sense of fragmentation is reverberated throughout many of the stories and texts that I encountered. Memories, definitions of self and culture, and ways of speaking are rendered partial and incomplete. They are interrupted and fractured not only by the act of travelling across spaces, but by the racist and colonial barriers that work to silence experiences and histories. To account for these fragments, Ghorashi borrows the idea that the concept of home does not have to be fixed to a particular place. Ghorashi views the ideas of home and belonging as fluid and created by one’s positioning within a particular space. She writes that, “by adopting a deterritorialized notion of home, I show that the feelings of belonging and foreignness do not have to be related to a fixed place, either the homeland or the new country, but that they are related to one’s position in life. The sense of belonging is not related to a soil...but it is rather to what a place can offer and how one can become part of a life of a certain place...it is the meaning of the place that is then essential.” (Ghorashi 12)

Very evocative and provocative images of memory and fragmentation are conjured up in Salman Rushdie’s essay, “Imaginary Homelands”. He suggests that home can be a place that can be (re)created within one’s imagination. He begins his narrative by detailing a framed photo that hangs above his study, which evokes an ambush on his senses. Pictured is an old house in Bombay where he was to be born, and a place he later left to migrate to Britain. He writes, “the photograph has naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically. The colours of my history had seeped out of my mind’s eye; now my other two eyes were assaulted by colours, by the vividness of the red tiles, the yellow-edged green of the cactus leaves, the brilliance of bougainvillea.” (Rushdie 9) Here, the act of remembering can be seen to illuminate the past.

Rushdie’s text also works to complicate simple ‘return’ stories and to position an individual’s relationship with place as fluid and fragmented. Since one’s separation from their country means that they cannot fully reclaim their past home in the physical sense,

one must rely on the fractured structure of memory which can work to (re)create a fictionalised version of home, a home one can live in through their mind. He theorizes that all immigrants are “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” (Rushdie 10) For him, home is therefore constructed on a purely metaphorical level where one can choose to connect with their home through the act of remembering itself. He uses another metaphor of memories as broken shards of glass and, like an echo of hooks’ statement, emphasizes that these pieces are “not merely a mirror of nostalgia” (Rushdie 12), but that they can be used to transform the present.

By the narratives and stories discussed throughout the essay, it becomes evident that there is no one definition of ‘home’ nor is there one purpose or goal in which to carry out the act of story telling. What these stories all share in common is the agency exercised by the women in creating a voice, one which can share their personal experiences of suffering and struggle as well as one which implicates the social and political systems that work to oppress them. This power and resistance is illustrated in the words of bell hooks, when she exerts that, “moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back”, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice” (hooks 211).

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