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DIGITAL DIASPORA AND THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY IN HUSSAIN'S HIDDEN FIRES

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ABSTRACT
This study explores identity negotiation from the perspective of the digital diaspora in the selected text, Hidden Fires. This study focuses on two main characters of the novel, Rubi and her grandfather, Yusuf. By applying the theoretical framework of Jennifer Brinkerhoff, Digital Diaspora: Identity and Transnational Engagement, this study uncovers the hidden realities of diaspora related to identity negotiation, homeland identity, self-positioning among youth, and psychological links with homeland. The analysis of this study highlights that migrants use social media platforms to maintain strong ties with their homeland, construct their position in the host society, and shape their identities. Hidden Fires is a perfect example of understanding the struggles of diaspora in relation to identity negotiation and homeland identity from the mirror of digital diaspora.

Keywords: Digital Diaspora, Identity Negotiation, Homeland Identity, Psychological Links with Homeland.

Introduction

The evolution of technology and the increasing use of the internet have shrunk the world into a small global village. In this rapidly evolving digital world, the internet acts as a vital medium for diaspora people to connect with their homeland and loved ones. The concept of diaspora has now evolved into 'digital diaspora,' which is a subcategory of postcolonialism. Robert J. C. Young, in his book Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction, defines the term postcolonialism as, "postcolonialism commemorates not the colonial but the triumph over it. The word 'post' highlights the victories of colonized nations and the postcolonial era in its name pays tribute to the historical achievements of resistance against colonial power". It is the phenomenon of understanding how colonization has impacted societies and altered culture, politics, and economy.

According to Cohen and Fischer (2019), the term 'diaspora' consisted of a network of communities, some sedentary and others quite mobile, that lived in often involuntary dispersion from their homelands and that resisted full assimilation or were denied the option of assimilating, or both at the same time.

The rise of social media has opened new doors for diaspora to connect, turning them into 'digital diaspora' where diasporic members use digital tools to maintain their strong ties with their homeland. Digital diaspora is the dynamic field of study of the twenty-first century, and the term 'Digital Diaspora' was first introduced by Anna Everett in her book 'Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace', which highlights the role of social media in shaping migrants' identities, maintaining connection with homeland, and ensuring their position in the hostland. "A digital diaspora is an immigrant group that uses social media to participate in virtual networks for social, political, religious, and communicational purposes with their homeland" (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010).

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In her book, Digital diaspora: Identity and Transnational Engagement, Brinkerhoff explores the role of social media in connecting migrants with their culture of origin, preserving language, negotiating identity, shaping their position in the host society, and promoting solidarity (2009).

Literature Review

According to Kerstin B. Andersson (2019), in "Digital Diasporas: An Overview of the Research Areas of Migration and New Media Through a Narrative Literature Review" investigated the evolving media and its role in diaspora. Kerstin argued that with the emergence of technology, diaspora people are now using Skype, polymedia, and smartphones to establish virtual communities with their country of origin effectively. In addition, he stated that online spaces have become a convenient tool for diaspora to negotiate their identities in the homeland and hostland, construct their sense of self in the adopted society, and maintain familial relationships with their country of origin.

In today's digital era, the notion of digital diaspora has gained prominence. Ansar and Maitra, in their research "Digital Diaspora Activism at the Margins: Unfolding Rohingya Diaspora Interactions on Facebook (2024)", examined the Rohingian diaspora. They investigated the Rohingya's use of Facebook to counter challenges of identity negotiation, memories of loss, sufferings, and homeland nostalgia, and highlighted that 47 FB pages publish 34,905 posts and receive nearly 8 million views. Because of the role of Facebook, they raised their voice against cultural and racial marginalization in the host society, demanded human rights, and gained global attention.

In another insightful research, "Digital Diaspora and Nationhood: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Practices of Nationhood," Azeb Madebo investigated the Ethiopian diaspora. She conducted research from 2020 to 2022 in Ethiopia and examined the role of Instagram in shaping the identities of the diaspora. Through critical examination of the research, she highlighted that Ethiopian diaspora members use Instagram to represent their political, social, national, and ethnic identities by using different emojis, images, and bio statements (Madebo). In addition to this, they represented the image of the flag of their country to show their ethnicity. Analyzing the existing literature, limited work has been done on digital diaspora regarding the selected text, Hidden Fires, to fill the gap of identity negotiation, homeland identity, self-positioning among youth, and psychological links with homeland. This study focuses on identity negotiation, the construction of self in the host society, psychological links with homeland, and homeland identity through the perspective of digital diaspora.

Objective of the Study

1. To examine the identity crises faced by characters and the role of social media in shaping their identities in Hidden Fires by Sairish Hussain.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed a correlational theoretical framework of Jennifer Brinkerhoff to investigate the identity crisis of diaspora people from the perspective of digital diaspora. She wrote a book named Digital Diaspora: Identity and Transnational Engagement in which she uncovers the challenges that diaspora people face regarding identity negotiation, homeland identity, and the construction of self in the host society. Moreover, she states that "migrant integration can be eased when Diasporas have opportunities to express their hybrid identities (a sense of self that is neither wholly of the homeland nor exclusively reflective of the hostland) collectively" (Brinkerhoff 2009).

According to the concept of homeland, Brinkerhoff (2009), argues that online spaces act as a platform for diaspora people to connect with their homeland and to maintain their strong familial ties with their homeland. By using social media platforms, they participate in democratic values, cultural norms, and political agendas, and promote solidarity in their country of origin. In addition, digital tools ensure security in the homeland and hostland and improve their quality of life. Homeland identity is based on a sense of belonging, emotional

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connection, and feelings of discrimination in the adopted society, and it hits diaspora people in the form of memories of the past and nostalgia.

In her critical analysis of digital diaspora, Brinkerhoff explores the position of youth in the diaspora society and highlights the challenges youth face while making their position in the hostland. The concept of self-positioning is deeply connected with the domain of digital diaspora because it is the emerging scenario of the twenty-first century. Brinkerhoff (2009), states that digital platforms have made it easier for diaspora to shape their identities as they build virtual communities, which help them to negotiate their identity in the host society. New media, such as text messaging and Internet discussions, emphasize the development of self-position among youth.

In her book Digital Diaspora: Identity and Transnational Engagement, Brinkerhoff highlights the concept of identity negotiation through social media platforms. Identity negotiation in the context of diaspora primarily involves the sense of self in the homeland and the hostland, to know who they are, where they belong, and what their cultural values are as Homi K. Bhabha (1994), states that identity is not fixed but changes according to situation, and is formed through cultural hybridity in an "in-between" or "third space", emerging from cultural exchange and negotiation.

Research Methodology

To translate theoretical ideas into practical insights, this study employs a carefully designed qualitative research method. Through the qualitative research method, the researchers uncover characters' behaviors to understand hidden aspects of diaspora people in the host society, according to the digital diaspora. Under the umbrella term of the qualitative research approach, McKee's textual analysis model has been used to examine the text deeply. Among the main aspects of McKee's model, making an educated guess is used in this study to profoundly evaluate the challenges of identity negotiation. The aspect 'making an educated guess' means text can be interpreted in multiple dimensions based on the reader's background knowledge, language, and socio-cultural backgrounds.

The selected novel, Hidden Fires by Sairish Hussain, is a multifaceted text that reflects diaspora and the challenges that diaspora people face during their stay in the host society. Two main characters of the novel, sixteen-year-old Rubi and her eighty-year-old grandfather Yusuf, confront challenges of identity negotiation in the adopted society. Yusuf is the first-generation diaspora member who suffers from identity crisis, trapped between his past (Pak-India Partition) and the hostland, which triggers his physical as well as mental health. He cherishes the moments he spent with his family in Pakistan and watches Geo News to maintain his connection with the political and socio-cultural practices of his motherland. On the other side, Rubi, who is a third-generation diaspora, suffers more than his parents and grandparents. She is entangled between the cultural values of the host society and her homeland's values. Social media plays its vital role in the lives of these two characters as it provides online spaces to stay connected to their homeland, shape their identities, and construct their position in the host society. Rubi uses YouTube to search for her homeland identity and her position in the host society, and maintains their psychological links, similarly Yusuf connects himself with his homeland through news channels. Therefore, Brinkerhoff's framework and McKee's textual analysis model help to reveal the hidden realities of diaspora and the role of social media in constructing their identities.

Discussion

In the critical analysis of the selected text, Hidden Fires by Sairish Hussain, this research demonstrates that by applying Brinkerhoff's tenets of Identity Negotiation, Homeland Identity, Self-Positioning, and Psychological Links with Homeland, the novel serves as a representation of the situation of diaspora people and the challenges they face while constructing their identity.

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Moreover, it highlights that a strong familial connection can eliminate problems and enable migrants to confront their past and present.

Identity of diaspora is a challenging factor in the host society, and it is constructed, shaped, and reshaped according to the gateway between homeland and hostland. Identity negotiation highlights the tension between adaptation and resistance, showing how people shape and reshape who they are in response to changing circumstances. Brinkerhoff (2009), in her book, extensively explains the concept of identity negotiation in the prism of digital diaspora as she argues that migrants "explore identity" on the internet and the internet is becoming an important weapon for diaspora "to negotiate their identity".

Hidden Fires portrays the issues of identity negotiation through the main character, Rubi, and her grandfather, Yusuf. Rubi is the victim of identity crisis as she faces neglect by her family and the host society. She keeps herself locked in the room and searches for her identity on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, as depicted through the text, "Alone is good compared to this" (Hussain 2024). In addition to this, striving for identity negotiation not only shows physical displacement but also deeply impacts the mental health of migrants when they are not accepted in the hostland nor in the homeland. Basically, immigrants grapple with two identities, and they face neglect from both sides. Similar is the case with Rubi because she is being ignored by her family and society, as it is evident through Rubi`s dialogues "I will live my life suppressing myself around other people" and "I was feeling lonely" (Hussain 2024).

Identity negotiation is deeply rooted in the language and cultural values of the country of origin. From the viewpoint of the digital diaspora, the cultural values of migrants are significant in knowing that migrants use social media to preserve language and practice tradition despite the physical distance from their homeland. Brinkerhoff (2009), in her book, emphasizes the element of cultural values by saying that "identity associated with migrants' culture of origin" and immigrants shape their identities through cultural values. Rubi, the main character of the novel, suffers from an identity crisis, and to confront the challenges of identity, she uses social media to search for her cultural values, she googles "how to read namaz" (Hussain 2024).

With the evolution of technology, social media has made life easier, especially for migrants who use online spaces to connect with their homelands and establish their position in the adopted society. Hidden Fires centers on the migrants' use of social media for different purposes, such as maintaining cultural values, supporting their homeland economically, and promoting solidarity in their homeland. Rubi uses digital platforms to search for her identity in the host society, the history and cultural values of her homeland, and to find a way to live in the adopted society, as the text illustrates that "virtual map" and she says, "Google innit". In addition, Rubi uses the internet to break the window, as it is evident from the text "I am googling how to break a double-glazed window and racking my brains" (Hussain 2024).

Diaspora is a complex phenomenon that brings numerous challenges with it. Migrants struggle with multiple challenges related to identity negotiation, such as discrimination, marginalization, racial and cultural disparities, and primarily psychological issues. In the critical analysis of text, Rubi has no direct link with her homeland, and she follows the cultural values and lifestyle of the host society, because of which a conflict arises between Rubi and her grandfather. Rubi wears "tight trousers" and "short top shirt" while going outside, and her grandfather says that "this is my home and you need to respect my rules, young lady". Rubi is entangled between the cultural practices of her homeland and the hostland she declares "this is so unfair" (Hussain 2024).

Another important aspect of digital diaspora in Brinkerhoff's book Digital Diaspora: Identity and Transnational Engagement is 'homeland identity'. According to Avtar Brah (1996), "home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, it is a place of no return, lived experience of a locality signifies its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, seasons and

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atmosphere. In digital spaces, immigrants stay connected to their homeland through online communities, cultural mediums, festivals, and traditions.

In Hidden Fires, Yusuf, an old man, is the victim of double migration, first from India to Pakistan and then, after partition, he moves from Pakistan to Bradford, England. After spending a long time in Bradford, he is still trapped in his memories. Social media plays an important role in providing different online sites to allow diaspora people to stay updated about homeland news, engage in cultural discussions, celebrate festivals virtually, and maintain connections with the communities back home. Yusuf and his old friend Ashraf watch the Pakistani Geo News and among these, they are fond of watching news related to politics, as highlighted in the text, "Work politics, money politics, Pakistani politics, British politics, tribal politics, and village politics" (Hussain 2024). Furthermore, after watching the news, they have debates on politics because it is their favorite topic to discuss. Yusuf struggles with his past; he cherishes the moments he spent in his homeland as it reflects through these lines, "an old Amitabh Bachchan movie", parathas, and masala omelettes" (Hussain 2024). Throughout Yusuf's life, he remains the major victim of trauma, gradually starts forgetting things, and he forgets his way to the mosque, and cries while remembering his brother, whom he lost during the partition of India and Pakistan.

Psychological links with homeland is another significant aspect of diaspora, which deals with deep emotional and sentimental attachment of migrants with their country of origin, and these memories are shaped by nostalgia, cultural pride, and belonging to cultural heritage. Brinkerhoff posits that while negotiating identity, diaspora people face "socio-psychological challenges" (Brinkerhoff 2009). The selected novel, Hidden Fires, shows Yusuf's struggle with the traumatic memories of the past as he says, "the one we all have tried to bury, it's all in my head" (Hussain 2024).

Conclusion

Sairish Hussain's Hidden Fires, investigated through Jennifer Brinkerhoff's theory of Digital Diaspora and McKee's textual analysis model, highlights the role of digital platforms in negotiating migrants' identities and their connections with their homeland. The findings of this study show that Rubi negotiates her identity by creating WhatsApp group with her friends where she shares issues of identity negotiation in the host society, as well as searches for her homeland identity by watching documentaries on the partition of India-Pakistan. Similarly, Yusuf confronts his identity crisis by linking with his homeland through Geo News channel and by discussing it with his old friend Ashraf. In addition, Rubi understands her grandfather's trauma with the help of social media. Eventually, Hidden Fires reveals the identity crisis of diaspora community through the characters of Rubi and Yusuf who finally mange to get some sense of identity by forming their own digital communities.

Recommendations

The novel Hidden Fires can be explored through Rubi's identity struggle between her brown grandparents and white grandparents. Besides this one important factor, future researchers can examine bullying through a deep analysis, including physical and online bullying. Further, this novel can be analyzed through the other aspects of Brinkerhoff's theory, such as socio-economic support and promoting solidarity of the homeland by using online spaces. These recommendations could open new ways for future researchers to expand their discussion on digital diaspora.

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