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## WHEN WILL THE DIASPORA 'ARRIVE'? A STUDY OF SELECTED NOVELS OF INDIAN DIASPORA

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### ABSTRACT

Indian Diasporic Writings tend to talk of rootlessness, search for identity, conflicts, loss and longing. These tales are extremely well crafted and have the power of poetry to move. While it is established what causes the pain and the conflict, it is yet to be explored how to end the conflict. The aim of the present paper is to find how and if, the uprooted protagonist can find roots. The paper posits the following questions: What are the significant constructs that would end the life quest of the Diaspora? Is it assimilation with the adopted culture that the protagonists seek? How will that assimilation transpire? The paper studies three representative works of Indian Diasporic Writings: *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Namesake* and *The Mistress of Spices* in an attempt to answer the questions raised above.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Conflict, Identity, Dislocation

### Introduction

Indian writings in English have been gaining international acclaim for the past several years. Salman Rushdie, a British Indian writer, won the Booker Prize in 1981 and also the Booker of Bookers twice – in 1993 and again in 2001 for his novel *Midnight's Children*. He was also knighted for his services to literature in 2007. In 1997 the Booker went to Arundhati Roy for her work of fiction, *The God of Small Things*. Jhumpa Lahiri received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 2000 for *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Recently Kiran Desai was given the Man Booker in 2006 and The National Critics Circle Fiction Award in 2015. Kiran Desai has also been listed as the 20 most influential global Indian women by the Economics Times.

Born Indian, these writers have since, made their homes elsewhere. Rushdie lives in New York and Jhumpa Lahiri in New Jersey. Kiran Desai divides her time between India, England and the US while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has settled down in

San Francisco. Like the authors themselves, the protagonists and nearly all the major characters in their novels are Indians who have migrated to other countries - men and women of that great body of people called the Indian Diaspora.

Writing on the meaning of the term Diaspora, Sahoor and Brij Mohan contend that it started with, "the settling of scattered colonies of Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian exile and has assumed a more general connotation of people settled away from their ancestral homelands" (p28). The quest for homeland of the Jews dominated the affairs of Europe for the greater part of the 19 and 20 centuries. The Jewish quest for homeland is mirrored in migrant communities across the world, even if their magnitude is not as large.

The present paper aims to explore (i) where this quest ends (ii) if identity and assimilation are synonymous, through a critical study of: *A House for Mr Biswas* by VS Naipaul, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa

Lahiri and *The Mistress of Spices* by Chitra Kumari Divakaruni.

In her seminal work Parmeshwaran has traced the following four stages of cultural settlement: "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 in ethno cultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues." (p165)

Born out of the pain of journey from arrival to 'arrival', Diasporic fiction is of abiding and universal interest. It sings our saddest songs and has the appeal of poetry. The leit motif of diasporic life is rootlessness, quest of identity, sense of isolation and extreme loneliness. This sadness, pathos, longing, the romance of loss is captured and curated in extremely well crafted pieces of literature of Indian Diaspora such as, *The Namesake*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Inheritance of Loss* etc. "In refined, empathetic prose ... each of Lahiri's characters patches together their own identity, making this resonant fable neither uniquely Asian nor uniquely American, but tenderly, wryly human." (The Observer) In a review of *A House for Mr Biswas*, The New York Times (Rwanda) dated Dec 4, 2009 states, "Mr Biswas, the affable likeable fellow who manages to get himself married to a girl from a Hindu family without much of an effort, except for a simple, weak I –love- you note, has a life that could easily resemble that of a semi educated African stuck between his motherland and his dreams of west." Likewise, Kirkus Review May2010(online) reviewing *The Mistress of Spices* remarks, "the unique insights into the struggles of Indian Americans to transcend the gulf between East and West make trudging through some rather plain prose worthwhile."

#### Discussion

One of the earliest works on Indian Diaspora is Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*. Mohun Biswas is not the first generation migrant and what he, 'is governed by is an inherited memory of dislocation – for them their native land is not a geographical

space but a creation of the imagination.'(Shodhganga: Web) Through all the trials and tribulations of growing up where, " with his mother's parents dead, his father dead, his brothers on the estate at Felicity, Dehuti as a servant in Tara's house and himself rapidly growing away from Bipti who, broken, became increasingly useless and impenetrable, it seemed to him that he was really quite alone." (p 38). His subsequent marriage to Shama did little to alleviate this sense of 'not belonging', for in marrying Shama, Mohun Biswas has married the domineering Tulsi family. It is not till he owns a house of his own that Shama is able to demonstrate her loyalty to him and Mohun Biswas has finally a piece of Earth that belongs to him completely. That is his most significant achievement in life. Even on his death bed, when he is ill, unemployed, in debt, Mr Biswas has the solace that he has a house that he calls his own, that he can shut or open its doors at will, that he has a place that shall never deny him entry.

Gogol, the protagonist, in *The Namesake* is conflicted differently. Born to Indian Parents in the USA and named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, Gogol Ganguli's existential conflict is over his name. The name resembles nothing in his world in India or in the US, just like his life- neither Indian nor American. There is loneliness and longing for home in the life of his parents who were the first generation migrants. But there is no conflict: home was most definitely India, and the Gangulis created its make belief prototype in the US, gathering around them the fellow Bengali expatriates, eating and dressing in the manner of home. These dynamics at home resemble nothing that happens at the homes of Gogol's American peers. The manner in which Maxine's parents treat him is significantly different from how his own parents respond to Maxine. And so Gogol is alienated from people of Indian descent since they are different from the average Americans and he cannot belong to the world of Americans as he is an Indian. His affair with an American girl brings him no joy, his marriage to an Indian girl ends in heartache. Unlike Mr Biswas, a house is not his aspiration. The physical comfort of a home offers no peace to him. After a life time of misery and solitude, Gogol finds solace in the book

his father had given him – given by a man who gave him his name and written by a man he was named after.

The magical realism of *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrates yet another paradigm of Diasporic life. Tilo possesses magical powers. She is a mistress of spices, spices that have the power to cure physical and emotional ills. But the spices are exacting mistresses. They have to take precedence each time, every time. If Tilo seeks to belong to America, she has to accept punishment for abandoning her *raison d'etre*. If Tilo seeks alliance with Raven, if she seeks 'ordinary human love, the ordinary human life', it will have catastrophic results.

No one else knows it better than Tilo herself. Hence her lines to Raven:

"Our love would never have lasted, for it was based upon fantasy, yours and mine, of what it is to be Indian. To be American". (p292)

Or again, "Tilo who should not have played with forces beyond your understanding, the destruction you have set in motion will touch every life around you. The entire city will shake with it." (p 285)

#### Conclusion

It is significant that the movement of people from their homeland is for finding better lands – of opportunities, security, and prosperity. The literature of Diaspora therefore ought to reflect the triumph of the displaced people; it should be a celebration of success. Yet it is anything but. These are dark melancholic tales of wry humour and lingering pathos. The tales of first generation settlers like Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli are tales of yearning for the homeland left behind. Tales of subsequent generations like that of Gogol are tales of conflict of a people who are foreigners at home and abroad.

To borrow an old cliché, home is where the heart is. Mr Biswas found peace in the oddly and inconveniently constructed house he purchased. Tilo surrenders herself to love while Gogol Ganguli's peace of mind and soul will be secured once he stops feeling different.

In decades to come the children and grandchildren of these settlers will marry peoples of

the adopted homeland and eventually the strains of the home country in their identity would diminish, would become negligible. But the journey will not terminate without covering the whole gamut of stages and combinations of nomenclature: 'Indian', 'born to Indian parents', 'of an Indian parent', 'Person of Indian origin' and finally 'in the family tree some ancestor was Indian'. Then they would be assimilated, obliterating all differences of being and feeling, in a very flat, monotonous, monochromatic world.

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