

## DIASPORIC OVERTONES FROM THE ANGLE OF WOMEN'S PREDICAMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*Etymologically word "Diaspora" is derived from the Greek word "dia" (through) and "sperien" (to scatter). While as per the Webster's dictionary, diaspora refers to "dispersion". The word itself epitomizes the conception of a centre, a "home" from where the dispersion takes place. Further it invokes images of multiple journeys. In the present context the meaning of diaspora could be narrowed to 'any substantial community of a particular nation outside its own country, sharing some common bonds that impart to the community a consequent identity'. The approach adopted by John McLeod in defining 'diaspora' is rich in clarity and catholicity.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Physical Displacement, Transformation,*

### INDIAN DIASPORA, DIASPORIC LITERATURE AND RELATED ISSUES

The Indian Diaspora in the west has undergone a physical displacement but with the globalization of the world, today migrants are not taken as aliens. Besides, the recent migrants have drifted of their own will, and consequently they are left with little or no reason to feel the sense of being in exile. The modern means of transportation and communication has reduced the world to a global village, which facilitates the feeling of being at home in the cosmopolitan urban quarters of the world. Under these prevailing conditions the external circumstances of displacement lose their importance while the internal environment, i.e. the 'psychological and spiritual' condition of the mind, assumes dominance. Thus the exilic condition is only ostensibly physical and essentially psychological and spiritual. The external exile either compounds or, occasionally, suppresses these conditions.

Regardless of being in a Diaspora there is little solace of any hope of escape into any pre-exilic state. It is this, which Rushdie in reference to diasporic writers call a 'hunting of mind'. Such mental afflictions can be efficiently dealt with by effectively addressing the psychological and spiritual aspects of life. This can be accomplished by a self-transformation of mind and the spirit. The migrants from India not only look back at the spatial contour of the subcontinent but also at its history, society and culture too. The technological innovations of today ironically not only aid and assist in recollecting the past but also in maintaining and refreshing one's link with the past that takes you back to your roots.

It may be that the writers in this position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from

India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible one, imaginary homelands, Indians of the mind.

Therefore Diaspora cannot be taken as a metaphor for individual exile. Instead it transpires out of migration of people, whether they travel collectively or as individuals or as households or in various other combinations. Diaspora is a place of long-term if not permanent, community formation. According to Kapil Kapoor, in his keynote address "Theorizing Diaspora and the Indian experience" in Sushma J. Varma and Radhika Seshan's *Fractured Identity*, diaspora is like a "leaf falling off a tree, the leaf separates from the tree and it's wafted away, far away." (35-36) Like a leaf separating from a tree, a person is wrenched away from where s/he has belonged for years.

Progressively more, the terms "expatriate" and "diaspora" are gaining popularity. The word diaspora as already noted literally means a scattering. The usage of words such as "immigrants", "exile", and "refuge" has given rise to further categories. Their use endeavors to furnish some insinuations regarding the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of migration. "Immigrant", defines a location, a physical movement, while "exile" indicates a compulsory isolation. Exile, in its literal sense, is a physical condition but the sense of exile is not necessarily a manifestation of a dislocated existence. As regards the Indian milieu conceivably all meanings are true with the migratory activities having been presided over by different reasons at different times, but for literary people it is different.

Furthermore in recent times many writers use "expatriation" and "immigration" as synonyms. However, it is imperative to delineate between the two, despite the fact that the line is a very thin one. As the term insinuate, expatriation puts the accent on the native land that has been left behind, while immigration specifies the country into which an immigrant enterprises. Or in other words, the expatriate lives on his/her "ex" status while the

immigrant celebrates her/his present status in the new country.

A well accredited verity is that the first-generation of immigrants as a diasporic community is conspicuously distinct from the second and the ensuing ones. For the first generation, diaspora connotes a strong feeling about the country of their origin, but for the second generation, it means linkage with the homeland that get progressively replaced by those with the accepted country as the latter does not hold the status of being adopted forever. It becomes their country, though not quite as their homeland. For instance U.S. currently has an entire generation of diasporic Indians born and brought up in the country. The first and the second generation of diasporic Indians are bound to differ be it a question of ethnic identity, emotional orientation to the ancestral land, or the response to social institution and cultural elements taken from India, and even the socio-political orientation to America. The third category is of the individuals and the families who live at the juncture between the two cultures, they can lay claim of belonging to both. Albeit, for reasons of being born into one culture and living in the second, they are marginal people, nonconforming to the norms set by the majority. The psychological conflict of a divided self is the domino effect of this marginality.

Diaspora often happens to conjure up the imagery of traumas of severance and dislocation, and this is emphatically a very imperative aspect of the migratory experience. But conversely diaspora is also regarded as a site of hope, of new beginnings. Migration is not a new phenomenon for mankind; people have been migrating since evolution in pursuit of better living. It is an incessant process whether it is within a nation or across nations. Along with the people, their skill and expertise, culture, modes of life and ideologies also get migrated to the new destination. A linkage is setup by migration between the areas of origin and destination, which can create a new cultural identity by introducing changes in demographic, economic and social structures. Precisely, it is in this context of creation of communities beyond their motherland that the

word 'diaspora' finds place in literature. It is concerned with the experience of people of one country going to another for any of the various reasons; in the Indian perspective essentially it is the case of separation. Moreover when we converse about diasporic experience, it is the experiences of the individual who undergoes separation, because literature deals with a specific individual, specific time and a specific situation.

While, being diasporic is a matter of choice, at least in the preliminary years the voyage through life turn into a pursuit of diverse modes of adjustment. The possibilities are as diverse and varied, as there are individuals. But for guidance there is, or can be, no single rule or combination of rules. Hence, the opinion of the women writers of the diaspora is a precious source of information to comprehend the complexities of the process. Their efforts at personal level and their perceptions are seen through the financial status of the characters in the short stories.

The literature of the Indian diaspora is that body of writing produced in English by people who recognize themselves as being of Indian heritage living outside their own land. According to Sushma J. Varma and Radhika Seshan in *Fractured Identity*, diasporic studies are only about two decades old, for such studies mainly began in the 1980s, with increased globalization. Though Indian diasporic literature has been in the limelight for some time now, it is in the past twenty years or so, that it has been recognized as a body of literature, a distinct stream of literature that wants to be identified as "Indian" as well as "global." Most of the Indian diaspora depicts the experience of Indians in a foreign land. While each writer has a different story to narrate, but there definitely emerges a certain common theme. The enigma of arrival in an alien land and culture, getting accepted and finally the dilemma that exists in balancing two different worlds often figure in diasporic writing, one or the other.

As creative writers all of them take the familiar and the known, as the basic theme of their literary work, to embellish it by their imagination into works of art. Hence, the themes deal with

fictional characters from back home or the story of immigrants' lives with their multifarious nuances in the new home or stories that straddle both the countries in time and space or express multiple subjectivities, as experienced by the characters. The themes, the characters and the stories are thus a true reflection of the reality of the diasporic life of the people in the concerned countries.

Issues concerning the diaspora would also include questions of culture and multiculturalism. There is a necessity to comprehend the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bi-cultural pull and the formation of a new culture which finally emerges. It is important to understand the dynamics of reception from both perspectives as it is rooted in cultural contexts. This sheds light both on the meaning of this writing and on the non-diasporic writing and formation of culture. Reviewing and critiquing diasporic writing relates and reflects their experiences and writings.

A general review of the stories written in English signifies that they focus resiliently on the alienation of the diasporic Indians who are often distinguished by an irresistible sense of nostalgia. This homesickness is augmented as they bear no antipathy towards the home society since they have not been forced into migration by religious or political persecution at home. Besides, the diasporic Indians discern a cultural difference, as compared to the white immigrants of the U.S., which may result in cultural disorientation. Sometimes, they even provide a critique of the western civilization. Lacking of a shared cultural heritage, sharpen the differences, a feeling of insecurity is instilled with the possibility of an identity crisis and under such circumstances the home country acquires a romantic glow. The story of diaspora in different stages is the resolution of this conflict in the lives of individuals, families and generations. With the lack of the sense of security of a known historical past and of a collective geographical space, their need to belong becomes the key issue. Almost all of their themes are concerned with the i) younger generation and their struggles, ii) intergenerational relations, iii)

complexities of inter-racial relationships, iv) the painful reality of racism and v) the sense of feeling peripatetic, caught between parents and mainstream culture.

Identity depends on the sense of displacement, loss of home, longing to return, culture, ethnic consciousness, religion, caste, groups, language, territory, etc. The concept of identity is very different for the diasporic people. Regarding identity Jhumpa Lahiri contends:

The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more aware am I that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways - superficial ones, largely - I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. For immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now. In order to comprehend the diasporic identity, while inquiring into displacement and cultural dislocation the concept of diaspora is itself approached as a theme in literary depiction. (Lahiri: Conversation at <http://www.houghton>)

Diasporic people possessing different individual identities are constantly in search for their home they have left behind. Apart from the issues of identity and alienation, the diasporic experience as exhibited in literature also comprises the aspect of community formation in a new land based on similar

language and regional backgrounds. Bill Ashcroft states, "the diasporic production of cultural meanings occur in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity." (Ashcroft: 218)

Although Indian immigrants differ among themselves in terms of language they speak and different professions and vocations that they practise, but what binds them together and gives them a commonality of identity is the consciousness of their Indian origin, cultural heritage and a deep attachment to India. As per the Indian tradition, the families live together and stick together, so that people can be of assistance to each another.

Indian English literature in America has gained affluence by the immigrants who have competently employed the medium of English for creative expression. It is apparent from their writings that they have got accustomed to their changed identities and traditions but it should not be mistaken for abandoning of their homelands. It is also evident that most of all the diasporic works deals with the concept of cultural transplantation where each migrant has his own story to narrate. Based on the element of exile, writers differ in their attitudes from one to other. One is those who are nostalgic for the home country and whose attitude towards the host country is negative. The other type conducts itself as having adapted to the western effect.

Diasporic Indians undergo different types of experience both dark and bright ones. Darkness followed by light and vice-versa, is the cycle of life. Advantages and disadvantages in it are two sides of the same coin, and hence inseparable. Likewise, the diasporic people not only face assimilation problem but they also face bright things, which are illustrated in the works of diasporic women writers. The women writers living in American diaspora have not given voice to their feelings of dislocation caused by immigration publically, and as it is difficult to gain an access to their lives personally, but we can log on to

their unrevealed ideas through their writings. As such their writings are distinct, specific, complex in their own way, and different from male writers. The plentiful of works published by women writers in the form of novels, short stories, poems and plays present not only a bird's view of life in the diaspora but also the diverse shades of experiences and reaction of different individuals to different situations. A woman employs her mother's experience engendering emotional envisages, which in turn results in creating a different perspective, a question rather than an answer.

## CONCLUSION

The issues of diaspora, globalization, consumerism, trans-nationalism, cultural hybridism, alienation and identity have become the leitmotif of most postcolonial literatures. The self, dislocated in space and time from its roots has a homing instinct – the desire is to discover its “inbetweenness” in a transnational and trans-cultural space. Problems of identity figure more prominently in the novels of Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Carl Phillips, Anita Desai, JhumpaLahiri and Bharati Mukherjee. In these writers the quest for identity is not tagged to the self alone. It goes beyond the self to issues of culture and linguistics. All these factors give rise to emergent trends and tendencies like hybrid cultural forms among the migrants. These migrant writings deal with issues like home, self and identity.

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