



Nostalgia, Rootlessness and Identity Crisis in the Works of Contemporary Indian Diaspora Writers

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Abstract

The writers of the Diaspora usually represent a struggle for individual identity, multiculturalism, marginalization in spatial terms, individual and community displacement and dislocation and rootlessness and nostalgia for the native homeland. Their writings are generally apathetic and depict individuals disconnected from their roots forcing them to make a difficult choice between two nations, accepting a kind of imposed-exile, and often indulging in the “insider and outsider” rhetoric. A common link in all these writings is a strong description of images like alienation, multiple identities, hybridity, victimization of racism, multiculturalism and a continuous process of adaptation to which protagonists are subjected to in their foreign environments. One of the objectives of this study is that the newer identities arising out of these situations, which are basically fragmented, ruptured, hyphenated in nature, require new descriptions and new elaborations within the field of creative literature and literary criticism. Through the present paper the researcher aims to understand the feelings of nostalgia and rootlessness and the challenges of identity in the works of Contemporary Indian Diaspora Writers.

Key words: Nostalgia, Rootlessness, Identity Crisis, Contemporary, Indian Diaspora Writers

The population of Diaspora has globally increased over the years due to overall surge in migration, emergence of multinational organizations and technological advancements which together have shrunk the world so much so that the boundaries have melted and people can easily relocate from one nation to another. They are winning awards and getting worldwide acceptance and acclaim for their themes revolving around loss of culture, reinvention of oneself, feelings of alienation, and the other such experiences, which come as part of relocation to a new place. These things reflect very well in the works of Indian diasporic writers. The writers of the Diaspora usually represent a struggle for individual identity, multiculturalism, marginalization in spatial terms, individual and community displacement and

dislocation and rootlessness and nostalgia for the native homeland. Their writings are generally apathetic and depict individuals disconnected from their roots forcing them to make a difficult choice between two nations, accepting a kind of imposed-exile, and often indulging in the “insider and outsider” rhetoric. A common link in all these writings is a strong description of images like alienation, multiple identities, hybridity, victimization of racism, multiculturalism and a continuous process of adaptation to which protagonists are subjected to in their foreign environments. One of the objectives of this study is that the newer identities arising out of these situations, which are basically fragmented, ruptured, hyphenated in nature, require new descriptions and new elaborations within the field of

creative literature and literary criticism. Through the present paper the researcher aims to understand the feelings of nostalgia and rootlessness and the challenges of identity in the works of Contemporary Indian Diaspora Writers.

It has been observed that the first generation of such immigrants had felt always a sense of alienation or rootlessness, a strange fear for survival, a sense of insecurity. They were nostalgic for the past and were not able to forget sociocultural practices, habits and traditions of the homeland. When their second generation arrived, the children born of these immigrants, they experienced less cultural displacement or social differences. However, they too found themselves in a hybrid situation, between their country of birth and the country of their origin. Such immigrants of second or third generation struggle for their identity as they find cultural assimilation too very difficult in their country of adoption. Bhiku Parekh has rightly stated about Indian diaspora that, "The diasporic Indian is like a banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he increasingly comes to feel at home in the world." (Bhikhu 1994)

According to Uma (2007) the life of a diasporic person can be divided into four phases. In the first phase, one is nostalgic and homesick and feels a bit scared in the strange land. The second phase is the phase of adjustment to the new environment. In the third phase people get involved in the ethno-cultural issues. The fourth phase is the phase of proving their existence by participating in the larger world of politics and national issues.

Akhil Gupta (1997:39) in his chapter. *Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference* states that, speaking of "Remembered places have...often served as symbolic anchors of community for dispersed people." He clearly argues that, "Homeland...remains one of the most powerful unifying symbols for mobile and displaced people..." Aparna Rayaprol (1997) in, *Negotiating Identities*, claims it as 'Part real and part imagined.' In *Migrants*

of Identity, Nigel Rapport (1998:8) states: Home brings together memory and longing, the ideational, the affective and the physical, the spatial and the temporal, the local and the global. However, Chase and Shaw (1989:2) explain: Nostalgia involved a special way of being involved in the past: one had to be connected to the object of scrutiny, perhaps through kinship or through a broader feeling of identity, these were in some way my people and my present.

In his book *Imaginary Homelands* Salman Rushdie (1991:10) makes the same point clear- "It may be that writers in my 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 invisibles ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind." Indian fictional works are comprehensively Indian in treatment and sensibility. The Indo-nostalgic writing is in the true sense a reflection of the mind and the soul put into the organization of the content, the instilling of life, attitudes and modes of perception. Bhabani Bhattacharjee (Interview: 1975) expresses her views saying, "it has not just been traditional...writer cannot live without roots. An Indian writer deeply concerned with lives of the people cannot get transplanted from the earth of centuries-old traditions despite full exposure to alien influences."

V.S. Naipaul, through his works has given us some eternal characters to dwell upon and relish. His works such as *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *In a Free State*, *A Bend in the River*, *The Enigma of Arrival* became very popular and won him Booker and even the Nobel Prize. His novels chiefly dealt with struggle for personal identity, freedom, changing perspectives in the wake of colonialism and post-colonialism. Rootlessness is a major subject found in almost all his writings. It generates from alienation brought about by exile; physical, psychological or

social. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is a masterpiece of Naipaul, dealing with the theme of isolation, frustration and negation in a colonized society— a society that becomes cruel and callous to the aspirations of the protagonist, Mr. Mohun Biswas. The novel also deals with a number of other maladies like, the clash of culture between the old and the new in a multiracial society, a quest for identity in a conservative framework and, above all, the protagonist's dull and droning journey full of many wrenches and shocks.

Migration means that an individual has to relocate himself afresh, for which he has to go through penitence such as readjustment, adaptation, participation. A person who has migrated always desires to return to what has been left behind. When an individual enters into an unknown world, he is naturally displaced from an amiable and cherished world, and this dislocation brings in a sense of nostalgia. The works and life of Bharati Mukherjee can be divided into three phases. The first phase is a state of nostalgia in which she tries to belong to her roots & and searches for her identity in her inheritance. Her works such as- *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Days & Nights in Calcutta* depicts it perfectly. *'Jasmine'* is also not free from nostalgia. Jasmine faces a lot of troubles but these hindrances are unable to cut her zeal. She always takes a new identity as per the circumstances, she herself says, "I have had a husband for each of the women I have been. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, Bud for Jane, Half-Face for Kali." (J47) Jasmine feels nostalgic about her native land but she is not caught in the web of past incidents. Instead of making her past a impediment in her growth she makes her past her power in her growth. Jasmine does not oscillate between the past and the present. But that does not mean that she totally breaks herself from her past. While living in Baden with Bud, she thinks about the condition of women in India. "In Hasnapur may be old at twenty-two I think of Vimla, a girl I envied because she lived in a two-story brick house with real windows. Our hut was mud. Her marriage was the fanciest the village had ever seen. Her father gave away a zipsy red Maruti and a refrigerator in the dowry. (J15)

Kiran Desai is a renowned name in the world of Indian Diaspora writers. Her novel *'The Inheritance of Loss'* won the 2006 Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. She grew up in India, the U.K. and the U.S.A. where she has settled down. Her debut novel, *'Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard'* published has praised so much for its subtle portrayal of India. But *'The Inheritance of loss'* eclipsed the first novel. This book won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2006 and received The National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in the year 2007. Her themes include post-colonialism and globalization as they relate to a modern India. It is considered a master piece of Indian literature in 21st century. It is pertinent to note that *The Inheritance of Loss* is a saga of loss that a human being has to face due to circumstances of his/her life. Most of the characters, especially the central characters have to face losses in life due to their diasporic existence. In this novel, the young people lose their sense of inheritance, belongingness, their culture and their original home. In fact, the loss is not only faced by one generation but by the three generations which have been depicted in the novel. Longing is perhaps the emotion that the characters cherish in this novel. They long for home, they long for love, and they long for acceptance.

Nilanjana Sudeshna, better known as Jhumpa Lahiri, is known for her short stories, novels and essays in English and Italian. Lahiri was born in London in 1967 to Indian immigrant parents from West Bengal. Her debut collection of short-stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003) was adapted into the popular film of the same name. In these works, Lahiri explored the Indian-immigrant experience in America. Lahiri's work highlights Indian diasporic womanism as a composite of feminism, womanhood and motherhood of the immigrant Indian women. It highlights the shades of each aspect such as double marginalisation, patriarchal dominance, ideological pressures, gender inequality, gender discrimination, power relations, sexism, stereotyping, emancipation and sexuality. In, *The Namesake*, she expounds on the Indian American individuals' nostalgia for their

home nation. The couple Ashima and Ashoke remake an imagined homeland through their interaction with Indian American community around them. The Indian American community helps protect Indian cultural legacy through special festivals and different gatherings in which the individuals in exile communicate in their very own language and play out their cultural rituals. The Indian American community is depicted to have a hybrid identity. Thus, in her novels, individuals in the community rise above their previous nostalgia and become progressively open, worldwide nomads on the planet.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is another renowned name in the list of Diaspora writers. Her works such as- *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* have been adapted into films. Her works are rich in Indian sensibility and culture. She also explores the themes of rootlessness, alienation, disparity, tales of abuses and bravery of immigrant women, emotional isolation, etc. In her debut collection of short stories, she talks about women caught between two worlds, their dejection, disillusionment and adaptation to such conditions. Through all her characters whether Sumita, Jayanti, Meera or Abha, she very beautifully and unequivocally portrays the predicament of immigrants, especially women. She very well bridges the gap between Kolkata and California. She depicts in her works how Diaspora Indians remember their native country and lament the loss of roots. Such representations add poignancy to her writing. Simultaneously she portrays the dilemma, joys and sorrows, and mainly the issue of identity of men and women of Indian Diaspora in the alien land. *Oleander Girl* (2013) exhibits traditional values imbibed with Identity Crisis in foreign land. It also demonstrates the female character, the protagonist, taking the risk of leaving everything and moving in an unknown land in search of her identity and family secret. As a Diaspora writer, she inventively deploys the themes of identity, up-rootedness, displacement and traditions as she experiences and believes that though technology bridges certain gaps, but it is for the wealthy and educated immigrants only.

Anita Desai is an Indian writer of the Diaspora and professor of Humanities at Massachusetts. Her name was shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times. Desai's novel, *'Fire on the Mountain'* won Sahitya Academy Award in the year 1978. Her works mainly focus on family in particular, matters about women. *Clear light of the day* presents the importance of family life. In the work *Custody*, she describes the problem of alienation of college teacher from his deep-rooted culture. Anita is expert in handling literary technique, the stream of consciousness in the novel *Cry the peacock*. In another novel *'Bye Bye Black Bird'*, she deals with the problem of adaptability; the theme of the story revolves around the three characters Adit, Dev. and Sarah. In 1993, her novel *In Custody* was adapted by Merchant Ivory Productions into an English film by the same name, directed by Ismail Merchant. Her 1999 Booker Prize finalist novel *Fasting, Feasting* increased her popularity. Her novel *The Zigzag Way*, set in 20th-century Mexico, was published in 2004 and her latest collection of short stories, *The Artist of Disappearance*, was published in 2011. She explored a world subsisting within the world and located the fragmentation of the protagonists' identity. The protagonist of her first novel- Maya is a wrecked soul who longs for her identity realized in terms of marital harmony but never succeeds. In her second novel- *Bye Bye Black Bird* the crisis of identity is born of the conflict between the spirit of place and the protagonist's soul. The incompatibility between these two dominant forces constitutes the dynamics of the action and the nature of the narrative. The crisis of identity and efforts to locate it along the finite dimensions of the narrative is the kernel of the techno-thematic frame work of her novels. In *Custody* (1984) and *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) - her most celebrated novels, have another revelation of the perennial quest for identity which is put to stake under the resistant pressures of the cultural forces and the efforts to relocate it becomes a painful enterprise.

Although nostalgia is told predominantly via recollection, and therefore to some extent imagination, it is a voice which demonstrates and celebrates the connectedness of the Community to

its birthplace: India. What remains important then, is that the connection to place, culture and people is established through the sense of longingness and the deeply ingrained feeling of up rootedness nurtures it. This in turn leads to the various type of Identity Crisis such as gender identity, national identity, spiritual identity, cultural identity and so on as discussed above. All such Identity Crisis leads to express Indianness too. These writers have by far successfully portrayed all the challenges of living in a multicultural world and how ultimately the Diaspora finds out ways and means to tackle them, be it nostalgia, rootlessness or identity crisis. With rapid developments in the fields of trade and commerce along with the growth in telecommunication technologies, together with various cultural confrontations at the global level there has been a paradigmatic shift in people's understanding of selfhood and identity, which has been depicted with utmost lucidity in the works of these Diaspora writers, thereby creating some of the pioneering works of Indian Diaspora fiction that has now attained a canonical status.

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