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An Interplay of Loss and Hope: Analyzing Diaspora Consciousness in Arnold Zable's *Café Scheherazade*

Abstract. Diaspora is a term often used today to describe practically any population which is considered "deterritorialized" or "transnational" – that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic, and political networks cross the borders of nation states or span the globe. However the connotation of "diaspora" goes back in time and is a concept that referred almost exclusively to the experiences of the Jews, invoking their traumatic exile from an historical homeland and dispersal through many lands. The connotation of a "diaspora" situation was thus negative as they were associated with forced displacement, victimisation, alienation and loss. Along with this archetype went a dream of return. Nonetheless, not all forced migration suffered in loss and despair. This paper explores the new age concept of "diaspora consciousness" that according to James Clifford lives loss and hope as a defining tension in Arnold Zable's *Café Scheherazade*. The paper aims to portray the interplay of loss and hope in the lives of Jewish war stricken asylum seekers who, having migrated to Melbourne, a city alien to them, suffer both a longing for the past and a flickering hope of survival within the Jewish diaspora community, preserving the language and culture of their lot. The constant tussle between assimilating oneself within the foreign culture and feelings of displacement and haunting memories of the past that refrained one from absorption and acculturation is foregrounded in the research.

Keywords: Jewish diaspora, diaspora consciousness, loss, memory, alienation, migration, Holocaust, Second World War, trauma

"You have navigated with a raging soul far from the paternal home, passing beyond the seas' double rocks and now you inhabit a foreign land," Ponzanezi (2007: 1) quotes Medea in her seminal work *Paradoxes of Post Colonial Culture*, which analyzes a culture that suffers a condition of dislocation, torn between "distress and elation" (2007: 10), hope and loss, the loss of a world to which they belonged and an eternal hope – an everlasting wish to recreate, to return to that "old world" that remained an integral part of their life till their dying day.

This culture or "ethnic group" as Vijay Mishra (2007) terms it, whose commonality consists in their migration to a foreign country wherein they establish a separate community, roughly connotes the term diaspora. I say roughly because, as Fludernik in her essay "The Diasporic Imaginary" puts it, the term diaspora "seems to resist precise definition" (Fludernik 2003: xi). Thus, while scholars like William Safran (1991) associate diaspora with the dispersal of a group from "an original center to at least two peripheral places" (quoted in: Clifford 1997: 247), as a result of a political strife or exile, the classic example being the Jewish diaspora spread over parts of the United States, Britain, Canada, and 'multicultural' Australia, Cohen (1997) and more recently Avtar Brah (2006) attributes the influx of labour into a foreign country or the migration of a group through slavery as a cause of diaspora; for instance, the African and Asian diaspora in Britain and the Caribbean respectively. Cohen's (1997) criteria that "a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location,

history and achievements" and "an idealization of the putative ancestral home" (in Fludernik 2003: xiv) is constantly recreated and reactivated in the minds of the immigrant group; however it is the wish to return to one's homeland which, while it remains attainable by the South Asian and African diasporas, is reduced to a myth, a dream for the Jews in the event of a terrible war (World War II).

It is this longing for a "home" that alienates the immigrant group from its host country, accentuating the feeling of loss and nostalgia, reviving the history and memory of the past. This revival of history through memory, to recreate one's past, to cling to one's country, leads to the preservation of one's culture, history, and religion, and enables a particular diaspora community to maintain solidarity and unity in a foreign country, which in turn gives rise to the diaspora consciousness within that particular community. Thus, while diaspora consciousness promotes experiences of loss, marginality and exile in a foreign country, this suffering coexists with an urge to survive, to begin life anew, and to adapt and permeate oneself within a foreign culture while still preserving the past in memory – something which the Holocaust survivor Zalman, a Jewish immigrant to Australia, states in Arnold Zable's novel, *Café Scheherazade*: "It was just another city coming into view... I just came. I wanted to drink, make merry and pass the time. I wanted to live for the day... I had no grand plans for a permanent home... This is what all my wanderings have taught me that the moment itself is haven, the true sanctuary" (Zable 2001: 218). While the diaspora consciousness, as James Clifford writes, is produced negatively by secluding and segregating ethnic groups in a foreign land, it also gives them a new lease on life by enthusing them with a hope, a dream a wish to survive by preserving their ethnicity in the host country or simply by reminiscing the past more as a pleasant memory than an indulgence for longing a nostalgia for one's home. Thus Clifford theorizes that "diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension" (Clifford 2001: 257).

In my paper, I endeavour to portray the interplay of loss and hope in the lives of war-stricken refugees, the homeless alienated and isolated from their loved ones as they undertake a journey full of struggle for survival as memory and history continue to haunt them, well depicted in Arnold Zable's *Café Scheherazade*.

Novels, writes Brennan in his essay "The National Longing for Form", in the "post war period are unique" (1995: 173) for they proclaim the idea of nationality, identity synonymous with one's country and the pangs of exile. Zable's *Café Scheherazade* is no exception. Zable as a post-Holocaust writer based in Australia documents the lives of the Jewish diaspora living in Melbourne, immigrants who survived Hitler's Holocaust during World War II. Born of Jewish parents who escaped Poland during the Second World War, Zable as a writer of the Holocaust trauma vividly portrays the lives lived by the survivors in the "shadow of displacement, loss, bewilderment and rage... trying to find in a renewed sense of belonging and security" (Freadman 2005: 120), trying to outlive the horrors of a "ruptured past." Almost all his novels, such as *Jewels and Ashes*, describe the predicament of Second generation Jewish immigrants, i.e., children of Holocaust survivors living in Australia, the autobiographical Fig Tree which documents the lives of Zable's Jewish past, together with his wife's Greek-Australian background, while his celebrated bestseller *Café Scheherazade* gives an account of the loss of families, the displacement of the individual, the dispossession of one's country juxtaposed by a flickering beam of hope to survive in the event of the world war encountered by the Jewish community now living in Australia during the 1940s.

On a "rain-sodden Melbourne night", the narrator Martin introduces readers to *Café Scheherazade* an avenue of "world dreams" wherein Jewish emigrants from Poland unleash

their tales of death and survival, of loss and hope, the heinous impact of the death camps during the Holocaust, and of their post war disillusionment and dispersion. Zable's novel unfolds with the story of three friends, Zalman, Laizer, and Yossel, their reminiscence and loss of the "old world", the lanes, streets and alleys of the city Vilna, and culminates in the love story of the cafe owners, the survivors of the Holocaust, Avram and Masha.

Before proceeding with my analysis I would like to draw a brief history of the events of World War II. It was in the event of non-acceptance of Nazi Germany's rising hegemony and power that Poland was attacked in the September 1939 and with this began the Second World War culminating in the destruction of lives and loss of family, identity and one's homeland, an existential predicament with the loss of home and an eternal search for refuge and shelter, a commonplace condition for millions of people existing in those trying times and to those narrating their tales in *Café Scheherazade*.

Zable's novel unfurls with the Cafe Scheherazade, a meeting joint for the Jewish community living in Melbourne. The novel's title and Zable's incessant description of cafes – be it the Wolfke in Vilna where the three friends Zalman, Laizer, and Yossel idled their time away, or the chain of cafes in Acland Street "raining caffeine. Of every conceivable variety and form: short black, flat white, froth-topped Viennese, raw Turkish, roughly ground..." (Zable 2001: 110), and among these the enchanting Cafe Scheherazade – depicts them as something more than meeting places, for they embody communities, a place to preserve one's culture, to share a commonality of dreams and hopes to communicate with the "old world" and to relate the harrowing experiences of the past which the inmates of Cafe Scheherazade do, relating their incidents of death, love, hope, survival, and migration during World War II. Besides this, the exotic name Scheherazade conferred upon the Cafe holds a different meaning for Masha and Avram, the owners of the café. Cafe Scheherazade is an embodiment of their love that survived and culminated in their marriage after the end of the war, for it was in a certain night club by the name of Scheherazade in Paris that they had both read of in Remarque's novel where they both decided to reunite after their escape from Poland. As Masha recollects: "It was then that there came to us an idea that we would celebrate our reunion in Scheherazade, as did the lovers in Remarque's novel. It pleased us to think we were involved in romance" (Zable 2001: 195).

For Zable and for the narrator of the story, Martin, Cafe Scheherazade connotes enchantment and attraction to those tales of the Holocaust narrated by the regular visitors of the Jewish community, very like Queen Scheherazade herself, who with her wonderful tales seduced and amused the king of Persia for a thousand and one nights, thus making him "revoke his cruel decree" of beheading a queen every night.

The notion of home as a safe and secured zone, a niche obliterated by the German invasion of Poland and the East, which destroyed the Jewish city of Vilna, uprooting and dispersing Zalman, Laizer, and Yossel in different parts of Europe, Japan, and China as they struggled to survive while living with the memories of torture and death of their loved ones in the Nazi constructed death camps. While Laizer moved to Russia during the German bombing of Vilna where he was consequently charged and imprisoned for the illegal crossing of borders by Red Army soldiers, his friends Zalman and Yossel were favoured with better luck when they succeeded in migrating to Japan and in turn China with the help of the Japanese consul Sugihara who had given them transit visas to Japan "that enabled [them] to buy [their] way out" (Zable 2001: 93). Zalman describes his loss of home and family during the bombing in Vilna in 1941, "...within days they heard that sections of Vilna was in flames. More than ever they were isolated from their loved ones they had left behind. More than ever they were

plagued by the sense of guilt and unbearable longing" (Zable 2001: 111) – true to what Kobrin also mentions in her study of Jewish immigration in World War II: "Bialystok was at the center of heavy fighting, with civilians in Bialystok enduring as much hardship as the common soldier on the front. Bialystok Jewry's experience was far from exceptional; similar dramas unfolded in dozens of cities in the region, such as Warsaw, Minsk, and Vilna that were all located either on or near the front" (Kobrin 2006: 34).

"Telling is an aspect of surviving" writes Freadman (2005: 121) and the characters in Zable's novel do the same, recollecting and unravelling history and memory, narrating their escapades and their final act of existence and a longing to live. While narrating his tale Laizer constantly moves back and forth, living between his past and present, his life in Siberia, in the Soviet prison of Lvov and his "wasted years in Vorkuta" (Zable 2001:156) juxtaposing it with his present life in Melbourne and those haunting memories of the past. Laizer speaks of his deportation to a Soviet prison in the city of Lvov along with a hundred and six refugees like him, imprisoned in a double room with a daily ration of bread and diluted soup that tasted, as Laizer recalls, "like swamp water", of his tiring journey from Kotlas to Pechora, of his exhausting work building airfields and huts for Hitler's army, all the time dreaming of Vilna and his "mother's cholent and roasts, Wolfke's brisket and Vilna's bakeries and cafes" while starving to death. Yet what kept him alive was his association with a multicultural community consisting of Tartars, Uzbeks, Poles, Jews, Mongolians, Africans, and Armenians who, like him, were refugees in a foreign country, prisoners of war, sharing tales of commonality. As Laizer reminisces: "They talked about their years in prison camps, their children, wives, lovers and squandered lives....They had once imagined future riches but now they lived for each passing day" (Zable 2001:76). This is coupled with his burning urge to live, to live to return to the "old world", to live to narrate his story to the world. However, this hope to survive is marred when his past haunts him in the form of a "recurring dream" with the death of his "father and mother, his sister and brother [who] perished in a furnace of gas" (Zable 2001:89).

Shifting between two worlds, the past and the present, between Melbourne and the streets of Kobe and Shanghai, Zalman as the narrator notes seems to savour every moment of his stay in a foreign land with its promise of light and freedom with its "pastel shaded sky" and the "cool texture of damp sand," which reflects Zalman's acculturation and adaptability to his present surroundings and life. While narrating his story, Zalman switches between worlds reminiscing and contrasting his life in Warsaw to that of Shanghai and Kobe, while he finally makes his way out of Vilna, journeying his way through Vladivostok, to ultimately reach the Japanese city of Kobe. He speaks of a life full of "symmetry" in Kobe, with a concoction of the east and the west reflected in the Japanese theatrical performances, a city that endorsed the merging of the east and west, that approved of both the Jewish and Buddhist regions of Japan to flourish within the same city; however, like Laizer he is forever tormented with thoughts of the past, burdened with the guilt of having migrated without his loved ones.

But among all three of them, it is Yossel who shows remarkable acclimatization with his Yiddish surroundings in Shanghai. Like Zalman, Yossel escaped from Warsaw to become a part of the Jewish diaspora in Shanghai. As Yossel says, "...in Shanghai there were Jews from the entire world. From Bombay...Persia and Cochin....They owned factories, warehouses, real estate.... The whole world was in Shanghai" (142). It was with the help of a Russian Jew that Yossel started his work in textiles and even smuggled goods and "traded in diamonds" for survival. Yossel, in accommodating himself with Russian, French or even Chinese ways of life in a foreign country, presents himself as a global citizen, for although he recollects his life at Warsaw, he "identifies with the world cultural/ political forces" and thus

in Clifford's term appears "global" in order to live, to secure and begin his life anew. Yossel's diaspora consciousness as Clifford puts it, "makes the best of a bad situation" (Clifford 1997: 257), and in this way survives the war.

Unlike their Jewish companions, Avram and Masha's story of hardship, isolation and displacement finally culminates in their love in Poland and marriage in France. Avram relates to his narrator the ravages made by the Nazi invasion upon Vilna, looting and plundering homes, the Nazi army shooting Jewish men as a part of Hitler's anti-Semitic policy, while he hid himself in the peat bogs and the ghetto of Vilna struggling to help his family survive. It is amazing to read how life flourished in the ghetto with the Jewish slaves setting up school for their children with Avram's sister Basia, teaching music to children, relocating a Jewish place of worship within the ghetto, and forming the resistance movement which Avram joined to resist the Nazi invasion of Poland. The Jewish ghetto symbolizes the small Jewish world, a little community wherein the exiled Jews preserved their culture and ethnicity; as Said puts it "it is a home created by a community of language, culture and customs and by doing so it fends off ravages of exile" (Said 1984:269). Avram's guerilla warfare alongside Russian, Jewish and Polish partisans to crush the Nazi power, when along with the band of partisans he attacked Nazi soldiers, is reminiscent of the "struggles to win American independence, to unify Germany, to liberate Algeria where those of national groups separated – exiled... [try] overcoming estrangement – from soil, roots, from unity, from destiny"(Said 1984: 269). Masha undergoes a similar isolation and estrangement when she is deported to the snow-clad Siberian labour camps along with her family. Although Masha's family survives in Siberia, they later return back to the old world, Poland, to find "the devastation that had been wrought in their absence: the piles of rubble, twisted girders, the razed hamlets...the desecrated temples and shattered homes,"; it is here in a Bund gathering that Avram and Masha meet and fall in love, a love that culminates in Paris, that according to Said "attracts cosmopolitan exile".

Zable's *Café Scheherazade* is a tale of constant movement, of migration – the shift between countries, between past and present wherein the characters migrate from one country to another traversing borders and barriers in search of a home. However, while they settle in Melbourne, a sense of non-belonging and alienation still persists deep in their minds, as their memory of the past, the history of their struggle for survival and their loss of home during the Second World War annihilated their hopes for a new life, a new world, a new home. Thus, Zalman lives for the sheer sake of living with no "grand plans of a permanent home", Laizer settles in a new world to do away with the old memories of his dead family and ravaged home, and Avram and Masha's dream of becoming a teacher and doctor lay buried within their past as they begin their life afresh as restaurateurs in Acland Street. In such a circumstance of homelessness, estrangement, and alienation, Avram and Masha's Cafe Scheherazade entertains and welcomes Jews from Warsaw, Budapest, Vienna and Berlin, men who lost their entire families, who craved for the Sabbath stew, to hear "the Yiddish word." As Mandaville points out "The estrangement of a community in diaspora – its separation from the 'natural' setting of the homeland – often leads to a particularly intense search for and negotiation of identity" (2001: 172), like that conserved within this Cafe which serves as a home to Holocaust survivors, wherein "old worlds were recreated and festering of wounds were healed". Zable's novel thus gives us deep insight into the inwardness of a person's mind cut off from the world by trauma, loss, and uncertainty.

Thus by drawing on the concepts of identity, ethnicity, and nationality; of hope to find the security and safety of a home; to live, to survive, to begin life anew; of loss and displacement from home; of feelings of alienation, isolation, and the dispossession that

remains etched within the consciousness of the diaspora community; it can be said that diaspora consciousness promotes assimilation of a foreign culture in foreign soil – as in the case of Yossel in Zable's *Café Scheherazade* who capitalizes on his opportunity, making the best out of every situation. His urge to prosper, to live unlike his fellow companions, is never extinguished even when he migrates to Melbourne: "This city was yet an arena of opportunity to revel in, to impress upon with his cunning and charm" (Zable 2001: 217). However, it cannot be ruled out altogether that the positive feeling promoted by diaspora consciousness is engulfed and devoured by the feelings of loss of homeland and the haunting memories of the past; a past recollected and retold, shared and suffered by the Jewish community in their utopic home, the Café Scheherazade. Though the novel ends with a flickering hope for survival within the diasporic community established in the Café by preserving Jewish culture, cuisine, and language, as done by Avram, Masha, Yossel, Zalman and Laizer, there still remains in Zable's *Café Scheherazade* an emptiness, a void, a longing for the past that the "new world can never fill." As Said states, "pathos... resides in the loss of contact with the solidity and satisfactions of earth" (Said 1984:174).

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