

EXPLORING THE RISE OF INDIAN DIASPORIC WRITING IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

The history of Indian diasporic writing is as old as the diaspora itself. Most of the Indian diaspora now settled in different countries found its inception in the form of indentured labour. The population of diaspora has increased over the years due to increased migration, a shift in global supply chain and technological advancements which together have shrunk the world so much so that the distances have melted and people can always be close to one-another. These things reflect very well in the works of Indian diasporic writers. These writers have taken the world by awe through their works. From Kamala Markandaya to Sunetra Gupta and from V. S. Naipaul to Rohinton Mistry, the Indian diasporic writers have carved out a niche for themselves in the terrain of world literature. They are winning awards and getting worldwide acceptance and acclaim. The themes of these writers involve- nostalgia, loss of identity, loss of culture, reinventing oneself, quest of self, rootlessness, alienation, homeland, amalgamation and assimilation and the other experiences, which come as part of settlement at a new place. Today in the changed scenario the idea of diaspora has got altogether changed. In the present world where there is more tolerance and acceptability, and distances have shrunk, making it a global village, the core themes do not have the poignance and acridness of experience which the early diasporic writers infused their works with in writing about issues and maladies pertaining to the Indian diaspora.

Keywords: Indian diasporic writing, Nostalgia, loss of identity, Alienation, Homeland, Dislocation.

Introduction

Away from their home, uprooted, dislocated, discarded & persecuted, they try to find ground so that they can stay rooted, firm and steadfast; so that they can sprout up, grow and bloom. Though they change the ground yet the relation is never snapped; the soil beckons; the nation pulls them. However rarefied it is but the bond remains there in some form or the other. In some corner of the heart or mind, the vestiges exist. The works of Indian diaspora attest this fact.

Today, in every part of the world, Indian diaspora exists, among them there are many writers who have penned down their thrills and travails; their troubles and tribulations

& their joys and sorrows. In an answer to the question i.e. “What engenders the emigration of people from India?” the commonest and the most frequent answer that we get is, financial goals, education and professional aspirations. In general, nobody wants to leave their native place unless they are compelled by circumstances. A very small percentage of such people get settled there penetrating with their roots deeper and deeper in the new found land in order to ensure their stability and security. They become the part and parcel of that culture and civilization. Their old identity is sandpapered away by their new identity. They reinvent and reframe themselves and start identifying themselves with the land of their bread which is indispensable for their survival. But the origin is mother and even after the placental cord is cut the bond is never. People like to talk and flaunt their knowledge and share their memories about their homeland.

Etymology & Types

To trace it from the beginning, diaspora is a blanket term used to name a phenomenon of dispersion of people from one nation state to a host country. It finds its origin in the exile of Jews from Israel. Etymologically, the word diaspora has Greek root, which means, “I scatter” “I spread about” and so gradually it came to mean “dispersion of people from their homeland.” But Robin Cohen(1997) , in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* foregrounded the need to have more theorization in the concept of Diaspora because according to him, the Jewish model of diaspora could be used as a base for reflection but couldn't be an exchangeable model. So during 90s many typologies were proposed to understand and define the concept of Diaspora. Michael Bruneau defined three major types of diasporas:

1. The Entrepreneurial Diaspora (i.e. Chinese, Lebanese)
2. The Religious Diaspora (i.e. Jews, Greeks)
3. The Politic Diaspora (i.e. Palestinians, Tibetans)

Robin Cohen, at this point, in response to different views, proposed a different typology:

1. Labour Diaspora (i.e. Indians)
2. Imperial Diaspora (i.e. British)
3. Trade Diaspora (i.e. Chinese, Lebanese)
4. Cultural Diaspora (i.e. Caribbean)

Such researches and discoveries witnessed an emergence of new notions of transnational space, transnational communities, nations unbound etc. due to the works produced by Basch, Glick-Schiller and Szanton Blanc. This seems quite true because in the current epistemological parlance, the term Diaspora is inadequate to explain the kind of mobility taking place in this world. The geographical boundaries have diluted and people have become global citizens.

Factors Affecting Diaspora & Diasporic Writing

Diaspora holds the status of being ambiguous as being a metaphor for both refugee and ambassador. For refugees because they go away from their home all uncertain about their future and take shelter in a different and unknown land; and for ambassadors because they represent the culture and tradition of their native place trying to enhance its acceptability in the host country. They are the bearers of their country's image in a foreign land. The diasporic writers try to justify both the roles through their works. Bhiku Parekh has rightly stated about Indian diaspora that, "The diasporic Indian is like a banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he increasingly comes to feel at home in the world." (Bhikhu 1994) Diasporic Indian literature strengthens the relationship between Indians abroad and Indians in India, makes the world aware of our rich cultural, social heritage and inclusivity thereby creating space for Indians all over the world. Today diasporic Indian writing has its independent identity with its unique characteristic features which make it tower over the narrow prejudices of race and colour.

Instead of directly plunging into the depth of diasporic writing, it is better to have more familiarity with its progress and other dimensions. So to say, in the diasporic communities, there are people who are compelled by instinct to outpour their feelings and emotions in the form of writing. Like the precious things such as gold, when these people undergo a rigorous process of pain, suffering, struggle, agony etc., the words that come out are cogently enamouring, purgated of all deformities and impairments. The works of early diasporic writers are a first-hand manifestation of their ordeals, the discrimination they faced and the other challenges of migration. The modern day diasporic writers have something else to say but there is a commonality which binds them and the land of their origin.

The diasporic Indian writers have contributed greatly to Indian writing in English. They have successfully carved out a niche for themselves in the world literature. The themes which can be observed in a diasporic work are- nostalgia, loss of identity, loss of culture, reinventing oneself, quest of self, rootlessness, alienation etc. According to Uma (2007) the life of a diasporic person can be divided into four phases. In the first phase, one is nostalgic and homesick and feels a bit scared in the strange land. The second phase is the phase of adjustment to the new environment. In the third phase people get involved in the ethno-cultural issues. The fourth phase is the phase of proving their existence by participating in the larger world of politics and national issues.

According to Safran(1991) the immigrants continue to relate themselves with their homeland in some way or the other and this defines their ethno- communal consciousness and solidarity with their native land. This is quite natural for the immigrants to make themselves acceptable in the host country. In an attempt of doing so, they try to adapt themselves to the culture and social practices of the host country. They assimilate different things from the host country and also they blend things together thus adopting a midway. But even in the struggle of settling down in the host country, they try to maintain their individuality, their culture and tradition. It is difficult

for them to discard their language, dress, cuisine, music, art etc. They try to pass it on to the future generation and over the generations, some of these practices are vanished, some are moulded and some undergo a syncretic process. They feel themselves always on a borderline belonging neither to the host country nor to the homeland. They are always in a struggle to maintain their inheritance and to assimilate the culture and practices of the host country. This constant conflict disappoints them as they find it difficult to manage both. There is always a feeling of marginality and alienation.

Torn between two cultures, two languages and two religions they find a desperate desire to express their pent up emotions which find a perfect channel in writing i.e. without directly offending anybody, one is able to give a cathartic treatment to one's inner springs of feelings. They pour out their creative talent into depicting their personal experiences and understanding of the immigrant issues and thus form a cultural identity for themselves. The immigrants always oscillate between crisis and reconstruction. The anguish and agony of lost home culminates in the making of a different version of home i.e. a metahome which exists nowhere except in one's imagination. Salman Rushdie rightly pointed out this when he stated

“--- one physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind.”(Rushdie, 1991:10)

According to Rushdie, an immigrant is an archetypal figure of diasporic age. He is a man without frontiers. Different writers have explained the plight of diasporas in their own manner. To Uma Parmeswaran, an immigrant is always in a Trishanku state, poised between three worlds – sea, sky and earth as mentioned in the Ballkand of Ramayan. He is a nowhere man, lost in a new world, without any geographical markers and de-territorialized. Feroz Jussawala has described an expatriate as chiffon sarees, a

sort of crossbreed attempt to adjust to the pressures of a new world while actually being from an older one.

An expatriate is triply displaced from his homeland i.e. geographically, culturally and emotionally. Out of the three, geographical displacement is quite patent to all but the other two are more telling. It wreaks havoc on the mental health of the expatriates. They find themselves on tenterhooks always caught and confused, oscillating between what they have lost and what they want to gain. Though through acculturation and assimilation, they try to negotiate the imbalance of their hyphenated identity, they find it difficult to justify themselves at either place; the past haunts and the present looms over them. They remain divided and torn unable to decide where to belong to. Their identity keeps shifting in time and space.

Memory plays a very significant role in expatriate writing. The writers create two distinct worlds for them (i) Imaginary and (ii) Real. They keep negotiating with both in an alternating manner. Sometimes the real world dominates and sometimes the imaginary. It has often been noticed that nostalgia and homeland have a strong pull for almost all the expatriate writers. On the one hand, these writers desire to go back home and on the other hand, the temptation of money, position, job, a prosperous life etc. function as a bait which compels them to hold on to the new-found land. But the past reminiscences overpower the present ones and the real and the imaginary keep constantly shifting, one overlapping the other.

Today, the writers like Hari Kunzru, Shashi Tharoor etc. do not feel the same kind of homesickness or nostalgia as the people of those times felt because in those days distances played a major role. For the first generation immigrants, things were pretty hard. It was not easy for them to return to their homeland except once or twice in the whole lifetime as most of the people were labourers. But today people can come to their homeland anytime they want. The NRIs are now economically well off to maintain the familial ties. They can afford to have a detached view of India. They

criticize her for her non-performance, wrong stand and wrong policies and boast of her achievements.

The people relocating themselves to the other country carry with them the baggage of the nation in the form of customs and practices which gets reflected in their behaviour, their approach and the way they carry themselves out. It results in either their acceptance or rejection in the foreign soil. As long as they keep the burden of their homeland aside, they are accepted and taken into the new culture with open arms. But if they are unable to accept the host culture, they are alienated. One can cope with the outright alienation to some extent but the untold and indirect alienation is crueller. Faced with such situation one undergoes anxiety, depression and loneliness.

In the ancient times when people lived by spiritual principle, nobody could have faced the problems of identity, loneliness, detachment, acceptance, rejection etc. as faced today by lots of immigrants. The gamut of people's thoughts was limited to the individual, family and society but today in the shrunk and globalized world, the notions of nation and national identity have also crept into. As the distances have shortened, the range and frequency of motion have increased and so have the mental frontiers of people. Moreover, when people cross the boundary of a nation, the cares and concerns get a background of nation and nationality, and failures and victories are perused, evaluated and dwelt upon in such a huge backdrop, and narrow and puny boundaries of caste, community and religion dissipate.

Over time the idea of diaspora has undergone a drastic change. The early diasporas had a different notion about nation and identity than what it means to the present day diasporas. The intense urge that one would feel for one's homeland, has come down a lot. The modern scientific inventions and the advent of social media have severed all the barriers. Today, the physical and geographical barriers don't exist and to a great extent people have got over the feeling of being physically and psychologically detached as one can see one's family members, hear them and even talk to them and that too any time. Diaspora is also shaped and affected by gender and class. The

working professionals who are mostly men, it becomes easy to adjust and adapt to the new culture and society but on the other hand, women who are mostly house-wives, are the carrier of the native culture and tradition. To them, it is comparatively taxing to come out of the cast and accept the new situation and systems of the new land. They create their own social and cultural space by associating themselves with the people of the same land. Thus they keep the ties on for themselves and for the family members. But with the second generation things experience a dramatic change and the first generation watch it all like an outsider: outsider to the local people; outsider to their own children and outsider to the native land. They live in a liminal space always oscillating between the two terminals. This situation allows them some room to have a detached view of everything which in turn imparts a better understanding. But with the second generation there starts building a conflict between parents and children. Parents wish to maintain their ethnic identity but children born in a foreign land are foreign to the homeland of their parents. They try to create their own identity breaking free from the ideas of nativity and homeland that their parents try to impose upon them.

Indian Diasporic Writing: Beginning & Rise

The history of Indian diasporic writing is as old as Indian diaspora itself i.e. since the time Indian people started migrating and settling abroad, they penned down their feelings and emotions in the form of novels and stories which help us understand their times and circumstances. The earliest extant work by a diasporic Indian writer is the *Travels of Dean Mahomet* by Sake Dean Mahomet who suffused the book with the first hand experiences of his travels to different places in India and abroad. Forty years later, in 1835, the first English text written by an Indian residing in India was published which was *Imaginary History* by Kylas Chunder Dutt. The first Indian novel *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee was published much later in 1834. It is enough proof that Indian diaspora was active much earlier than the natives residing in India. The Girmityas also preferred writing in English and the descendants of these indentured labourers have been the major contributors to this field.

The Naipaul family contributed greatly to the diaspora literature. See Prasad Naipaul, an Indo-Trinidadian writer wrote *The Adventures of Gurudeva & Other Indian Tales* but it could not be published until after his death. He passed the legacy on to his sons V. S. Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul. Shiva Naipaul died quiet early, at the age of forty, depriving the world of a genius, who could have brought forth more fruitful works for the literature lovers of the world. His elder brother V.S. Naipaul has given us some immortal characters to dwell upon and relish. His works such as *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *In a Free State*, *A Bend in the River*, *The Enigma of Arrival* became very popular and won him Booker and even Nobel Prize. His novels chiefly dealt with struggle for personal identity, freedom, changing perspectives in the wake of colonialism and post-colonialism.

Salman Rushdie born in Mumbai and settled in U. K. was catapulted to fame after the publication of *Midnight's Children*. He was quite influenced by Joyce but his works deal more with the issues of identity, ethnicity, racism and other post-colonial issues. His first novel *Grimus* nosedived into oblivion amid universal critical derision. In *Midnight's Children* he employed magical realism to explain the allegory of events in the pre & post- independent India. *Shame* was the third novel by Rushdie in which he explores the theme of shame and shamelessness along with the sense of heritage and lineage. His *Satanic Verses* received good reviews in England but was criticized by the others as blasphemic and ridiculing Islamic beliefs. He has written 12 novels along with other works and holds a prominent place among the literary intelligentsia.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is another name in the list of diasporic writers. Her works such as- *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* have been adapted into films. Her works are rich in Indian sensibility and culture. She also explores the themes of rootlessness, alienation, disparity, tales of abuses and bravery of immigrant women, emotional isolation, non-communication etc. In her debut collection of short stories, she talks about women caught between two worlds, their dejection, disillusionment and adaptation to such conditions. Through all her characters whether Sumita, Jayanti,

Meera or Abha, she very beautifully and unequivocally portrays the predicament of immigrants, especially women.

Bharati Mukherjee with the publication of 8 novels, several short stories and other works of non-fiction, has carved out an enduring space for herself not only among diasporic Indian writers but also among the milling crowd of writers all over the world. Though she doesn't like to introduce herself as a hyphenated Indian-American writer yet all her works are infused with and steeped in Indian moralities, modalities and culture. They also reflect a first-hand experience of an Indian in a foreign land, the resultant anxiety, quest for identity, culture shock, cultural mongrelisation, displacement in space etc. The works and life of Bharati Mukherjee can be divided into three phases. The first phase is a state of nostalgia in which she tries to belong to her roots & and searches for her identity in her inheritance. Her works such as- *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Days & Nights in Calcutta* depicts it perfectly. The second phase is about racism and an immigrant's dilemma which gets manifested in the works such as- *Wife*, *Darkness*, *An Invisible Woman* & *The Sorrow*. The third phase portrays the immigrant's assimilation and adaptation and also celebration of a new free life in the host country through the works such as- *Jasmine* and *The Middleman*.

The writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Meera Syal have talked about intergenerational gap in their works viz. *The Namesake*, *Anita & Me* respectively. The work presents the bewilderment of both children and their parents. The parents expect their children to follow the Indian value system and culture but the children born in the foreign land find it difficult to adhere to the standards set by their parents. To them the host country becomes their motherland and they rebel against the conservative approach of their parents.

Some diasporic writers have also talked about disintegrating family units due to deteriorating moral values, commercially negotiated marriages, shifting power relations in the families. Writers like Hari Kunzru has totally different aspect of Indian diaspora in his novel. Through his protagonist Arjun Mehta, he tells us about the modern day

techies who migrate to USA to live an American dream but are frustrated due to their failure in achieving their goal and they adopt wrong means to take revenge which ultimately proves devastating to them. Amit Chaudhari's *Afternoon Raga* is a blend of student life at Oxford and the life in India. He also brings in nostalgia, cultural difference entwined with his predilection for music. There is a long list of such diasporic writers who have related several existential problems and opportunities.

Conclusion

With the second and third generation of diaspora, there has come a tremendous change in the outlook of people. Today with modern technological revolutions, shrinking geographical spaces and increasing awareness and understanding, the existential problems as delineated by the first generation people are no more relevant and no more a matter of concern for the third generation people. The feeling of nostalgia, culture shock and alienation do not exist now or have vanished into a thin layer. The anxiety and fear of migration has now turned into an opportunity to rejoice. People are celebrating their double identity and belongingness to two places. The problem of assimilation and acculturation is also no more a problem. People easily adapt themselves to any place and culture and the foreign lands are also more open to assimilate the immigrants. Today we see a new culture & community evolved in the foreign lands due to the people frequently travelling between countries and these immigrants are enjoying their hyphenated identity.

Diaspora now instead of being a narrative of loss, has become a narrative of gain, marked by new belongingness, new freedom and new territories. Unlike being in a state of limbo between the native place and foreign land, diaspora is being apotheosized, characterized with more mobility and freedom from social and cultural ties. According to Bharati Mukherjee diaspora is not an impoverishment rather an enrichment in terms of culture and aesthetic experience. At the end, it would be unfair to forget the writers such as- Kamla Markandaya, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran

Desai and Anita Desai, and the stupendous contribution made by them to Diasporic Indian Literature.

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