

Litrature of Indian Diaspora: An Overview

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Abstract

The paper is primarily aimed at giving a brief overview of Literature of Indian Diaspora. There is an effort made to introduce the term 'Diaspora'. Major motives of the literature are highlighted in short. A few Indian writers of the literature of Diaspora are taken into consideration with their sole purpose. The paper is mainly concerned with Indian Literature of the writers who are alienated yet concerned for the nation- India.

Key Words- Diaspora, Indian, Motive, Alienation

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Introduction

The term diaspora comes from the words *dia* meaning “away” and *speirein* meaning “scatter” or “sow.” Connotatively, diaspora has been defined variedly. Initially applied to refer to the dispersal of Jews outside Israel, the term diaspora as per the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary now applies to “the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country” A distinction is often made between the two, i.e., Diaspora with “D” in the upper case and diaspora with “d” in the lower case: the former stands for dislocation of Jews and the latter stands for cross-cultural displacement in a very general sense. The term diaspora is also sometimes used to connote the evolution of human civilization all over the world. The origination of the primitive human and subsequent dispersal to establish human societies in different parts of the world signifies diaspora and the diasporic condition. Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as diasporic writers, who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works. Diasporic literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation.

Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. Uma Parameswaran has defined it as follows; ————first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have ‘arrived’ and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (Parameswara, 165)

The immigrants, whatever their reason for migration be, financial, social, political, no matter whether they migrated for trade and commerce, as religious preachers, as laborers, convicts, soldiers, as expatriates or refugees, exiles (forced or voluntary), or as guest workers in search of better life and opportunities have shared some common things as well as differences which are based on their conditions of migration and period of stay in the adopted land. Mostly the migrants suffer from the pain of being far off from their homes, the memories of their motherland, the

anguish of leaving behind everything familiar agonizes the minds of migrants. William Safran has observed that; “—they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.” (Safran, 1991:23)

The diasporic Indians too, do not break their relationship with the ancestral land. There is a search for continuity and ‘ancestral impulse’, an effort to look for their roots. Settlement in alien land makes them experience dislocation. Dislocation can be considered as a break with the old identity. They experience the sense of loneliness in an alien land feel as they face non-acceptance by the host society and also experience ethnic discrimination.

The immigrants attempt to assimilate, adapt and amalgamate with the society of their host country. Their attempts of adaptation and adjustment are not without their concern to maintain their original culture and identity. The marginal groups try to guard themselves against the dominant host group. The most important means used for insulation is the continuation of the cultural practices and social traditions. The first generation immigrants are always concerned with keeping the social, cultural baggage which consists of among other things their religion, language, music, art, dress, cuisine, etc. intact. Conscious attempts are made by the diasporic communities to pass their traditions to the future generation. The experiences of these cultural elements have been varied in different diasporic situations. Some of these elements have vanished, some have persisted or survived, others have experienced assimilation, syncretism or change, and few elements ought to be rejuvenated. The immigrants in these situations are compelled to feel that they stand on the borderline belonging neither to their motherland nor their adopted country. In their attempt to integrate with the adopted culture while maintaining their inheritance, they develop a dual identity, and their culture becomes a sandwich culture. Their efforts for assimilation and failure to do so dishearten them. The feeling of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation and sufferings due to discrimination on the basis of race, culture, religion and language concludes into conflicts, fight for identity and on the other hand lead to birth of feeling of marginality in the minority group. This results in the creation of a fractured identity.

As they torn between the two places and two cultures and often languages; the expatriate writer navigates a new literary space. The diasporic literature arises under these circumstances. The broken psyche of the immigrants sheds off its psychosis into writing. Therefore, the migrant writer feels a forceful need to write and with their multicultural ethos and a profound understanding of socio-cultural and

economic realities around them, they have been successful in transforming their experiences into writings. Another important reason for writing by the creative talent in the diasporic community is to make their existence recognized. The very act of creation is a purposeful effort to form a cultural identity

Diasporic writing unfolds these experiences of unsettlement and dislocation, at some or the other level. A diasporic text can be investigated in terms of location, dislocation and relocation. The changing designation of home and accompanying nervousness about homelessness and unfeasibility of going back are recurrent themes in diasporic literature.

The expatriate literature also deals mostly with the inner conflict in the context of cultural displacement. The immigrants away from the families fluctuate between crisis and reconstruction. They are thrice alienated from the native land they left behind, from their new host country and their children. Diaspora literature is in constant conversation with the metahome. The longing to regain lost home often culminates in the creation of a different version of home. As Salman Rushdie observes;

“— one physical alienation from India at 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)

Nostalgia, loss, betrayal and duty are the foundations of new homes as diasporic protagonist adjust to new countries. In adjusting to new countries, issues of acculturation and assimilation become the central point as these immigrants negotiate the unbalance of their hyphenated identities. Usually, the first generation diaspora clings to food and clothes as the most obvious markers of Indianness that sets them apart and highlights their difference. The insistence on this difference is often a conscious declaration of belonging to another place. On the other hand, second generation diaspora declines and removes such identity markers to assimilate the dominant culture.

Writers of Indian Diasporic literature in English –

It is interesting to note that the history of Indian diasporic writing is as old as the diaspora itself. The first Indian writing in English is attributed to Dean Mohamed, who was born in Patna, India. His book *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* was published in 1794. It predates by about forty years the first English text written by an Indian residing in India. Kylas Chunder Dutt's 'Imaginary History' *A Journal of Forty-Eight hour of the year 1945* published in 1835. The first Indian English novel, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, was to be published much later in 1864. It

proves that the contribution of the Indian Diaspora to Indian English writing is not new. It is also interesting to note that, the descendants of the Indian indentured laborers in the so-called 'girit colonies' have mostly favored writing in English. Writers like See Prasad Naipaul and later Shiva Naipaul, V. S. Naipaul, Cyril Dabydeen, David Dabydeen, Sam Selvon, M.G. Vassanji, Subramanian, K.S. Maniam, Shani Muthoo and Marina Budos are important contributors in this field.

V. S. Naipaul's characters like Mohan Biswas from *A House for Mr. Biswas* or Ganesh Ramkumar from *The Mystic Masseur*, are instances of persons who are generations away from their original homeland, India, but their inheritance gives them a realization of their past. They become examples of the outsider, the unhoused, for the world to see. Naipaul's characters are not governed by actual displacement but by an inherited memory of dislocation. For them, their native land India is not a geographical space but a creation of the imagination. Their predicament can be explained in Rushdie's words as he remarks; "— the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity." (Rushdie, 1991:87)

Literature of old generation of diasporic Indian writers like Raja Rao, G. V. Dasani, Santha Rama Rau, Dhal Chandra Rajan, Nirad Chaudhari, Ved Metha,, mainly look back at India and hardly ever record their experiences away from India as expatriates. It is as if these writers have discovered their Indianness when they are out of India. Evidently, they have the benefit of looking at their homeland from the outside. The distance offers detachment that is so required to have a clear insight of their native land. Gradually, the old diaspora of indentured laborers is replaced by the new diaspora of International Indian English Writers live in the market driven world. These writers register their away from India experiences and even if they look back at their motherland it is often in a melancholic tone rather than nostalgia. These modern diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two different classes. One class includes those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. The other class comprises those who have been raised since childhood outside India. They have had a vision of their country only from the outside as an alien place of their origin. The writers of the previous group have a factual displacement whereas those belonging to the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have created an enviable corpus of English literature. These writers while portraying migrant characters in their fiction investigate the theme of displacement, alienation, assimilation, acculturation, etc. The diasporic Indian writers' portrayal of dislocated characters gains immense

significance if seen against the geopolitical background of the vast Indian subcontinent. That is exactly why such works have an international readership and a lasting appeal. Two of the earliest novels that have effectively depicted diasporic Indian characters are Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* and Kamala Mark Andaya's *The Nowhere Man*. These novels reveal how racial prejudice against Indians in the UK of 1960's isolates the character and deepens their sense of displacement. Bharati Mukherjee's novels like *Wife and Jasmine* depict Indians in the US – the land of immigrants both legal and illegal – before globalization got its momentum. Salman Rushdie in his novel *The Satanic Verses* approaches the metaphor of migration by adopting the technique of magic realism. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* depicts Tilo, the protagonist, as an exotic character to reveal the migrant's anguish. Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* shows the extent of rootlessness encountered by character born and brought up on a foreign land. Amit Chaudhari, in his novel *Afternoon Raag*, portrays the lives of Indian students in Oxford. These writers also depicted the positive aspect of displacement. There are benefits of living as a migrant, the opportunity of having a double perspective of being able to experience diverse cultural modes. It is often this advantage that enables diasporic Indians, particularly of the second generation; face the dilemma of dual identities. Such ambivalence produces existential anguish in their psychology.

The ranks of second generation diasporic Indian writers like Meera Syal, Shashi Tharoor, Hari Kunzru, Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc. have faithfully demonstrated the lives of both first and second generation immigrants in the US. This is possible because big issues like religious discrimination and racial intolerance are no longer the main concern of these writers. What matters now in the present world are the small things. Little unappreciated things gain enormous significance in changed conditions. It is here that the different reactions by Indian, westerns and diasporic characters towards similar situations are bound to differ only apparently. It reveals that the inner needs of all human beings are the same.

The great writers of Indian English fiction like Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, had a strong dedication to expose cruel realities of life to effect the desired change in society. Nationalism, Partition Poverty, Peasantry, Subjugated Women, Rural-Urban Divide, East-West encounter, Feudal Practices, Casteism, and Communalism were some of the themes quite closer to their hearts. All of them are well known for realistic portrayal of contemporary Indian life. Taking departure from the first generation of Indian English novelists, the postmodern Indian English novelists have concentrated on a completely new set of themes which are

wide ranging and inclusive as the life in the age of globalization is immersed in the emerging issues of globalization and subsequent multiculturalism, feminism, queer theories, diasporic sensibility, glamour, consumerism, commoditization, upward mobility, erosion of ethical values are some of main issues raised by contemporary novelists and short stories writers.

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