



Experiences of Expatriates and Immigrants: A Reading from Diaspora short stories

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Abstract: The emergence of the concept of Diaspora is fairly recent. This concept has elicited unprecedented interest in Academicians and has provoked divergent responses worldwide. It has emerged as an important area of research in the Department of Literature and Social Sciences. Some scholars have argued in favour of identifying a closed set of attributes, others have preferred to use the term in the broader sense of human dispersal.

Born and brought up in the Post-Colonial World, the new novelists, many of whom are a part of the great Indian Diaspora, had no reason to feel self-conscious in handling the English Language. It is simply a tool that has been mastered thoroughly with typical Indian flair for languages.

India is the third-largest Diaspora next to British and Chinese. The migration of Indians has been gradual but relentless. One should think of it as reverse colonization. During the Raj, Indians were sent as indentured labour to various countries. Today, their children are holding key-posts in almost every field. Diaspora is living in 135 countries and is looked upon as a vibrant, new face of India. Indian diaspora has surmounted the pangs of dislocation to become the people of the world thrift, networking skill, impunity, and industry.

The migration of people across the globe is an inseparable part of human history. Diaspora is not new, it has its roots in history and religion. India witnessed a massive movement of people from India to other parts of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In this paper I wish to explore the features of Diasporic writers of- Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri. Apart from the short story writers, in the same period, A.K Ramanujan, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, produced beautiful diasporic poetry and novels respectively.

Key Words: colonization, Diaspora, impunity, migration

I. INTRODUCTION:

Diaspora literature has assumed international significance. The word *Diaspora* has been taken from the Greek, meaning *to disperse*. It means "the process by which people of a particular nation become scattered and settle in other countries, especially the Jews who left ancient Palestine in this way." It may be defined as "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. "The migrant diasporas and their descendants experience displacement, loss of identity, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural discourse of the subject countries. Etymologically, the term 'Diaspora' is derived from Greek word 'dia' and 'speiro'. 'Dia' means through and 'speiro' means 'to scatter'. The literal meaning of Diaspora is 'scattering' and 'dispersion'

The term *diaspora* was initially used for the dispersal of the exiled Jews beyond Israel in the 6th and 8th centuries. It is now used in a generic sense for communities of migrants living or settled permanently in other countries. These migrants maintain various types of connections with the native country. According to Stephen Gill, the renowned diaspora writer of Indian origin in Canada, the term *diaspora* includes "the elements of alienation, loss, forced migration, memories of the past and a dream to return to the land of birth. It may include also the unwilling acceptance of the host country."

The present position of Diasporic Literature:

Diaspora is an international phenomenon. It happened in several nations and ethnic groups dispersed in other countries throughout the history of mankind. In addition to the Jewish diaspora, other major diasporas are from Africa and Armenia. The Indian diaspora has started mainly after the British made her part of the Empire. Indians were forcibly moved as indentured labour to Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, and other parts of the empire. Diasporans maintain continuous contact with their homeland and with other dispersed segments of the same group." A key characteristic of the diaspora is

that a strong sense of connection to a homeland is maintained through cultural practices and ways of life. Among these, culinary culture has an important part to play in diasporic identification.”

Meaning of Diaspora Literature:

What is diasporic Literature? It means the writings-poems, novels, short stories, essays, memories, autographs, and other creative writings-by those writers whose parents migrated to foreign lands and took nationality there. Diasporic writings are invariably concerned with exile memories, diasporic consciousness, longing for return, alienation, and search for identity. Here we are mainly concerned with the literature produced by well-known and representative writers of the Indian diaspora and their works. There are certain characteristics in the writers of the Indian diaspora. Nostalgia about the native country is a powerful element in diaspora literature.

Indian Diaspora:

In the novels of **Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharathi Mukherjee**; in the short stories of **Jhumpa Lahiri**, and the poetry of **A.K. Ramanujan**, we find a powerful element of nostalgic memories about the motherland. Diasporas live in one country the country of their settlement but look across time and space to another, the country of their birth. The migrant diasporas and to some extent, their descendants experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization, alienation, loss of identity, and discontinuity in the cultural discourse of the subject countries. **Tejinder Kaur** remarks:

“This living in-between condition is very painful and marginalizing for the diasporas. There is a yearning for home, to go back to the lost origin, and imaginary homelands, are created for the fragmentary and partial memories of their homelands. They also face a cultural dilemma when cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms. In the following generations these confusions, problems and yearnings, become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of that country and also adapt themselves to it.”

Diaspora also articulates the cause of their exile from their homeland. Some of them, who suffered from discrimination, exploitation, social injustice, and economic disparities in their native country, also write about it.

Stephen Gill writes in this connection:

Diasporans in history had diaries in which they recorded the hard life in the lands of their birth. They often talked and wrote against the laws and prejudices in the lands of their birth. Because these factors were responsible for their exile, they attacked them....

Discrimination is an important part of Diaspora because it is largely the discrimination in the country of birth that forces them to seek refuge abroad. In the country of birth, this discrimination becomes life-threatening and intolerable. In the host country, it is not life-threatening and obvious.

There is a remarkable generational gap of difference between the first-generation diasporans and the second generation diasporans.

Tejinder Kaur observes:

*“No doubt, due to the **generational differences the migrants** and their children occupy different spaces in the **representative** culture but their experiences of feeling rootless and displaced can also be similar nature. Though the children born to migrant people enjoy better settlement and place in the country. “Their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents and grandparents.” Remarks John McLeod (Beginning **Postcolonialism-Diasporic and Trans culturalism. Manchester University**)*

The diaspora’s transform, their attitude, ways of thinking, ideology, and emotional state when they interact with local communities and the representative culture. They start intervening in the cultural discourse of the dominant culture. Thus, remarks Tejinder Kaur “the **hybrid identities** are negotiated” which bring a change in the fixed traditional binary division such as:

Native inhabitants: diaspora people
Same: different
Master: slave
etc. and this is called *post-colonial* by Homi.K. Baba

This interaction and fusion of cultures sometimes result in further conflicts but it opens new perspectives and modes of thinking for the individuals and diasporans. This process of assimilation with the dominant culture of the country of settlement guides the diasporans "to outgrow the stereotyped experiences of uprootedness, displacements, and marginalization." In this era of Globalization, the diasporans have radically changed and they have given up their national identities and have cultivated a broad vision and outlook.

Canada-a land of Diasporic immigrants:

Canada is a land of immigrants from England, India, China, Japan, Africa, Arab Countries, etc. Hence it is a land multiracial and multicultural fusion, in which the immigrants assimilated their varied social and cultural values with the dominant culture of Canada to form a national culture. The Canadian literature has, therefore, a diasporic character. Besides Stephen Gill, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, and Uma Parameswaran migrated to Canada to better their economic prospects and in course of time, they made a memorable contribution to the diaspora literature in Canada.

In this paper, I explore the short stories of diasporic writers from India. The second and third generations of Indian immigration in any country cannot be classified as diasporans because they have completely assimilated themselves with the national, cultural, and social ethos of the country of their birth. Many Canadian writers with their ancestral roots in Canada have significantly contributed to literature, which according to Stephen Gill, cannot be classified as diaspora literature.

A) Rohinton Mistry, an expatriate Parsee writer, expresses his expatriate experiences in Canadian *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. Sid, the protagonist in *Firozsha Baag* searches for happiness in Toronto. He is happy in the chosen land. He friendly tells his mother and friends before his departure for Canada

"My dear family, my dear friends, if I do not become completely Canadian in exactly ten years from the time I land there, then I come back, I promise."

He is nostalgic about his native country because he fails to adapt himself to the Canadian way of life. He feels isolation and loss of identity. *Squatter* reveals the love-hate relationship that exists between the adapted country and the immigrants. Vinay Irpal, a character in this story, observes:

"Return to the motherland aggravates an émigré's feeling of rootlessness. He realises how different he has grown, how incompatible he finds himself in his nativelyland. At the same time, he feels estranged and exiled in the adopted land."

Thus, he faces alienation and loss of identity both in his adopted country and his native country. Sid in a **nowhere** man.

In another **story Lend Me Your Light** Kerchi enjoys both prosperity and success in his chosen land Canada, but he feels alienated from India. Consequently he suffers from guilt consciousness and his inner self remain chaotic. He confesses:

*I am guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land by birth and
Paying the price in burnt out eyes. I Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Mumbai and
the one to come to Toronto.*

Jamshed, the other expatriate in **Lend Me Your Light** hates India:

*'Bloody corruption everywhere. And you can't buy any of the things you want, don't even get to see a
decent English movie. First chance I get, I am going abroad. Preferably the U.S.'*

B) Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-American writer, now settled in U.S.A. is an outstanding woman novelist and short story writer. She writes that growing up in Kolkata was

"indistinguishable from my twenty cousins, indistinguishable, in fact from an eternity of Bengali Brahmin girls."

Bharati Mukherjee's work focuses on the "phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigration and the feeling of alienation often expressed by expatriates as well as on Indian women and their struggle." (Alam, 7) Herself an Indian expatriate in Canada and an immigrant in the US, Mukherjee lays bare the struggles that the immigrant undergoes, particularly the female immigrant. Having successfully established herself as a powerful member of the Indian and American literary scene, she attempts to portray the extreme transformations her characters undergo in America. "At the same time," she opines, "they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up." (1996:16)

In the process, Mukherjee underwent an "almost total rebirth." In her novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Darkness* and short stories collected in *The Middleman and Other Stories* she dramatizes effectively immigration experience in USA. Her works also reflect the gentle collision between the East and the West struggling to understand each other through her works.

The Middlemen and other Stories, a collection of short stories won her the National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction, was published in 1988. Through theme, plot, dialogue and narration Mukherjee aims at portraying in a feministic

angle the women characters as they live their lives in an alien land. Her attempts reflect what Feroza Jassawalla says of the diaspora which had a tough time adjusting. "We are like chiffon saris—a sort of cross between attempting to adjust to the pressures of the new world, while actually being from another older one." (The Massachusetts Review, 29:4, 1988)

Characters in *The Middlemen and other Stories* attempt to adjust themselves to their new found experience while their past experience, lives of parents and grandparents continue to haunt them. The chief protagonists of the *Middlemen* are women around whom the stories revolve. It is around Maria the protagonist that the story 'The Middlemen' revolves. Her attempts to seek a life partner is the theme of the story. Maria is a native girl who is forced to live with Gutierrez and later Ransome, her husband. It is only with Andreas that she finds her life's destination. She kills Ransome with a gun. She takes revenge for all the humiliation she had been

forced to face. Panna is the heroine of the story 'A Wife's Story.' She is an emigrant from Bombay and a product of the best schools in Bombay. "My manners are exquisite, my feelings are delicate, my gestures refined, my moods undetectable." (p.26) says this young woman who migrates to the US with the sole ambition of acquiring a Ph.D degree. The protagonist sacrifices the sexual urges of her husband who visits her reminding her that she would have to stay back in the US for another two years.

With the power of her body she controls her destiny. Her husband goes back to India satisfied and she to complete her degree and to the arms of her lover, Imre. Panna stands as a contrast to the generation of Indian women who have been ill treated by their in-laws and husbands. Panna's husband too was dominating and she attempts to liberate herself from a stifling relationship for at least another two years. Mukherjee's portrayal of Panna transforms her into a strong feminist who is determined to hold the reins of her own destiny.

In 'Orbiting's' Renata is a divorcee who seeks to find her own soul mate in Roshan. The story deals with how she seeks to convince her parents that she is clear-headed in her love and her intentions in her choice. She admires Ro and finds him very special and different from her ex-husband Vic. She realizes that Vic was self-sufficient though he was beautiful. She needed to feel complete, and that completion was provided by Ro who with his "blemished and tortured body" and his funny way he held himself made her feel powerful. Renata was thus a powerful protagonist displaying Mukherjee's feminist leanings who succeeded in finding a man of her choice.

'Maya' in the story of the same name comes to America to lead an independent life, but is torn apart from the materialistic outlook of the West and moves from lover to lover in search of true happiness. She finally finds the man of her choice. Maya, the daughter of a rich steel company owner is aware of what an Indian woman ought to be through her mother's words. She is disillusioned about her Indianess and explains to her friend that all Indian men were wife beaters and hence she married an American.

Ayesha Kagal writes: (Indian Fiction p.23)

India meets Iowa meets -Vietnam, as Jyothi turned jasmine,turned Jone Rifflemeyer ,moves from a mud hut in Punjab village ; via Queens to a 3000 acre Iowas farm,from being widowed by a terrorist bomb.she becomes the pregnant wife of an American Banker.

The writings of Bharati Mukherjee focus on the rootlessness created within the concerned section of the population,a sense of being marginalised and thereby leading a sense of otherness within the geo-political territory they have migrated to. These immigrants are placed in a situation of both mental and physical diaspora. These writings address important issues of selfhood,ethnic and communal identity as well as nuances and effects of a hybrid culture. Mukherjee does not wish to be called an exile or an expatriate because to her acculturation is a process which has the exuberance of acceptance or assimilation and not the pain of alienation.

Her writings reflect a pain of exclusion while her later ones portray the ability to forge an identity while being also accepted by the new cultural milieu. In her works Mukherjee attempts to delineate the fractural identities of the protagonists. She poignantly depicts the pain of the loss of identity in an alien land . In **Father**Mr. Bhowmick,a Government Engineer in Ranchi , settles in USA at his wife's insistence. When he realizes that his unmarried daughter Babli is pregnant, he blames his wife who was responsible to their moving to the US. Though they lived a comfortable life in this land, Mr. Bhowmick had to make these small trade-offs between new world seasonableness and old world beliefs. . In a n alien land with constant cultural collisions,these protagonists find it difficult to adjust , to cope, and to come to terms with the reality around them: The homeland left behind is always uppermost in their minds. They feel difficulty in adjusting socially, culturally and economically . In **Mrs. Sen**, the protagonist always thinks about India where she would find everything. Eliot is surprised to note that when Mrs. Sen said **home**, she meant **India**, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables. To her, everything about India is nostalgic.

Bharati Mukherjee describes her isolation in Canada due to her paradoxical position of being both " too visible and too invisible." In **Daysand Nights in Kolkatta** while her colour made her too visible , as a writer she was invisible . She recalls :"*The media had made me self conscious about racism, I detect arrogance in the slow footedness of sales clerks.*" In Canada, she recognized herself as an expatriate who had clung to her ethnic identity: " I was psychological expatriate though a naturalized Canadian for fifteen years simply because Canada is a country officially hostile to the concept of assimilation."

Her collection of short stories entitled **Darkness** consists of four stories-**The World according to HSV , Isolated Incidents , Hindus and Courtly Vision** . They deal with the theme of expatriation . In the first story Ratna , a woman on Indian origin, and her husband Groeme Clayton , a Canadian professor of Psychology of McGill University, Montreal , are on a holiday at an island off the coast of Africa.He persuades Ratna to move from French dominant Montreal to English dominant Joron to where the University had offered her the Chair in Personality Development. She prefers Montreal because there she is in English speaking Canadian whereas in Toronto she neither is a Canadian nor even an Indian. There, she would be labelled a Paki (one who belong to Pakistan) In **Isolated Incidents** , the expatriate is viewed from the point of view to the native Canadian Anne Vane whose job is to file complaints from immigrants on problems concerning human rights. It is ironical that cases of discrimination towards the visible minority are not related with racism but will always be ignored as isolated incidents. In **Hindus** , she juxtaposes an expatriate against an immigrant to draw out a contrast .

Leela Lahari reveals an immigrant's fluididentity. She proudly declares that she is an American citizen but she is proud of her Bengali Brahmin past. Maharaja Patwant Singh of Golath is an obvious expatriate with a grievance against India. When Leela and maharaja meet after two years , the Maharaja is writing his memories. While he candidly reveals his pain and grievance, Leela celebrates new birth in a new world.

The women protagonists of the stories thus come through as romantic,sensitive and strong women. The central motif of the stories appears to be both material advancement and inner satisfaction. Women attempt to come to terms with their deep inner desires,sexual fulfilment and need for contentment in an alien land. Some ethnic and gender stereotyping remains in Mukherjee's characterization. Her sympathetic Indians are largely female and her Indian man are unromantic and overwhelmingly patriarchal and domineering. Many undergo submission, and ill treatment for long before they can emerge like

Maya, Jasmine and Renata. Panna and Shiela are of great significance in today's context as they lend insight into the attitudes and aspirations of the modern women who has redesigned their traditional roles.

C) **Jhumpa Lahiri** portrays the problems related with the experience of migrancy and diaspora such as displacement, rootlessness, loss of identity, fragmentation, discrimination and marginalization in her collection of short stories entitled the *Interpreter of Maladies* aptly subtitled *Stories from Bengal, Boston and Beyond* and her only novel the *Namesake*. her second generation diaspora writer, Lahiri has an innate Indianess. She says:

My parents never consciously sat down and told me things about India, they correctly assumed that I would learn things just by virtue of being their child. I think it has always been important to them to maintain strong social ties with Indians living abroad and visiting India.

Kolkata plays an important part in her works. It plays an important role in her imagination. She writes:

I spent much time in Kolkata as a child idle but rich time -often at home with my grandmother. It enabled me to experience solitude-ironically, because there were so many people. I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively. Kolkata nourished my interest in seeing things from different points of view. There's tradition that we just don't have here.

As time went on, her relationship with India changed: "As I grew older, going to India was frustrating because growing up in America is different...in Kolkata we had to respect the family's concerns." As a second generation immigrant in the United States, she still feels "a bit of an outsider too."

In the essay *To Heaven Without Dying* she reveals the dilemma of a diasporic writer;

I have always lived under the pressure to be bilingual bicultural, at ease on either side of the Lahiri Family map. The first words I learned to utter and understand were in my parent's native tongue, Bengali..... My ability to speak the language made me feel less foreign during visits to Kolkata every few years. It also made me less foreign in the expatriate Bengali Community, my parents socialize with the United States and on a more quotidian level my home. While English was not to my writing, English was from the beginning, my only language.

II. CONCLUSION:

Diaspora literature is the latest literary phenomenon. It is an area of specialist study, which requires a comprehensive knowledge of the native country of the diasporian and that of the adopted country. The word *diaspora* has, because of its historical and religious connotations, underlying meanings, which should not be ignored. The pain and suffering of an entire race or community or religious group uprooted from its homeland and then finally settling down in the new land (as in case of the Jews in Israel or parsees on Iran) should not be compared to what an immigrant writer feels. The immigrants, especially of the second generation, undergo the process of acculturation which enables them to assimilate with the ethos of the adopted country.

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