

EXPLORING DIASPORA: A STUDY OF SETHU'S *ALIYAH: THE LAST JEW IN THE VILLAGE BEYOND HOMELAND*

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ABSTRACT

IOM defines diasporas as "migrants or descendants of migrants, whose identity and sense of belonging have been shaped by their migration experience and background." This paper explores the features of diaspora through Sethu's work; *Aliyah: the last jew in the village*. There are five theorists referred to in this paper to draw emphasis to these characteristics. As expressed by Edward Said and Iain Chambers their identity is not fixed; it's constantly challenged and they live in a jealous state of the non exiles and their stable identities. They live with an image of an 'imaginary homeland' in their minds and a possible return to this place constructed from broken fragments of memories according to Salman Rushdie in his essay "Imaginary Homelands". Another key feature is the hybridity in culture that Stuart Hall talks about that results in such a community and a subsequent feeling of being caught in between or 'liminality' as explained by Homi Bhabha in his essay. The aim of this paper is to analyse Sethu's novel '*Aliyah; the last jew in the village*' from the perspective of diaspora studies. The novel is about the small Jewish community who were settled in Kerala and had to choose to break all the ties with the land they've known for centuries as a response to the Zionist call; a call to their promised land. The novel provides a great view into struggles of people of diaspora and is a piece of work that enables one to understand some important aspects of the people of diaspora in an effective manner.

Keywords - struggles of diaspora, identity, homeland and return.

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INTRODUCTION

Diaspora is a term that is hard to define and has had its meaning changed several times over different periods in time. IOM defines diasporas as “migrants or descendants of migrants, whose identity and sense of belonging have been shaped by their migration experience and background.” (IOM Glossary on Migration)

What differentiates people of diaspora from individual migrants is their consciousness of their roots, origin and past. They are filled with a sense of nostalgia and longing for their homelands they had to leave behind; and for most, this longing brings along sorrow and pain. Even if a community has been settled in a new land for several generations, these feelings tend to persist and so does a hope for a return. The Zionist movement that had the creation of a nation state in Palestine for Jews or The Gathering movement to reach out to diasporas are all manifestations of this desire.

The origin of the term diaspora is associated with Jewish exile as it originally referred to the scattering of Jews all over the world after the Babylonian exile. But in the course of time the term has been used to talk about several communities that identify with a homeland but live outside of it and is also often used interchangeably with exile as will be used here.

In Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, he talks about how issues of culture, identity and representation are important for a group that is struggling to feel liberated.

Diaspora identity is a complicated one that falls under a grey zone where one constantly wonders whether they are an “outsider” or an “insider”. They are surrounded by nonexiles and they live in a state of resentment and jealousy.

So in one way, the 'oneness' the people of diaspora feel as they look back at their past and try to stick together can be healing for the pain they experienced when they were separated, but it is also important to keep in mind that their identity is in a discontinuous state of being and that their identity remains ongoing as history progresses. This second way of looking at their identity emphasises on the similarities and differences among an imagined cultural group and also how their identity keeps changing over periods of time depending upon the historical or political occurrences that happen, thereby giving us a glance into their traumatic experience of identity and an identity crisis. He talks about cultural identity in this sense as such:

"Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation."

(Hall 225)

Furthermore from this perspective, we are to understand that cultural identity is not a fixed essence lying unchanged with no relations to history and culture. As Hall states, 'it is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return'. They should be seen as points of identification; a positioning in the due course of history rather than as an universal unchanging essence.

To return therefore to these homelands, would be to experience a shock of 'doubleness' of this similarity and yet at the same time, their difference. Derrida's notion of 'trace' is also brought up by Hall as he talks about the Africa that remains alive through memories of the people in diaspora. This Africa remains alive through their daily lives, their practices, beliefs, their language, tales, music etc. The people in diaspora are clinging onto a homeland that is made from

broken fragments of memories and is no longer there anymore. They create a homeland in their mind that is frozen in the past as though it hasn't undergone any change and can be recovered and returned to.

An example for this would be when the Indian Jews migrated to Israel after the call from the promised land and the migration did not go as smoothly as they thought it would. There were many families who were discriminated against because of their darkerskin colour and their lack of fluency in Hebrew. For many of the people, in such a situation, leaving behind their host country becomes a regret.

As Edward Said explains in his concept of "imaginative geographies" they create an image of a land through imagination and underlying desires. By creating images and descriptions about this land, one then assigns a value to it as well. They additionally form a sense of belongingness to this imagined land which constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls an 'imagined community'. But it is obvious that one cannot return to this land that exists only in one's mind. According to him one has to respect the hybridity that has formed and reinvent themselves. The New World has provided a space for such narratives and expressions of such hybridity.

Another feature of the people of diaspora is their double identity. They become borderline figures that stand in-between two border conditions. They are caught between obligations to their own community in the host country and to those from other regions but have the same origins or diasporic identity. This is explained by Bhabha with an example from *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. The conflict of cultures and community around the *Satanic Verses* has been represented by him in a binary geopolitical sense - Islamic fundamentalists vs Western literary modernists; 'the quarrel of the ancient migrant and modern metropolitans'.

" This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one; there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the 'survival' of migrant life." (Bhabha 224)

Bhabha proposes a "third space"; a space for hybridity rather than negating cultural translation. Cultural translation broadly refers to an idea of moving across differences and borders and in doing so, translating from one place to another, for instance from one cultural and political condition to another. It becomes a space where minorities are subject to claim a degree of agency within a majority culture. Instead of the method of negation, he brings forward the idea of negotiation or cultural translation, which he believes to be in itself politically subversive, as the only way to transform the world and bring something politically new.

Even though these issues might sound like something that happens out there, far away from us, through immigration statistics, news and documentaries we are able to learn much about the landscapes that we inhabit. These might reveal to us a scene of hope, migration and attempted relocation. In these moments of reality, we are able to see a 'third world' that no longer seems to be "out there". As a result of encounter between different cultures, histories, religion and languages, they emerge 'at the centre of our daily lives in the cities and cultures of the so-called 'advanced', or 'First', world', and then we can begin to talk of about a significant interruption in the preceding sense of our own lives, cultures, languages and futures as mentioned by Iain Chambers.

"Migration, together with the enunciation of cultural borders and crossings, is also deeply inscribed in the itineraries of much contemporary reasoning. For migrancy and exile; as Edward Said points out, involves a 'discontinuous state of being', a form of picking a quarrel with where you come from. It has

thereby been transformed 'into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture'" (Chambers 2)

There is also another implied sense of 'home', of being in the world as said by him:

" It means to conceive of dwelling as a mobile habitat, as a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation of an opening whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitute our sense of identity, place and belonging." Migration is thereby compared and differentiated from travel because to travel means to move from fixed positions. There is a site of departure and there is a point of arrival and eventually a return. Migrancy on the other hand involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. He states that it calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. They are always moving; are in transit and as history makes way for history a homecoming becomes impossible.

"To come from elsewhere, from elsewhere, from 'there' and not 'here', and hence to be simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories. Cut off from the homelands of tradition, experiencing a constantly challenged identity, the stranger is perpetually required to make herself at home in an interminable discussion between a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present."

In that sense, one can say that they are in a continuous state of exile. Their life moves according to a different calendar, is less seasonal and less settled than life at home as Said puts it.

Diaspora literature therefore becomes a manifestation of these concerns and questions by these people. These works are characterised by a quest for identity, a longing for their roots and a homeland and exploring topics such as belonging, a sense of nostalgia and feelings of loss. It often involves a struggle in choosing between two cultures; their native culture and a foreign one. In these literary works, the 'home' and the 'homeland' becomes one of the most powerful symbols for the dispossessed. In Malkki's (1992) ethnographic study of Burundian refugees in Tanzania, she found that by 'trying to understand the circumstances of particular groups of refugees illuminates the complexity of the ways in which people construct, remember, and lay claim to particular places as "homelands" or "nations"'.

The aim of this project is to analyse Sethu's novel 'Aliyah; the last Jew in the village' from the perspective of diaspora studies. The novel is about the small Jewish community who were settled in Kerala and had to choose to break all the ties with the land they've known for centuries as a response to the Zionist call; a call to their promised land. Sethu worked on Aliyah with an aim to have more work that represents the Jewish community that inhabited the land for so many centuries. Through the character of Salamon and others, we're able to see the psychological pressure that the Jews in Kerala went through after the Zionist call as Salamon's character struggles to find out his true identity and make the right decision for himself

Although not a historian, Sethu worked on Aliyah with an aim to have more representation of the Jewish community that inhabited the land of Kerala for so long. His village of Chendamangalam was one of the earliest Jewish settlements on the western coast. He wants people to know about the connection that existed between the native people and the Jews. He says that he is very proud of it and 'wanted to make known to the world the harmony that existed here'.

(Sethu 404)

The first Jews have been known to arrive as spice traders from the kingdom of King Solomon (970 - 930 BC). However the first physical evidence of the Jews' presence comes much later around 9th and 11th century AD in the form of copper plate inscriptions by local kings that guaranteed certain rights to the Jewish community.

Compared to how they were treated in many other places, here the Jews were welcomed warmly. According to the most local stories they were held in high esteem by the monarchs; they were given gifts, privileges, and religious rights. They settled in this land till the founding of Israel, their promised land.

The novel was written after an extensive research on the history of Jews in Kerala and the framework is a mixture of history, myth, legend and imagination. We have the character of Salamon who has been hearing about the return to promised land since childhood but is not sure about his decision when the call finally comes out of the blue. We're able to follow him and his interior battle as he questions his own identity on various levels as the novel progresses.

A starting point to this study would be to analyse Salamon's individual attitude to his religious and group identity. We can see from the beginning that Salamon has been an aloof and introverted person. His father Evron was always worried about Salamon's placid nature and his ability to find a job. "He lacked the vigour of youth and would sit idly, lost in dreams." (8). He refuses to take up a job as is expected of him and step up into the social framework as is expected by the people surrounding him. His father fails to exercise much authority on him on the matter as well because of his own failed business ventures and how his mother herself keeps reminding him of it. The father and son have a tense relationship stained by their pride.

Salamon being thus detached from the expectations and responsibilities his family has of him, seems to be wandering through his life relying upon his own judgements and observations without much care for any boundaries or responsibilities. He gives off the impression of a person settled in their comfort zone and without much of a group identity; he was a spiritless boy, "a loner, and a dreamer, he was often found in dark corners of the house or on the river bank, or in the shade of a tree, where no one would see him"(56). Even though this is something that is visible in his personality throughout, he is ultimately like any of us humans, a part of the society as well. He lives with his family and they're settled in an area of Jewish community residents.

The Jew Street had about fifty Jewish families that lived side by side and they lived in harmony with the Hindus, Christians, Muslims and other communities in the area. Although they were welcomed, there was still a difference in their status and how they were treated because of their migrant history. Nothing would change the fact that they were outsiders. The struggles people of diaspora experience can be observed in the novel as it explores with minute details, their life and interactions especially during the time of the Zionist call and they were trying to understand their identity, place, loyalty and duty.

When the call to the Promised Land was finally upon them after having settled in Kerala for so long, it was normal for them to have confusions and hesitations regarding leaving behind everything they've ever known thus far in their life. But as the Jewish community, this had also been something that they've been waiting for all these years. It was their ultimate dream as a community to feel like they belong, to have their own land where they are not considered outsiders, where they are not under the mercy of the majority or the supposedly "original inhabitants" of a land; an entire country with their own name and flag and a president.

Even though they had settled here all this while and established their history, it would always be a history of people who came from an exile. Even after having been a part of the landscape and culture for years, they were still treated as outsiders. In being treated so, in experiencing this doubleness of identity, the Jews are united and they feel a need to stick together and find a sense of comfort in this group identity. Their identity has been changing ever since they arrived as history changes. In the novel, we're able to see how the Ephraim family was able to maintain status and their importance during the reign of the monarchs; "Ephraim was the most eminent Jew the people of that village had ever seen. His reputation was such that he could request an audience with the king of Kochi whenever he wanted"(13). But as rules and government changes they can do nothing but wait in anticipation of what the new policies would bring for their community.

Salamon, while trying to figure out his own identity, converses with the many other characters in the novel so as to make a choice he won't regret. He interacts with people leading different lives. One such character is Varuthutty master who is a very knowledgeable person. He is someone Salamon relies on for wisdom and an educated opinion. He speaks to Salamon about the history of the Jews and makes him aware of their history and the identity they share which is important to understand in depth how their social standing evolved into what it is currently. None of these characters ever provide a complete answer that is the right one or certain. Their role becomes that of giving insights and different perspectives to Salamon's dilemma; which even though not explicitly stated gives perspectives and information about the struggles of people of diaspora and everything they have to be mindful of.

Varuthutty master explains their ancient history and addresses the topic of migration and return. He says that he is not sure if they had a return in their mind when they arrived to this land and that at that time, like most of the people who

got exiled, they were looking for shelter and refuge so none of those probably mattered to them. "Because those days the concept of nationality was alien to them"(145).

This talk about the nature of exile and migration reminds us how people who have undergone it, live in an ongoing history. Their state of being is discontinuous and they're constantly watching out for new rules, leaders and news. They do not get to have a stable sense of identity like the rest. In the novel we can see that what was a stable sort of environment for the Jews drastically changes once the Zionist call arrives. Others think of the Jews as ungrateful and arrogant when they see that they may leave. They express this malice through barbed remarks and comments.

One such instance that reveals this hostility is when a character called Mani Menon asks Moses master to show their new country on the globe knowing very well that matters were still uncertain and there were limits to the information they were able to obtain at that time. He enjoys putting Moses master in the spotlight making him feel helpless and probably thought of it as an act that put Moses master in his place. Another instance, a conversation between Elias and Kamalan where Kamalan asks Elias if this was not their land and why they were leaving. When Elias is too confused to answer he remarks, "We know, we know... We've seen this before. Food here, loyalty there"(88).

These sorts of interactions swell up the feelings of being an outsider furthermore. How they are perceived and their status becomes more obvious to them and will have them swaying more to make a decision to leave. They will expect a brighter future for themselves in their imaginary homeland.

In the novel, the bright future they imagine for themselves seems to be one where they will all come together. Some of the characters seem to be aware that they might not lead a comfortable life once they leave; that they may have to

work and toil hard, they may be discriminated against based on their colour and financial status. But what motivates them to leave is the thought that whatever happens, all the Jews will be together. No one would be an outsider, no one has to keep quiet and listen to the barbed comments about how they don't belong or how they are living in a land under the mercy of others, although this may not be reasoning for every one who chooses to leave. Everyone lives in different circumstances and in a way, each choice is unique to a person's life and experience. But the desire to leave for their own land grew in all of their hearts nevertheless:

"Then, as things began to move forward gradually, desires grew wings. No one had to tell anyone anything. The decisions that took shape within the walls of every house in Jew Street had a clarity. As each one began to weave dreams around that decision, the desert they had never seen blossomed within them. In the sweetness of its fruits they realised a new bliss" (91).

At the beginning of the novel, Salamon is not very aware of these kinds of perspectives. Even though throughout his life he has experienced such discrimination and heard backhanded comments about him being a Jew from the girl he likes, he only reflects on these later in the novel. In his conversation with

Ramanandan, when Ramanandan says that it is the perfect opportunity for Jews to run away from this cursed land, Salamon is stunned because he has never thought of the place like that despite their status.

The actual fate that awaited them in Israel was another thing to consider while making the decision to leave. Even though it seemed like a dream to be in a land of their own, would it be that easy? After going back, would all the Jews be considered equal? Would there not be divisions and classifications between the Jews once they arrive there? Within the Kochi Jews itself there were distinctions based on wealth and colour; and obviously the white Paradesi Jews had an upper

hand when it came to status and their history. When the travel documents arrive in the novel, the Bombay Jews were listed above Kochi Jews and in Kochi, the Malabarais were listed below the Paradesis. Even though the some people who are involved in the facilitating processes may come to realise this, most of the folk may not realise the reality of the situation to its true extent.

Their decision to leave was solely based on their beliefs, duties and a fear of being left alone on top of everything. To have no one who shares your identity, your pain or struggles becomes an even scarier thought than the suffering they might have to deal with when they leave. Salamon finds out that Eliacha's decision to leave is not mainly because of his belief in the rituals and because of his faith, but the fear of being left alone.

Even Eshumuthimma who had been waiting all her life for this and is on board with the return ever since she first hears it experiences cold feet before she has to actually leave. At that point it could have also been a harder decision for her because it was already too late and they had even packed their bags.

The Return does not mean a return to some point in the past. It has to be understood as a new page that will be written in history after Jews from all over the world reached The Promised Land. As Varuthutty master says to Salamon, "Whatever be the birth of that country and its politics, when this migration is complete your Israel will become the greatest kaleidoscope of races in the world"(145). What will unfold from this migration will only be revealed in action. It will be completely different from the imaginary homeland and the future that they speculate and conjure up. "Whether this is good or bad, only that great power, Time, can tell"(145).

For these people who were born in this land of Kerala and have been practicing the culture of this region, how much they'll be able to adapt to their new homeland would be an additional concern. While they continue to practice their

Jewish beliefs in this land, it is appropriate to assume that they have mixed the culture of this land with their religious traditions. This aspect is evident when Eshumuthimma talks about the marriage celebrations and the usual customs. When Evron married Rebecca through love, she was not quite able to accept the deviations her sons were bringing into their customs and traditions of marriage as she knew it. For her, the old way she was familiar with was what was right. She recalls fondly how the weddings were supposed to be a big deal in the culture and thinks about her own wedding. The decorations, music, games, food were all tiny but important details to her. As already mentioned before, she does have a late realisation of the value she gives to this land and the culture quite late towards the ending of the novel.

By that time Salamon was the only person in the family who still hadn't explicitly expressed what his decision was, as he himself was not very sure. Salamon obviously held a lot of sentiments for his current land. For him, at the beginning he is even curious as to why it was such an obvious choice for everyone to leave. But later he uncovers one by one all these underlying issues and perspectives and yet we are not able to see him making a decision till towards the very end.

With all these concepts brought up, Salamon's journey of making the decision becomes much more traceable. Salamon has a tendency of escaping from responsibilities and his life. He does show an interest in wanting to go away but not from the land. He merely feels burdened by the responsibilities of his family. He thinks about family business as 'an unending chain' that someone should break and get out. Salamon doesn't seem to dwell or rely much on a sense of belonging. It is further obvious when he doesn't care about the names he is called enough to leave the land for it and how Ramanandan's comment about leaving this cursed land shocks him as he has never thought of it like that. At this point neither does leaving nor does staying seem like an appealing choice.

Leaving would mean an uncertain future but at least their community would be together despite the differences they might have within them. At the same time, staying would mean that they would have to continue dealing with circumstances that would make them feel like an outsider. If everyone else chooses to leave it would also mean that he would suddenly be left behind with no one else from his community who might understand his struggles. But if he is able to overcome that fear of feeling alone, let go of the comfort that a group identity would provide, Salamon could realise his individual true identity that transcends their cultural and religious identity. It was this land after all that helped him discover his desire for being an artist.

The fear of being left alone is not something that can be that easily overcome though. In the chapter 'Eliacha Explains', Eliacha talks to Salamon about his reason for deciding to leave: "That is why I say, even though I love this land and its people a lot, I will certainly go. Not for anything else, just to be together. Not to stay back alone..." (257). "The pain of loneliness, the thought of abandonment. It made Salamon shudder" (257).

For all humans, there is a comfort in the feeling of belonging. To know that you're not alone. When Salamon hears Eliacha's answer he is surprised but he is also able to understand. He felt as though a lot of his questions were answered that day. He accepts it as a valid and important response although he personally doesn't agree with it. Salamon doesn't want to make a decision out of some fear and he continues with his quest to find answers and make the best decision.

He realises that no matter where they went in one way or another everyone is an outsider. In the course of history, mankind has moved around, conquered lands, settled, have been exiled so much that in a sense we're all outsiders somehow. This realisation brings a brand new perspective to how Salamon perceived history, migration and return. Once again in a conversation, Ramanandan tells

Salamon that "people came from different places at different times"(332). They come from all places and people leave from all places as well. He tells Salamon, "If you look at it like that, who can claim to belong to this place?"(332)

Therefore it seems like Salamon is mostly aware of the consequences and effects his choice would have by this point but still seems to want to stay. His attachments to the land and his life there seems to hold more value to him than in an imagined future in their imaginary homeland. The only thing that seems to hold him back anymore is his family.

Salamon has been described to us from the beginning as a very passive character incapable of making his own choices and decisions. He doesn't have much ambition for himself and simply goes with the flow, doing what he is told to do. But even then, he never shows complete obedience as well. Overall, he gives the impression of an incapable and dependent person. Most of his decisions are made by his family and he merely goes with the flow escaping the burden of decision making. But this choice seems to be a very important one for Salamon as he puts his everything into obtaining information. It would change the entire dynamics of his character. From the point of this realisation his battle seems to be to decide whether to go with what the family decides or to listen to his heart. He almost disassociates with all the chaos and noise around him but it becomes harder to ignore as the day when they would have to leave approached. "When the entire Evron family packed their bags and left, did he not have anything to do with it? Someone from within flung that question at him"(349).

His choice to stay would be a breaking of his usual dependent demeanour. Therefore his choice becomes a more important and personal one. A personal aspect of the psyche of a person in diaspora is revealed here because we cannot ultimately come up with some equation that could derive a person's true identity

or right choice for them. It is complex and depends on their personal experience and what someone goes through. Their decision becomes something that is completely personal and unique to them. Salamon wants to paint. When Eliacha attempts to get an answer out of Salamon another time, Salamon asks if he would be able to paint there.

Salamon gets a bit closer to his decision once he realises the limits of what one can expect from their families and comfort that can be gained. Just days before the day they had to leave, when Salamon's name gets involved in an incident with Elsie, he expects some comfort and trust from his family. He expects some gesture from Eshumuthimma the most because she has always been there for him and always taken his side in the pettiest of matters. He is disappointed and incredibly let down when no one even brings up the topic or even enquires about his side of things. Not even Eshumuthimma.

This incident holds an importance in his ability to make a decision as this kind of breaks down his family dynamics. He was relying on them as usual to come to his aid especially given the seriousness of the issue. But when he needed them the most, no one was by his side. He is able to detach himself from the bounds of his family and think clearly because of this. When he goes to the river landing to get some air, Eshumuthimma doesn't stop him. He reaches a state where he is at peace with things; however they were in his life. "Let it be. If that was how it was going to be, so be it. He tried to find consolation within himself"(385).

The Eve before the departure is another important instance to behold. Everyone who was so excited to leave till then was no more excited. Their sentiments for their current homeland, culture, traditions and life hit them like bricks:

"The day they had waited for, for so long, had finally arrived, but something lay taut and heavy in their hearts. The land where they were born, where they grew up. Their ancestors had not come prepared to leave. One of the rare doors that

had opened for a desperate people. The place they had been given to settle down in later on became the Asylum for the generations that followed(388)".

In Eshumithimma's last reaction and meltdown about leaving for the unfamiliar homeland, Salamon probably saw his own future self and the guilt he would feel if he decided to leave when for him, he knew that happiness and satisfaction would mean to stay and maybe someday pursue painting. Salamon tries to look for a final sign, something that would make his decision easier for him in the sky, in the stars. But at the end, his heart makes his decision for him as we see him on the river landing the next day, as he realises he will soon miss his boat and he would also miss his plane.

He stands there as Evron's son Solomon called Salamon who was born there and will be buried there. His final decision is to stay as for him, the greatest blessing would be to merge and melt into the same soil of his birth. "For he had nowhere to go"(394).

The novel thus gives us a glimpse into the multitude of feelings and experiences that the Jewish community underwent during the time of the Zionist call especially through the character of Salamon and his family. Through the personal narrative that explores their life in detail, the readers form an attachment with the characters and are able to empathise with them, their struggles and their decisions thereby allowing to conclude that the novel effectively manages to provide a perspective into the problems faced by the people of diaspora.

CONCLUSION

The work *Aliyah: The Last Jew in the Village*, which is about the Jews that were settled in Kerala and had to choose between staying or leaving the land they knew for all these years when the Zionist call came gives an overview to the issues of people of diaspora and how they live their lives among people who are

oblivious and oftentimes insensitive to the kind of psychological pressure and struggles they face.

The text is not only helpful in understanding the lives of people in diaspora, but also ultimately helps the readers in relating to and empathising with these characters. Mainly through the character of Salamon, we get a close look at the various struggles of people of diaspora. The characters are written in a raw and organic manner that allows the readers to bond with these characters and relate to their struggles in a broader and more universal sense even if they may not be part of such a diasporic community. The work being set during the time of the Zionist call and being told through three generations of a Jewish family in Kerala, gives detailed glimpses into their personal psyche and their psyche as a part of the society. We're able to understand them individually and as a part of the functioning society and how they are fitted into a stereotyped role of being an outsider when it comes to talks about land and who truly belong. Feelings of uncertainty, identity crises and facing offhanded remarks and humiliation aren't experiences that are entirely exclusive to any particular group of people. As humans, we all come across some kind of situation at some point in our lives that makes us question ourselves and our standpoints and it is through experiences and situations like these that Sethu manages brilliantly to make the readers relate to the experience of people of diaspora. Their experiences are not locked away in some hard to understand theories and philosophies; they live their lives among the rest of the population and we are accountable to understand how we may be unintentionally adding to their pain.

The work manages to bring a universal understanding in letting the readers know the history and their lives in detail. It is not primarily focused on the issue of diaspora and their struggles as the prominent theme. The characters have a life beyond that aspect and they have an identity in their society more than just being outsiders; they have their own history in the land, contributions they made

for the people etc, but still are somehow not able to completely fit in. Formation of such dynamics cannot be completely explained or captured through simple statements and facts. Their story has been beautifully narrated and manages to provide a deeper understanding and view of their struggles by throwing light on experiences and feelings that are universal to all of humanity. The work captures the social setting and all aspects of life in the region excellently as well.

Salamon becomes a very accessible and understandable character as the readers get to know his story from the beginning, see his childhood, growth and how his nature is shaped up. As a kid who grew up without his mother and was pampered by his grandmother and grew comfortably for a long time till he was ultimately forced to make a decision of his own, his character provides the perfect canvas for anyone unaware about their history and contexts. The readers are able to join Salamon in his journey of collecting information, understanding their history and learning the importance of making the decision while he gathers the opinions of various people he trusts and relies on even though they were not part of his community. He makes his decision by gaining insights from the people surrounding him living with different struggles but is able to put them together and make a decision for his problem as well. One doesn't necessarily have to be a part of a diasporic community to feel out of place in their surroundings or to feel an urge to escape, run away, or go in search of a place where they truly belong. Sethu has realised this and used it effectively in the novel as he brings in other characters and their feelings of being out of place as well and provides the reader with multiple point of views for such a feeling and the reader themselves is probably able to think of such instances in their own life and this makes the work more easier to empathise and understand in detail.

Ultimately it is the individual experiences that shape a person's perspectives, their outlooks and determine the decisions they make. Sethu also portrays this in the story by setting Salamon as a character who stands apart from the rest of the

Jewish community in the novel for whom the choice is very much obvious from the start; as a community this is what they wanted and they choose to leave. For Salamon on the other hand, he takes his time trying to make a decision never fixating on any stance because he doesn't have a sense of that group or religious identity. For him, it is about the land, the people, all the relations he cultivated in that land while he lived there. His last commitment was his family and that too experiences some tension and by the final chapter, he is able to make a decision without any biases or influences. Salamon's final decision to stay is not a right or a wrong one, or a one that gives some definite conclusion or formula to understanding the mind and dilemma of all diaspora; it is simply his personal decision shaped by his own life, experiences and priorities. Nevertheless the novel remains successful in bringing out the features of diaspora to a very large extent.

The work in this sense, beyond all its portrayal of diaspora and history which it effectively puts forward, also allows one to understand and empathise with humanity, its ordeals and widening our horizon of perspectives. Sethu is perhaps trying to throw light on all of humanity with his widely relatable, simple and a very accessible *Aliyah: the Last Jew in the Village* which is what ultimately leads to the easy understanding of what might seem like a complex theory, dispute or issue. The work manages to provide as an excellent model for understanding diaspora in detail.

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