

Diasporic Literature and the Indian Diasporic Fiction

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Abstract: *At the present age we find a great diversity in the human population in almost all of the countries especially in the 'First World' countries and in the speedily developing countries. This is chiefly because of migration. The migrant people or the settlers are new and like alien to the adoptive land in terms of language, culture, tradition and so on which at times lead to ethnic clashes at times. Because, the migrant people always try to keep their original identity alive – they like to be what they have been in their motherland. This is very much disturbing to the migrant people to live in a land which is different from that of their own; they find it difficult to mingle with the native people, native culture of the adoptive land. This is the case with the native people also. All these kind of experiences have been portrayed in the literary works of some of the migrant people. These literary works are popularly known as Diasporic Literature. Diasporic literature also presents a clear understanding of the migrant people of their homeland. Indian diasporic literature is a vast field to be studied. This may lead to the understanding of the migrant people's experiences in the foreign lands and also the kind of reception they receive. This might also lead to a much more clear understanding of the Indian culture and tradition as it is often get contrasted and compared to the other cultures of the world in the diasporic literature.*

Key words: culture, diaspora, identity, Indian.

Introduction:

The present paper is a humble effort to understand the Diasporic Literature and its origin and also to find a glimpse of the Indian Diasporic Literature in the genre of fiction. A good number of available literatures has been reviewed and cited to suit the discussion of the topic.

“Diaspora” means the scattering of people of a certain community, or nation outside its home, or homeland. The word ‘diaspora’ originated from the Greek ‘Diaspirein’ meaning ‘to disperse’, which was used especially for scattering of seed on soil. Later, it was used to refer to the people of the imperial city-state who scatter themselves to conquer and colonize other lands and to assimilate the conquered land into the Greek culture. But, the present concept of Diaspora has been derived from the Jews dispersal from Palestine after their defeat with the Romans in 70 CE. The Jews were a distinct group under the Greeks, when, in the Hellenistic period, the rulers brought the idea of ‘city-state’ or ‘polls’. As a result, the Jews remained outsiders in Canaan and they did not wish to be the citizens in the city-state and wanted to be separated from the Greeks. They feared that becoming full citizens in the city-state under the Greeks would have abolished their own [Jewish] identity. Therefore, the Jews were totally abolished from the city-state [Canaan] in 70 CE. “Later when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the word diaspirein was used to refer to the mass population of deported Jews who spread after the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE. It subsequently

came to be used to refer interchangeably to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel, the cultural development of that population, or the population itself.” (Biswas, 2010, p.75)

The late 19th century and the twentieth century witnessed a worldwide dispersion of vast population fleeing political oppression or simply looking for more beneficial opportunities in terms of education and earning etc. Hence, Diaspora has taken the expanded form. And it now includes any group of people living outside their homeland.

Diaspora can be defined in the most concrete sense that “...it refers to the people who were forcibly or voluntarily exiled to some foreign land [and they remain a minority group there], suffer from a nostalgic longing for their past land, and preserve their former land. In the abstract and qualitative sense it is a consciousness of ethnic alienation within a given polity.” (Biswas, 2010, p.76) And again, Diaspora may be seen as a form of multiculturalism also. The deported [whether imposed or voluntary] population feel their ethnicity on the foreign land. They feel “a sense of alienation, identity crisis, two or more cultural heritage and which is the most important nostalgic longing for their homeland, habits, rituals and food.” (Biswas, 2010, p.76) Diaspora is thus a trans-state cultural, social, psychological, economic, political, ethnic and linguistic state in which these people carry a sense of xenophobia and displacement from their homeland. Some of the characteristics of the diaspora people can be

identified as follows – (a) these people maintain regular or at least occasional contacts with their former land, (b) they have a hope of, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point of time, if the “homeland” still exists, (c) these emigrant people not only settle in new territories but also take with them and recreate there a form of their homeland with its artefacts in case of culture, language and all other aspects of life, (d) the subsequent generations get the ideas of their homeland through their parents, diasporic society, reading literary compositions, myths and legends and the like, (e) So, the homeland, for the subsequent generations, is a land of emotional attachments and the hearth of their original culture, (f) they do not share the same history with the citizens of the host country and so they feel their different ethno-political identity, (g) moreover, these people always possess a feeling of alienation.

However, these characteristics vary from place to place, and from community to community, or even from individual to individual. “But the most common feature that works behind the feeling of diaspora is the role of common memory, myth, folklore, history and ethno-political myth comprised of national flag, national anthem, constitution, official history, and common allusions and metaphors.” (Biswas, 2010, p.76)

Ethnic identity is the basic problem of the diasporic people. Because, they fail to adapt themselves to the customs, rituals, culture, food habit, dressing sense, different kinds of relationships etc. of the host country for they have in their mind the memory of their homeland in which they were born and brought up. And the cultural tradition of the homeland differs greatly from that of the host country. It is a known fact that culture and cultural tradition differs from place to place. Another aspect of the diasporic people is that they are never accepted easily by the native people of the host country. These people are always considered as aliens or outsiders. No matter they have contributed greatly towards the growth of the host country. Diaspora is also related to the religion and religious rights. Because, it is a very important social institution and differences in religious practices contribute a lot in creating difference in human relationships. These people often face problems in terms of language also for their linguistic difference and also difference in accent. And it leads to the realization of linguistic rights. Therefore, it is evident that, “diaspora comprises twofold identities – one is the original and strongly rooted identity that is traditionally inherent, and the other is the adapted identity that is a reaction to the society of the host country -” (Biswas, 2010,p.78)

“Nostalgia for home is the quintessence of Diaspora...Diasporic literature captures the problematic issues and the concerns experienced by the immigrants.” (Swamy, 2013, p.1) “Diaspora is

the displacement from one geographical region to another... lead[ing] to a sense of homelessness and identity crisis.” (Swamy, 2013, p.2) “Thus the displacement from one country to another and acquiring the ethnic culture also holding the native culture brings gradual dilemma and a sense of rootlessness in the migrant community.” (Swamy, 2013, p.2) “The question of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ is a constant concern of the migrant of which ‘nostalgia’ is the inherent result.” (Swamy, 2013, p.2)

“On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand home is also the vivid experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations.” (Quoted in Swamy, 2013, p. 3)“This is a revelation that ‘home’ connotes not only physical distances but harbours passions attached with people and surroundings, and ambience shared characteristics of a native land. The yearning for home and nostalgia for homeland becomes a constant presence as it always seems to ponder the psyche of the expatriates.” (Swamy, 2013, p.3) The expatriates continue to live in a double life refusing to give up their cultural roots.

Though the term “diaspora” can be traced back to the times of the Bible; to the dispersal of the Jews, the term diasporic literature is not that age old idea. It has got currency only in the recent times; it can be sensed from the last few decades only. This can be related to the ideas of colonialism, post-colonialism, multiculturalism, immigration, exile and the like.

The Indian Diasporic Literature:

Thus, while going to discuss the theme of alienation we are to discuss the diasporic literature. In this regard we may well take the Indian diasporic literature. Because, “among the diasporic communities – as far as twentieth century and twenty-first century literary traditions are concerned – the most important must be of African and Indian.” (Biswas, 2010, p.79) The Indian diaspora has been considered as one of the most outstanding and complex socio-cultural and economic phenomenon in the scenario of the contemporary world literature. The Indian diaspora is constituted in migration, partition, resettlement and socio-economic assimilations and moreover, there is the push and at the same time there is the pull of the opportunities of prosperity. There is the push of inadequate opportunity in the homeland and the pull of better prospects in the West. There is a range of Indian diasporic writers. This includes Raja Rao to Bharti Mukherjee, or Vassanji to

Stephen Gill, or Tabish khair to Satendranandan and so on and so forth. The Indian writers or the Indian origin writers form a significant body in many of the western, African and Australian countries.

“India is ... famed for its myth, magic and tradition. But what happens when its people leave for the foreign lands ... what happens to the magic...”(Ray, 2009, p.85) is like the following. “Amitav Ghosh’s diasporic imagination into the contours of historical fiction promotes a novel globalism but at the same time there is a constant effort to create a craving for a ‘space’ that would be identified as ideal home. In an Antique Land is an individual’s attempt to discover some euphoric moment in which he is metaphorically connected to his past histories.”(Ghosh, 2013,p. 21) “*Midnight’s Children* [by Salman Rushdie] explores the Indian history where he explains and expresses his views about his birth place...” (Daniel, 2011,p. 5) “The difference in the response to the adopted land in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, Michael Ondaatje and Bharati Mukherjee foregrounds the complexity in the diasporan’s approach to life and society.” (Sarangi, 2009, p. v-vi) Sunny Singh says, “I wrote for an Indian reader who can relate to the dilemmas and conflicts of trying to modernize while retaining something that could be ‘essentially Indian.’...” (Quoted in Sarangi, 2009, p.viii) “The sense of agony marks Peeradina’s poems. Separation from the root haunts her like the dark shade of despair. Modern intelligence and doubtful promise burn brightly in Saleem Peeradina ... Tabish Khair’s richly cultivated style and expressive elegance are marked by the Indianized English.” (Quoted in Sarangi, 2009,p. viii) This fragmented study on different Indian diasporic writers show the pluralistic Indian culture and the pluralistic experience of the Indian identity by the different writers of the Indian origin but living abroad and writing from there about their perception of India.

Daisy Hasan is still another prominent new-comer to the scenario of the Indian Diasporic Literature. She is from the Indian continent but presently living in the U.K. Her works deal with the experiences of the ‘dkhars’ (or the immigrants, or in-home settlers) in the hilly city of Shillong.

It is found that the first characteristic feature of the diasporic writing is the theme of alienation. The characters in this kind of literary writing always suffer from being alienated and also that they have a sense of belonging to their homeland. Which they have left years ago, or they have just come to know about that ideal home through their parents or their grandparents. By the phrase “being alien in one’s own homeland” I mean the experiences of the second generation of the “diaspora” or simply the immigrant settlers. This generation or the other subsequent generations take their birth and are brought up in a land which according to their parents or the other people out

there who calls themselves the local people is not their own; that they belong to some other land. But generally what we notice that this generation hardly moves out of the present place. They wish to take the present place as their own and they wish to get established in it. But when they are whammed by the other local peoples they are haunted by their homeland which lays ideally there in their sub-conscious mind. But they do not know what their homeland is; they do not have any kinship, or hardly any kinship left to the homeland; which is left by their parents or grandparents years ago. They cannot go back to that homeland and stay there again. Even if they go there to live they would be alienated because they are not acquainted with the place or the people out there.

Rootlessness of the immigrant settlers is also a very much important theme. The subsequent generations of diasporic people always search for their roots. Because, they cannot locate themselves to the place and people where they live in. This rootlessness can also be found in the people of the colonized people whose culture and traditions and histories were almost wholly destroyed by the colonizers. In the case of this later people; they sometimes try to identify themselves to the culture and identity of the colonizers. It can be found in the case of the West Indies people, as projected by V.S. Naipaul in his novel *The Mimic Men*. These people are aliens in their own homeland.

Being alien is “the state of psychic unease.” (Mishra, 2013, p.162) As in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, Kripal Singh “writes his memoirs while living in his self-imposed exile in a private London hotel. Singh writes his memoirs as an attempt at giving his life a sense of order and cohesion.” (Mishra, 162) And the migrant people always be alien to the adoptive land.

V.S. Naipaul offers a theory in his novel *The Mimic Men* through the character of Lien that “we become what we see of ourselves in the eyes of others.” (quoted in Mishra, 2013,p.163) This is the extreme extent of the sense of alienation.

“*The Mimic Men* proffers a view of the post colonial subject struggling to find a sense of locality and subjectivity within a shifting political epoch...The very nature of the colonial subject’s experience is rooted in uncertainty and uprootment; identity-formation is always contingent and, as Singh, experiences it, fragmentary and haphazard. His narrative is located at the interstices, at the struggle between psychic representation and social reality.” (Mishra, 2013,p.162)

In *The Mimic Men* “Singh is really a body in search of a soul; a life in pursuit of an authentic identity; a personality in need of approval and reassurance.” (Mishra, 2013,p. 163)

“In the West Indies, the word abroad is purely magical, carrying with it depths of richness and mystery which the untraveled native worships

and which the returnee wears like a badge of honour. But within their own group they scarcely deceive themselves.” (Mishra, 2013,p.164) In the same novel (i.e. *The Mimic Men*), Singh and Sandra “had indeed come together for self-defense [security]. (Mishra, 2013, P. 164)

Since his childhood itself, “he [Singh] dreams of escaping his shipwrecked life in the West Indies by riding to the end of a flat, empty world with his Asian ancestors.” (Mishra, 2013, p. 166) And, “all of Singh’s adult life is spent in a futile search for order and roles with continuing disappointment. He seeks support from people and professions but is incapable of true involvement with either because he is so [very] intent on avoiding self violation.” (Mishra, 2013, p. 166)

“V.S. Naipaul begins to hint at a rootlessness which is becoming increasingly widespread, one which compels him to widen and deepen his vision on this theme.” (Mishra, 2013, p.166)

The judge in *The Inheritance of Loss* “is an epitome of alienated personality. His life is dominated by two factors: memory and silence.” (Singh, 2013, p. 3) Thus we can point out that these two factors are very much important of the diasporic people. And these two are the factors which make the diaspora feel alienated in the land they live. Father Booty in the same novel “...was a foreigner but had lost the notion that was anything but an Indian foreigner.” And “...had done much more for the development in the hills than any of the locals and without screaming or waving Kukris, Father Booty was to be sacrificed.” (quoted in Singh, 2013, p. 4) Bose, the friend of the judge observes about the independent India, “...it was a different age with different rules, but it had turned out to be only different version of the same old.” (quoted in Singh, 2013,p. 5) The nostalgia and feeling of ethnic identity heightens the feeling of alienation in the diasporic people. Like the character of Gyan in *The Inheritance of Loss*, who even suppresses his feelings for Sai, the girl, whom he loved at heart only for his sense of the ethnic identity.

C.B. Divakaruni in her novel *The Vine of Desire* “brings about the contrasting cultures of India’s and U.S.” (Swamy, 2013, p. 4)

“Mukherjee’s novels portray the protagonist’s physical, social and psychological isolation from the society and the immigrant

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community. The characters feel that their identity is left hanging in the air and they remain aloof.” (Vidhya, 3)

“Caught between two value-world and two different streams of cultures, [as the characters of the two novels in discussion] the diaspora’s nostalgic longing for the centrifugal ‘homeland’ is counter balanced by indomitable pull of the adopted land. Victor Turner describes the diasporans as ‘transitional beings’ or ‘liminal personae’. It means that they are in the continuous process of moving from one cultural state to the other. Homi K. Bhabha indicates that there is “a cultural liminality within the nation.” (Sarangi, 2009, p. v)

The diasporic writing is about the writer’s going abroad and writing his/her experiences living there. But most of the diasporic writers write about their nostalgia of their homeland, or their socio-political experiences in the past. This is what is evident in the works of most of the Indian writers living abroad, or the Indian origin writers living abroad.

“Native diasporans” is also an important aspect in this case. Kiran Desai in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* “addresses the crux of minority assimilation regarding the Gorkha people of north-east India. The novel peers into the dislocation of some characters and elaborates their alienation within their home (nation).” (Singh, 2013, p. 1) The novel gives us a picture of the extreme sense of alienation felt by a minority group in India – namely the Gorkhas. The sense is so strong in all spheres of day to day life that they had to unite under a banner and fight for their rights within their homeland (i.e. india). “Minority literature is a foray into a controversial field of study. It is an attempt to introduce the complicated issues involving identity crisis on an ethnic level.” (Singh, 1) It expostulates the cultural homogenization and marginalization in the post-independence period of the once colonized nations or sates.

Conclusion:

In the above discussion we find many vital points of the Diasporic literature. We also find that how the Indian Diasporic literature presents the different aspects of the diasporic community in different places. We also find the Indian philosophical ideologies getting reflected in the works of the Indian diasporic fiction writers.

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