The Diasporic Experience in Mira Jacob’s The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing: Assimilation, Memory, and Mourning

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Received on: 5-1-2021 Accepted on: 26-6-2021

Abstract

This research article explores the politics of cultural assimilation in Mira Jacob’s novel The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing (2013). The aim is also to discuss the intersection of memory, trauma, and mourning concerning the immigrant experience. In terms of cultural assimilation, Barkan’s six-stage model is critiqued, and diasporic ‘hybridity’ is proposed as an alternative to the notion of total assimilation. In the analysis of traumatic experience, the paper refers to Caruth’s formulations of the ‘abreactive model’. The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing (2013) is a transcultural text that represents the gap that exists between first-generation Indian immigrants and their offspring. It is selected for analysis because it is a typical trauma novel featuring timeless and unspeakable experiences. The novel does not present a postcolonial collective trauma but an example of diasporic imagined trauma. By introducing two contrasting generations in her novel, Mira Jacob attempts to highlight the cultural dilemmas that baffle diasporas in the United States particularly those that resist assimilation. The textual analysis reveals that much of the narrative projects the haunting presence of home and the anguish of personal loss experienced by first-generation immigrants. Moreover, the novel questions the nostalgic and romantic engagements with the past, and it rather promotes a bold affirmation of the culture of the adopted land. In other words, Mira Jacob calls for more genuine engagements with the new culture that the second and third-generation immigrants are more exposed to than their home culture because their in-between status leaves them with no choice.

Keywords: Assimilation, Memory, Identity, Trauma, Diasporic Experience.

Assimilation is sometimes viewed as an answer to the discontents of diaspora, and it simultaneously affects the way immigrants look back towards their native culture. Robert Part and Ernest Burgess define assimilation as a “process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in common cultural life” (735). Part and Burgess’ definition of assimilation does not differ markedly from Barkan's six-stage model, in which total assimilation is required (65). However, postcolonial diaspora critics advocate the multiplicity of identity construction and think of hybridity as a subversive strategy (Bhabha, 154; Trodd, 142; Guignery, 3; Pieterse, 20; Papastergiadis, 172). Georgiou, for instance, argues that the extended cultural boundaries that diaspora possesses can be enabling for the
construction of new and multiple domestic and collective homes (23). In her view, home is always ambiguous and incomplete; it is never fixed and permanent (23). Similarly, Kołodziejczyk posits that the more we focus on identity issues, the more we limit the migrant experience to the struggle for recognition in the process of settling down (114). If reduced to this domain, the diasporic subjectivity might remain within the confines of ‘fitting in’ and the issues of loss and gain in the cultural process.

In diaspora studies today, there is a recognized crisis with the ‘hyphen’. In his deliberations about diaspora, Vijay Mishra refers to diaspora as people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia (1). Pressing either side of the hyphen results ultimately in imbalance and the diasporic subject bears the consequences. This issue is reflected in Mira Jacob’s novel particularly in her juxtaposition of two immigrant generations. *The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing* is a diasporic novel that narrates the story of an Indian American family and their loss of a loved son and other family members in tragic circumstances. Though it features several joyful moments, the novel can be read as an elegy because of the tragic events that overshadow the narrative. Jacob’s characters of first-generation immigrants struggle with whether to maintain a particular identity or transform it further. Remaining hyphenated, as in the case of the parents Kamala and Thomas in the novel who immigrated to the United States in the 60s, creates an identity crisis.

More importantly, revisiting the past and taking responsibility for individual familial decisions determine their engagement with the American culture and society. Their choice whether to adopt either pole of the hyphen complicates their diasporic experience, very often triggering memories and instituting moments of guilt and remorse.

Apart from personal experience and the route of migrancy taken, other factors determine the type of identity that diasporas form, whether hybrid or hyphenated. The notion of ‘imaginary homeland’ persists and imbalances the position of the designated hyphen. It very often re-defines the relationship of the diasporic subject with the general society. Besides, border crossing in its totality entails mapping and imagining the world, resulting in a particular frozen view of the homeland. In any case, home, both in its real shape as a place and in its symbolic imaginary form, provides the initial and emotional parameters for identity (Georgiou 23). The ethnic tag also provides a sense of belonging, punctuating identity and multiplying affiliations. On the other hand, the acceptance and assimilation of racially mixed individuals have always encountered great ambivalence and resistance in American society (Barkan 67). The politics of assimilation of the receiving culture determines to a great extent the type of identity diasporas construct. Though there have been attempts to re-write the nation as an entity not associated with a pre-given people (Antonsich 5), essentialist identities resurge, demarcating who intrudes and who has the right to be included. De-ethnicizing and writing the nation in civic terms is a bold suggestion, yet it seems inapplicable. Ethnicity and skin color remain among the robust markers of identity in the United States and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, Mira Jacob, in her novel, projects the idea that immigrants of second and third-generations should be allowed to choose the path that is best for them. The American model of assimilation advocated by Barkan, Part, and Burgess fails to address ethnic differences and the visible identificational and cultural markers of diasporas. For Barkan, assimilated individuals must have lost most of their knowledge of their
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ethnic roots, or those roots had become diffused, merged with what has been absorbed from their new principal societal context (47). If Mira Jacob’s characters are analyzed according to this type of assimilation, the result is instead a conflating unconventional identification where both the receiving and sending cultures interact. Assimilation of the contemporary diaspora is hybridized, involving multi-steps that eventually result in acculturation, adaptation, accommodation, and integration. Jacob’s second-generation diaspora aspire for assimilation but not what Barkan envisions. Though hybrid in cultural identification, Amina and Akhil, Thomas’ children, still show significant association with their roots. The food that Kamala cooks for them at home, the Indian family friends, and the imaginary homeland that they cherish still constitute their Indian American identity. The assimilation that Amina, Akhil, and their friend Dimple envision is bi-directional, requiring the willingness of the dominant society to accept them without prior conditions. The two-way process of this type of assimilation does not necessarily mean that it is an equal cultural exchange. Still, it indicates a cultural hybridization in which both the dominant and the diasporic societies affect and influence each other. The process of integration and Americanization that Amina and Akhil undergo remains inadequate in constituting a sense of self. They are not, in any case, able to shed their ancestral heritage.

The novel provides ample cultural encounters where first-generation immigrants are usually depicted as hesitant in engaging in cultural interactions with the dominant society. This sort of resistance is attributed to the traces of homeland cultural heritage and punctuation of identity. Assimilation is a social process, also taking cultural as well as behavioral variables. The notion of ‘dual loyalties’ mostly associated with the diaspora is regarded as a psychological variable that results mainly from the diasporization process. In this paper, a mix mode of reading is employed to offer a critical analysis of Mira Jacob’s characters. Homi Bhabha’s hybridity theory constitutes the conceptual framework of the study. Jacob’s characters oscillate between the hybridization and hyphenation of identity. More importantly, hybridity here is not viewed from a postcolonial sense, resistive and counter-narrative in Bhabha’s words (235). It is rather employed based on diaspora criticism, signifying multiplicity and celebration of difference. In terms of cultural assimilation, Barkan’s six-stage model is critiqued, and diasporic ‘hybridity’ is proposed as an alternative to the notion of total assimilation. In the analysis of traumatic experience, the paper refers to Caruth’s formulations of the ‘abreactive model’.

Thomas and Kamala, as first-generation immigrants, remain in constant struggle with duality in identity. They never act Americans, and they sometimes ridicule faking being American. Kamala, in particular, does not exert any effort to assimilate or even explore the American culture. Hence, her diasporization process is not complete and her loyalty remains to her roots. Similarly, Thomas, as a brain surgeon, is profoundly respected at his work not for absorbing American cultural values but for his dedication and professionalism in his medical practice. His profession and elite medical profile provide him with a badge to transcend cultural differences, which his wife experiences more clearly in her day-to-day life. Though immigrants worldwide are encouraged to adjust and accommodate to acquire citizenship, Thomas represents the segment of the Indian American diaspora of the sixties categorized often as ‘highly-qualified professionals’. This category of Indian diaspora obtains citizenship not based on assimilation and
absorption of American cultural values but because of the demand for their expertise. Their knowledge and services are required more than their cultural integration, as in Thomas’s case.

One of the central themes in the novel is the complexities of first-generation immigrants and the conflict between the American way of life and Indian tradition. The cultural transition through the first-generation to second-generation diasporas is also very significant in Jacob’s novel. Kamala and Thomas, being first-generation immigrants, carry their cultural baggage with them, and they try to transmit it to their offspring, Amina and Akhil. They expect their children to live by the value system of their Indian culture. Consequently, they force on them specific cultural markers through food, dress, customs, rituals, languages, beliefs, etc. Nevertheless, Akhil and Amina are more exposed to American culture outside their home, and they are eventually sandwiched between two cultural poles. Their cultural negotiations with both sides transform them, and they not only absorb from both sides but exist in-between. In connection to this position, Barkan emphasizes that the federal government in the United States has very early given very concrete recognition to the nation’s ethnic pluralism (67). This constitutional recognition of ethnic pluralism enables both Amina and Akhil to explore both the American culture that they inhabit and the Indian culture that they inherit. Initially, Akhil reflects a negative attitude towards his identity and his ‘self’. In a state of dissonance, he suffers from personal conflict with heritage. When Dimple, his cousin and Amina’s friend, decides to go to the Homecoming dance wearing a sari, Akhil does not approve of it at all. He protests that “Everyone would know that you are Indian, and the next thing you know, you will be asked to make ‘samosas’ for the whole school” (139). By this response, he attempts to discourage and prevent Dimple from pronouncing her cultural identity.

As a bildungsroman, the novel traces the emotional and the intellectual maturity of Akhil and Amina. The continual cultural explorations enable Akhil to understand his in-between position better. He no longer complains about his cultural heritage but embraces who he is and asserts that “I am not trying to be white” (136). All this shows that he experienced an identity crisis. More importantly, it also demonstrates that even the second-generation immigrant spends the whole day outside not to present himself as he is but to pretend to be American. This position is reflected in Barkan’s article about assimilation, where he remarks that the American society, despite its diversity, is not yet ready to be multicolored to the core (68). Although cultural variation demands honest respect, color remains a boundary that assimilation models are unable to blur. Although one of the rights in America is the right to be different, the dominant society in the United States imposes its criteria for acceptance and inclusion (Gordon 17). This situation leaves diasporas in an in-between space in which nothing is definite or articulated.

Despite its recent history, the Indian diaspora in the United States has gained recognized visibility and a strong presence in different sectors of science and technology (Sahay 18). However, the success of any diaspora is usually attributed to its ability to assimilate and integrate into mainstream culture. First-generation immigrants, as depicted in Mira Jacob’s novel typically struggle in their attempt to assimilate into the new culture to gain acceptance, and they even at certain occurrences reject associating themselves with the dominant culture. The idea of ‘Homeland’ remains a haunting presence in their minds. For them, the myth of homecoming (return) remains active even though the journey back home is more fictive than
actual. Diaspora exhibits an orientation to a real or imagined ‘homeland’ as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty (Brubaker 5). They do not seek return, but they desire to maintain a connection with their homeland (Berns-McGown 8). Practically, “not all diasporas wish to return home” (Brah 7), and their nostalgic engagements are part of identity formation. In reality, home is a complicated political and cultural terrain where the diaspora cannot physically return (Nititham 41). The exile and the expatriate always envision a possible return, and this insulates the individual. On the other hand, the immigrant seeks transformation and re-rooting with a desire for continuity. This transformation, however, causes a split of the self and also brings trauma, self-doubt, and uncertainties. For Brubaker and Cooper, identity is a collective phenomenon denoting a fundamental and consequential ‘sameness’ among members of a group or category (7). This sort of ‘sameness’ required for diaspora identity formation is never fixed, since there is no concrete identificational reference. Identity, as understood by Sturat Hall, is something that is not fixed, something beyond conventional boundaries (2). Going beyond the Jewish model necessitates understanding contemporary diasporas on individual basis with specific particularities. The collectivity and shared consciousness implied in ‘sameness’ devalue the legitimacy and importance of particularistic claims of cultural difference. In the novel, Mira Jacob attends to the particularity of identity by presenting two immigrant generations not conforming to a collective model and viewing homeland identification differently.

The textual analysis indicates that diaspora identity is a product of a myriad of intersections. The de-territorialization of identity signifies fluidity and non-fixity. Nevertheless, Brubaker argues that de-territorialization still presupposes that there is ‘an identity’ that is reconfigured, stretched in space to cross state boundaries, but on some level fundamentally the same (13). When under threat, diaspora retreats and returns to an imaginary homeland that serves as “a romantic refuge” (Nititham 41). Invariably, diaspora remains connected with their homeland via different means, and the finality of the diasporic journey is never realized. Jacob’s novel depicts the difficulty in setting the immigrant free from the past and its traces. Through much of the narrative, her first-generation immigrants demonstrate how the past cannot be suppressed easily. The first-generation diaspora clings to their food and clothes as the most obvious identity markers that set them apart and highlight their difference. More importantly, what happens back home does not remain there but affects diasporas and re-defines their association with their ancestral past. On the other hand, their children, mostly second-generation, engage in hybrid social and intercultural interactions. They are caught in-between trying to please parents and also their American peers to meet both their respective expectations. Hence, they show greater flexibility in adapting and assimilating.

**Intersections between Memory and Mourning**

Immigration itself is a stressful experience that often leads to altered physical and psychological health outcomes at the individual level. Cathy Caruth, in her theorizing about trauma, focuses on the complex permutations that unconscious emotions impose on traumatic reactions. She describes ‘trauma as not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature— the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the
survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Based on Caruth’s notion of trauma, Balaev describes the traumatic experience as a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain but maintains the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the power to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups (151). A close examination of these characteristics indicates that diasporic experience is traumatic. However, diaspora trauma is different from postcolonial trauma in terms of collectivity. In diaspora, trauma is personal for a myriad of reasons and conditioned by the types of routes pursued in the immigrant’s journey. It is about loss and mourning, solely a lived experience of a traumatic event by an individual. What demarcates diaspora trauma from collective postcolonial trauma is the historical absence and re-remembering of the collective past.

Vijay Mishra links South Asian diasporic trauma to the painful experiences they underwent, such as the passage, plantation life, or events in the diaspora like the ‘Komagata Maru’ incident (3). Trauma in the contemporary diaspora is mainly associated with memory, racializing, and troubled relationships with the general society. Mira Jacob’s novel is ridden with loss and profound grief because the traumatic death of Thomas’ family members, Ammachy, Sunil, and Akhil, causes several implications in the family’s life in the United States. In the novel, trauma is mostly associated with Thomas’ mourning of a dying son, a dying mother, and a dying brother. Besides, Amina’s mourning of a dying father and the tragic death of a brother, and her role as a witness to all the family’s saga complicates the narrative. The reader ultimately sympathizes with the family’s loss.

The notion of an ‘imagined’ traumatic event is of interest here, and it suggests self-consciously ideological narratives of nationalist history, as Alexander explains (8), or primarily a sense of loss as recounted in diasporic narratives. Alexander’s concept points to the entirely illusory, nonempirical, nonexistent quality of the original event (9). These features are inherently diasporic and are closely associated with diasporas and their varied routes and experiences of migrancy. It is only through the memory that second and third-generation diasporas have a sense of traumatic experience. It is a particular type of trauma originating in uprootedness, ethnic difference, memory, and also cultural trauma in the form of racializing and profiling. It is not collective as in postcolonial or holocaust trauma, where victimization is a central characteristic. The emphasis in diaspora trauma is on memory and personal experience rather than collective. Though arguments about trauma are based on ontological reality, for second and third generations of diaspora, it is purely imagined or primarily transferred from family associations or ethnic communities. Nonetheless, trauma, either imagined or real, is a phenomenon that abruptly and harmfully affects collective and individual identity.

*The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing* as a diaspora trauma novel offers a close exploration of interiority, memory, psychological verisimilitude, and personal isolation. The sudden and untimely death of Thomas’s extended family in India leaves him traumatized. His situation worsens, and he subsequently traumatizes his small family in the United States. Thomas experiences a sense of guilt for refusing to stay along with his mother and brother back in Salem, India. Based on Balaev’s definition, Thomas’ trauma can be understood as an emotional response to the overwhelming event that disrupted his previous ideas of self and the standards by which he evaluates society (150). The memory of dead family members is not only
social but deeply connected to the sense of self. This sense of self is shattered when Thomas realizes that his mother and brother are dead in a tragic incident. Also, the house in Salem as a place through metaphoric and material means functions as an effect of remembering. It is also through it as a site inhabited, viewed, or imagined that Thomas develops a melancholic feeling. It is not only a physical location of experience, but also an entity that organizes memories, feelings, and meaning because it is the site where individual and cultural realities intersect (Walter 21). Once the familial connection is lost, Thomas strongly feels that he has betrayed his family. His mother haunts him, and he spends nights talking to her spirits on the porch of the house. Much of his hallucination comes as a result of a guilt-ridden feeling. Ammachy represents an invaluable link to the ‘homeland’, which Thomas misses much after her tragic death. Once this link is broken, Thomas attempts to reconnect with his mother, but all attempts go in vain. He is disturbed and never finds compensation for his loss.

Akhil’s bizarre case of oversleeping causes grave concern to the family. Thomas repeatedly tries to figure out his son’s case, but the family eventually loses him. The whole family suffers a profound bereavement due to the loss of their beloved son, and it is another traumatic incident causing emotional as well as psychological harm. Akhil suffers from a sleeping disorder, an unexplainable excess of sleep, and his sudden and unexpected death doubles Thomas’ traumatic grief. The emotional disruption that he endures destabilizes his relationship with his family and he retreats to memory and imagination. These tragic incidents inform much of Thomas’ trauma, and he subsequently remains stuck in the past, living with the memories of his dead mother, brother, and son. In his prolonged and extreme grieving, Thomas revives memories of these deceased family members. More importantly, he imagines and feels the presence of his son Akhil, leading to frequent hallucinations that annoy his daughter and wife. These traumatic moments heighten Thomas’ sense of mourning, and according to Mishra, there is no immediate cure for such traumatic condition because the loss remains abstract (3). Thomas’ trauma is deeply internalized, and it causes severe emptiness in his ego itself, which cannot be compensated for by his dignified position as a surgeon.

The narrative oscillates to and fro between the past and the present to come to terms with the two worlds that the characters inhabit in both the native and the host countries. Initially, Thomas refuses to return and permanently live in India because he leads a happy life in the United States. But after his mother’s death, he begins to feel uprooted. Though he is a brain surgeon, he begins to act strangely, attesting to the mental strain that affects diasporas in his case. He undergoes a psychological breakdown due to the series of tragic events that struck the family; the death of his son, the burning of his family’s house in Salem in India, and the death of his brother and mother in the fire. In the opening conversation, Kamala casually informs Amina that her father spends his nights talking to invisible figures, including his dead mother:

“He’s fine,” Kamala said. “It’s not like that. You’re not listening.”
“[I am listening! You just told me he’s delusional, and I’m asking——”
“I DID NOT SAY HE IS DELUSIONAL. I SAID HE WAS TALKING TO HIS MOTHER.”
“Who is dead,” Amina said gently.
“Obvious.”

“And that’s not delusional?” (8)

It seems that Thomas experiences a break with his family. He begins to talk with his dead mother and sees his dead son. Thomas is believed to go through a psychotic break, “a loss of contact with reality” (197) in Amina’s words. It is instead a loss of contact with his homeland that he leaves behind searching for a better life in the United States. Losing his mother, brother, and the house where he was born and raised, Thomas is brutally traumatized, especially when he finds that his family’s house back in India is burned into ashes. “Even from a distance, they [Akhil and Amina] could see the grief radiating from him” (147). The narrator’s description of Thomas as “curled over the dining room table like a question mark” (147) reveals how shocked he is. The presence of his mother in Salem in India was a contact link, a point to return to in times of despair and alienation. All this leaves Thomas in chronic melancholia, struggling with memories and visualizations of beloved family members.

The inability to bear the motherly absence is textually depicted when Thomas is seen and heard talking to invisible figures, particularly Ammachy. Jacob illustrates the psychological and emotional bond between the mother and her son, which gets redirected when Ammachy is dead. The death of Ammachy leaves a void in Thomas as he slowly starts to drift away from his family members. Thomas’ aloofness not only preoccupied his wife, but most importantly, epitomizes the quandary of the diasporas at large. Ammachy, being the connecting factor with India, seems to sap this geographical bond with her death.

Thomas is haunted by his mother as she opposed his travel and stay in the United States. Upon his visit to Salem, Ammachy, bursts “traitors! Coward! Good-for-nothing!” (13). Her words come as a response to Thomas’ reluctance and objection to staying in India after completing his studies in America. These words may be the root cause behind Thomas’ psychological disturbance. In addition, when Thomas decides to leave India for the United States, the last words he hears from his brother are “your children will leave you and never come back” (53). These words seem to have done the most damage to Thomas. When Akhil dies, these words recur and ring in Thomas’ head as if Sunil’s prophecy comes true. All these incidents lead to a sort of illness symptomatic of the condition of earlier generations of diasporas. Thomas’ mental condition worsens, and the imaginary visitations of his son and mother continue. Another incident at the hospital where he works takes the matter out of the family’s confines. He tries to save a dying child, Derrick Hanson, at the hospital, drawing the medical staff’s attention to his problem. His medical assistant at the hospital, Monica, meets Amina and embarrassingly informs her that her father acts strangely. Anyan George, Thomas’ coworker, presents a medical opinion about Thomas’ case, brain tumor. He insists on taking medical examinations and seeking medical support to better understanding Thomas’ case. Under pressure from family and friends, Thomas decides to seek medical treatment. Nevertheless, after a while of improvement in his case, Thomas does not want to go for chemotherapy. When Amina asks him why, he explains that: “because the chemo will keep him [Akhil] from coming. I want to see my son” (445). Thus, Thomas’ hallucinations and visualizations of his dead mother and son continue until he dies in peace.

Refusing to continue treatment, the ghostly visitations are back, and even Sunil is back. Thomas sees him, and he reveals to Thomas that he wanted to be a dancer:
He [Sunil] said dancing was one of the things that made him happy. That if I had come back to India like I was supposed to, if he wouldn't have been left to take care of everything on his own, he would have been a dancer. (446)

Sunil’s ghostly visitations explain the intersection of memory and grief that Thomas’ endures. The sense of guilt doubles Thomas’ trauma and seizes him from his reality. The memory of Sunil flashes back clear and sharp, and Thomas interrogates himself at the presence of his daughter, who acts as a witness: “can you imagine what all might have changed with that one silly thing? Maybe your mother would be happy. Maybe Akhil” (446). It is a relief for him to hear his brother again and reach a conclusion. Most importantly, it is a relief for Thomas to accept the blame of abandoning his family in Salem in India as his fault. In his revelation of ghostly visitations, Thomas, in a desperate tone, mutters: “it was a relief to hear him [Sunil] say that it was my fault. All these years, imagining how he must have hated me, cursed me, and now finally it’s done, over, kaput. Now I move on, right” (447). Jelin and Kaufman argue that the personalized memory of people cannot be erased or destroyed by decree or by force” (94). Thomas accepts the blame, and his guilt drives him further to an unavoidable destiny.

The popular trauma theory employed today depends upon the ‘abreactive model’ of trauma, which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a “temporal gap” and dissolution of the self (Balaev, 150). This model is developed by Caruth, and it is now deployed in literary studies. It is used here with reference to Jacob’s novel, in which trauma is a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual’s coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience. Consciousness is seen as an inherent characteristic of traumatic experience. Kamala refers to it as ‘choices’, implying that Thomas understands the situation he is in yet remains reluctant to seek help. His choice seems to be a way to punish his guilt-ridden soul. In any case, Thomas carries out a significant component of trauma in the novel, demonstrating the ways that the first-generation diasporas experience and how they endure various forms of trauma. The act of remembering adds another dimension to the family’s narrative. The preoccupation with deceased family members ravages the family and turns their lives into a tragedy. Thomas’ childhood photos of his brother and mother trigger memories of distress and enliven his mourning. ‘Memory’, in his case, is, as Seyhan describes, both poison and antidote (38). Remembering past painful incidents torment him mentally and physically; a source of trauma and mourning. Moreover, since the protagonist Amina’s profession is photography, there is a recurring motif of the ‘image’ as a captured moment of time. The photos of people she takes as part of her job and the mural in Akhil’s room all function as a catalyst to memory. This reflects Jacob’s notion of diasporic memory, and she positions it as a double-edged sword. Her characters rely heavily on memory, whether to mourn catastrophic circumstances conditioned by migrancy or to shape their cultural identity in the United States.

Thomas’ responses to traumas are attempts to alter the circumstances that caused them. His memory residues surface through free association with the past, and remembering as an act situates him in a larger social context that serves as a mourning source. Before his death, Thomas’ case worsens, and he insists that Akhil is alive in the garden and will come to visit him. Even Kamala believes him this time and considers
it Thomas’ miracle because of his righteous work. This new collaboration between them signals the beginning of the end for the family’s patriarch. Kamala lights the whole house and the garden, believing that the lights will keep Akhil in the garden. She realizes that her husband wishes to go to his son more than he wants to stay with them. Due to his excessive insomnia, loss of weight, and deteriorating health, Kamala goes along with her husband. The change in her evaluation from ‘evil’ to ‘miracle’ suggests that she offers a parting gift and a final agreement with her ailing husband. Realizing this collaboration, Amina yells: “My parents. It’s weird. They go everywhere together now. The garden, the porch, probably the bathroom. It is like the sun set on the wrong side of the sky” (465).

Kamala is indifferent to what happens to her husband while he continues to drift away, consumed by his sadness and guilt. Instead of supporting him emotionally and trying to understanding his case, she very often attributes it to the devil reiterating the concept of superstitions. Exasperated, she at some other times associates her husband’s behavior with a sort of weakness. Kamala accuses Thomas of being “tempted by bad spirits” (307). She considers it as a kind of devilry blaming him for letting this happen. “All they need is one crack, and they will infest an entire soul” (308), Kamala asserts. She here expresses and voices out the male weakness in diasporas as Thomas is depicted. She seems to condemn the male weakness in this difficult moment represented by Thomas' choice to settle in the United States. She justifies:

“There are choices, Amina! Choices that we make as human beings on this planet Earth. If someone decides to let the devil in, then of course they will see demons everywhere they look. This is not delusional. This is weakness”. (8)

In associating the psychological predicament of Thomas to the ‘devil’ and ‘demons’, Kamala confuses the readers with her evaluation. By referring to Thomas’s case as ‘choices’ and ‘weakness’, she indirectly blames him for choosing this diasporic path of remembering and mourning. She is not only depicted as a cultural heroine resisting assimilation but she also dominates the family’s narrative and takes control of the house. Through Kamala, Jacob cleverly juxtaposes two perspectives on the same subject of discussion: Thomas. While his wife deliberates on the superstitious and religious beliefs, Thomas symbolizes the scientific, psychological, and emotional reality of the diaspora in the United States. Jacob also intertextualizes Shakespeare’s tragedy where the ghost preoccupies Hamlet and wears him down. Amina suggests that Akhil’s ghost that visits her father is merely visual imagination. Hamlet is, therefore, an intertext in terms of the ghost tale, and even Hamlet’s melancholia is similar to that of Thomas’s. The irony lies in the fact that Thomas, being a neurosurgeon, cures other patients. However, he fails to help himself in his descent into insanity. More importantly, Kamala, by reinstating that it is a matter of ‘choice’, not only reduces Thomas’s traumatic experience to a personal choice but criticizes immigrating and leaving their homeland. She is suspicious of living outside India. She accompanies her husband to the United States but still longs for her homeland.

Although she is at the center of the family in the United States, Kamala experiences a sort of uprootedness typical of first-generation immigrants. She is unhappy in the United States, and according to Vijay Mishra, unhappy diasporas are often also traumatized diasporas (106). Her unspeakable trauma is reflected in her attitude towards her husband, unadmittant and restrained. Through Kamala, Jacob employs
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‘silences’ as a narrative strategy to create a “gap” in time and feeling. In one sense, the unspeakable trauma of Thomas and Kamala, in particular, creates unresolved tensions that push the reader to imagine what might have been done or could have happened. In another sense, the gaps and silences are left for various contemplations given the non-conformity of the diasporic experience.

A central argument in literary trauma theory is that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity. This, according to Balaev, suggests that identity is formed by the intergenerational transmission of trauma (149). Amina is traumatized and endures considerable grief over the death of her brother and later her father. Her initial trauma is transferred via her father, who, as a first-generation immigrant, can be called a “carrier”, as termed by Max Weber (468). He transmits the trauma process, inflicting all the members of the family at varying degrees. A professional photographer, Amina tries to understand the saga of her family. She is watchful observant of what happens to the family and realizes that the only way she can help her father is by understanding her family’s painful past. In doing so, she must come to terms with the ghosts that haunt all the family. She, therefore, listens to her father’s ghost revelations and converses with him in an attempt to alleviate his pain and grief. Amina is also a witness to the mother-son and brother-brother conflicts, which later overshadow Thomas’ life. She closely monitors how her father diminishes as a result of the extreme grief. Since traumatic experience is contagious, Amina’s trauma is not her own but precisely an intergenerational type of trauma. In her unspeakable trauma, Amina refuses to talk to her colleagues and friends about her father’s case. Moreover, she experiences deep psychological break and has to endure the emotional pressure generated by such a dysfunctional immigrant family. She is not only traumatized by her brother’s death, whom she recurrently remembers and imagines wherever she goes, but she also copes with the case of a sickening father and a ranting mother. She is also consumed by her guilt for photographing a Native American who commits suicide. Amina’s sense of guilt is overwhelming to the extent that she thinks of leaving her job. Her photo of the Native American community leader suicide makes the front page and affects her career as a photojournalist. In addition to observing the world through her camera lens, Amina is a witness to all the catastrophes that are inflicted on the family.

There are multiple deaths in Jacob’s novel rendering it a tragic epic. Not only the death of Akhil, Ammachy, and Sunil casts its shadow over the narrative, but also the death of Derrick Hanson, the Native American community leader and eventually Thomas, traumatizing even the reader and deploying a sad immigrant saga at large. Though there are certain moments of warmth and unity, a sense of grief and loss dominates most of the narrative. Jacob’s novel, according to trauma theory in literary studies, serves as a preservation of diasporic trauma; the themes of victimization and melancholia channel a sort of transferability of the traumatic diaspora experience. Since transmission of trauma is re-conceptualized to include practically all situations where trauma is involved (Visser, 275), Jacob links her traumatized characters to a place and memory which function as a source of anguish. She does not project a sense of psychic resilience but presents a weak and guilt-ridden immigrant. Thomas cannot dissociate himself from his homeland and the memories of his deceased son and mother.
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It seems that Thomas and Kamala see themselves as illegitimate to claim both cultures, American and Indian. Their attachment to India is substantial, and in the United States, Kamala, in particular, clings to everything that connects her to and reminds her of India. Both Thomas and Kamala remain fearful and suspicious of the new culture that they encounter on a daily basis. The conflict of loyalties becomes apparent when Thomas loses his brother and mother in a house fire in India. However, they grant their children a chance to make the best of both Indian and American cultures. Thomas is deeply saddened by his son’s death, and he buries himself in his work at Albuquerque hospital. He refuses to seek help, and he consequently starts hallucinating and speaking to the dead. Memories of the dead flashback and haunt Thomas, in addition to the visitations of his deceased son-Akhil. The family is haunted by the presence of Akhil, too. His belongings, jacket and photos, in particular, trigger memories and cause emotional distress. His room becomes a sanctuary for his parents, and the narrator indicates that “there was still the smell of him in the room” (357). The simple description of the family is that it is dysfunctional, coping with memory, trauma, and grief. The tragic memories of the family they leave behind in India are, for Thomas in particular, an uncomfortable presence, and they loom large over the narrative.

The novel explores how grief defines the life of an Indian immigrant family and how they deal with it in the United States. The textual analysis indicates that the choice between hyphenation and hybridization of identity remains mostly dependent on the policies of the general society. Total assimilation that involves the erasure of ancestral cultural heritage is never achievable as long as the ethnic difference is observable. The Sleepwalker’s Guide to Dancing is a trauma novel, conveying a diversity of extreme emotional states. Through dramatic shifts in the family’s history, temporal fixtures, silences, and visceral traumatic details, Jacob delineates a painful diasporic experience mediated by loss and trauma. Moreover, by employing a nonlinear narrative strategy, she emphasizes the mental confusion and chaos that penetrated the lives of first-generation immigrants. The intensity of trauma delineated in the novel qualifies it as a diasporic trauma narrative; contagious and intergenerational. It differs from postcolonial trauma, for it merely traces the individual response to traumatic events. The multiple deaths in the novel create a sense of insecurity and panic. Nevertheless, what Jacob projected in her novel is rather a particular diasporic condition characteristic of first-generation immigrants.
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الملخص

تهدف هذه المقالة البحثية إلى استكشاف سياسات الاستيعاب في رواية ميرا جاكوب (ِدَلْيْل النَّامُ لِلْرَقْص) التي صدرت عام 2013. و تهدف المقالة أيضًا إلى مناقشة تفاصيل الذاكرة والحداد مع الإشارة إلى تجربة المهاجرين في أمريكا كما صورتهم الرواية. تعد الرواية نصًا متعدد الثقافات. يستكشف الفجوة الموجودة بين الجيل الأول من المهاجرين والأجيال الجديدة. من خلال تقديم جيلين متناقضين في روايتها، تحاول ميرا جاكوب تسلط الضوء على المعضلات التي تضطرح الشتات الهندي في الولايات المتحدة وبخاصة أولئك الذين يقاومون الاندماج. وتصور الرواية وجود الخيال المخيف للوطن (الهند) والألم الناتج عن الخسارة الشخصية التي يعاني منها الجيل الأول من المهاجرين. كما تعرض السردية تساؤلات عن الارتباطات الرومانسية والحنين إلى الماضي، وتشجع على تأكيد جري، لثقافة الأرض المتبينة، بعبارة أخرى، تدعو ميرا جاكوب إلى المزيد من العلاقات الحقيقية مع الثقافة الجديدة التي يعاني بها الجيل الثاني والثالث من المهاجرين أكثر من ثقافة وطنهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاندماج، الذاكرة، الهوية، صدمة، تجربة الشتات.
References


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