

SENSE OF BELONGINGNESS IN INDIAN-ENGLISH DIASPORIC WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic writers exhibit the sense of belongingness in their writings since whenever a person migrates to another country or place, first thing he faces that is geographical conditions which are generally different from his/her own country or native place. Then come the problems of language, culture, traditions, living style and sensibility which differ from his/her own society. But these are not the only tough things which one has to face or adjust in another environment but one has also to adjust with the local political milieu of the the new land. Apart from these things in many countries the issue of racial discrimination also exists which makes the assimilation of an immigrant tougher in other lands. In addition to it the feeling of nostalgia and sense of belongingness also haunt the mind of an immigrant. The present paper focuses this sense of belongingness and identity crisis in the writings of diasporic writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Belongingness, Immigrant, Nostalgia

INTRODUCTION

The migrants suffer a serious trauma in their newly accepted identity as immigrants in the alien nation. For them it is not only a challenge of geographical displacement but also a challenge for transformation of cultural ideologies. Hyphenation and isolation are also the features of the lives of diasporas. When any individual or social group is in the margin, they are usually in hyphenation and isolation from the mainstream. Therefore, the margin is also a space where hyphenated identities fall into and seek for their cultural spaces. These cultural spaces are generally occupied by the Diasporas who hyphenated from their culture attempt to assimilate in other dominant culture with their 'hybrid experience' of diaspora:

The hyphen is that which signifies the vibrant social and cultural spaces the vibrant social and cultural spaces occupied by diasporas in nation-states. It also reminds us of the contaminated, border, hybrid experience of diaspora people for whom an engineered return to a purist condition is a contradiction in terms because they returned to the quay their ships had gone (Mishra 79).

These diasporas are the best epitome of the marginalized groups. Having forsaken their own lands, these diasporas choose exile for their better future. Sacrificing their rights in their own lands, the diasporic people go to exile to acquire the dignity, value and freedom of the individual and their basic identity as a noble creative force having inherent immense possibilities in the exile. They choose exile an escape or elimination from the suppression or restrictions they have

experienced or felt in their homelands. Fascinated to the notion that “exile is viewed as an escape from the stranglehold of tradition, orthodoxy of religion and oppression of the social systems of the land of their birth” (Vijaysree 135). But contrary to their expectations the diasporans experience the alien ambiance very ambivalent. Their assimilating struggle creates a dilemma in their minds where they hang between two cultures, one they have given up and the other they have conceived a space of possibility for better future:

They carry with them from the country of their origin culturally acquired roles, role expectation and values which complicate the process of relocation. They try to retain their ethnic distinction in a plural society rather than assimilate into a non-existing melting pot. They devise their own ways to transmit their knowledge, values, belief systems and beliefs to the next generation (Ibid).

The restrictions and restraints created by their own ethnic existence to merge in new found lands make them marginalized and suppressed. And because of it they, being in the margin, look for their recognition which they find the most dilemmic and trapped in the space between two cultures. The one in which the migrants move and the other one out of which they are to evolve their personal identity. Expressing in the most lucid and elucidating way, Salman Rushdie in his essay *Imaginary Homelands* mentions the dilemma of the identity:

“Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for the writer to occupy”(15).

The dilemma of the diasporan is specially expounded by Rushdie who himself belongs to that new waves of immigrants that arose in the twentieth century from almost every part of the world and the representation of the marginalized conditions of whose have perfectly and aptly been depicted by the diasporic writers. Who, themselves having been in the margin, are writing from the margin and writing on the margin.

The diasporic writers in quest of their identities become hybrid and they become the component of a heterogeneous society. Being part of a hybrid culture, they seek their assimilation in that heterogeneous environment where incongruous elements make a society. As a consequence the immigrants also become the part of a multicultural environment as in a society myriad of the times the diasporic people belong to the different and various cultures and their being located in alien lands take them into the multicultural conditions. So frequently yet in multicultural conditions the migrants also remain marginalized because there also exists a cultural purity or dominance of some race. So their marginalization from which they want to be away and being away from which they want to make recognition, would bring the consciousness of their hyphenated personality.

Sense of alienation and estrangement has always been the major theme of diasporic writers and Jhumpa Lahiri's stories have this prevailing phenomenon in abundance. She not only talks about the immigrant experience in her works but also shows the psychology of her women and their cross cultural confrontation in vivid pictures .JhumpaLahiri's short stories are the interpretations of the meaning of hybridity and talk clearly about women experience being immigrants in an alien land. It depicts the experience of diaspora and acquaints its readers with the complexities and nuances of such an

experience. The world that Lahiri portrays is set in motion against the cultural tension, anxiety and resultant dialogues that take place when two very different sections of the world. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* abounds with male and female characters struggle to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. Lahiri shows the diasporic struggle to keep hold of culture as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. The female protagonists of her stories represent first and second generation female immigrants who being submerged by the other culture and try to assimilate and as a consequence become hybrid. Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, paint a powerful picture of life in the Indian American Diaspora. She describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America, most of her protagonists being second generation characters. These characters face the opportunities and challenges of belonging to two different cultures, and must continuously negotiate an intermediate position within and between two cultures. They occupy a middle ground which could easily turn into a battle ground between the Indian and the American parts of their identities, but the characters in her stories strive to maintain ties to both cultures, identifying themselves as Indian Americans. Thus, no matter how predominantly Indian or American they feel, Lahiri's characters still retain a sense of self as Indian Americans. The continuous renegotiation of their identities can be seen in these stories, offering an interesting perspective on the stories.

As a well-known Indian Diasporic writer Bharati Mukherjee explores the problem of 'exile' and 'home' in her writings. To an exile, 'home' is much appreciated, where the lost national identity and culture remain. Bharati Mukherjee, a writer of the Indian diaspora appreciates the "melting pot" of America. Her major theme all over her writing centers on the situation of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular notice to the change staking position in South Asian women in a new world. In her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, she has secured an admirable position among the writers of Indian diaspora. Most of her writings deal with the projection of cultural confrontation between the East and the West. In her works the immigrants are found struggling with the cultural dilemma of new and old communities.

One of the most illustrious and prominent fiction writers from Indo-Canadian diaspora, Rohinton Mistry was born on July 3, 1952 in Bombay. He was brought up and educated in Bombay from where he migrated to Canada in 1975 at the age of twenty-three. Being a Parsi Zoroastrian and having grown up in Parsi ambience, Mistry came to know all kinds of Parsi traditions and customs which he depicted in his all four books, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002). Inserting the Parsi backdrop, he port-rays the marginalized conditions of his community and their social existence in India.

His works mostly deal with discourse pertaining to the margin and subaltern. This is the mode through which his writings touch the heights of popularity and glory. Like other postcolonial diasporic writers he has also made margin as the major theme of his works and this margin consists of marginalized sections and subaltern classes of Indian society, non-belonging, uprootedness, displacement, remembrance of the past and present struggle in contemporary culture.

The inequalities in the societies create social imbalances in which a group or individual comes into centre and the other group or individual remains in the margin. The presence of the group or individual in the margin and their social conditions and struggle is the theme and subjects which are depicted or portrayed by the postcolonial writers. The discourses related to margin have got significance in the light of the ugly social realities in which the persons in the margin have to suffer or undergo social suppressions.

Encircled by the rigorous sufferings and poignant circumstances, the marginalized persons and groups remain

subaltern groups and persons in a society. They become subaltern or subordinate because they are in the margin and the margin is a place or space where something ceases or ends to evolve or thrive. New Webster's Dictionary also mentions margin is "a limit, or a condition, beyond which something ceases to exist or be possible", which states that if a person is in the margin, (s)he is unable to evolve himself/herself whether due to being economically backward, destitute of basic needs or suppressed by psyche. Impoverished, Dalits, minorities, racially discriminated, women, and social tribes are counted in the margin of the societies.

The writings of Rohinton Mistry also deals with the margin and like other postcolonial writers, he also uses margin as a tool to make a glittering future for himself. Focusing on the identical expositions of the complex social problems and the marginalized condition of his community, his first book *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) deals with the Parsi ambiance of a fictional Parsi enclave named Firozsha Baag in Bombay. Published by Penguin Canada, this book was brought out later in Britain and U.S.A. under a modified title, *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*. The collection of eleven stories, this book gives the glimpse of the Parsi world – their customs, traditions, food habits and Parsi psyche of the marginalized community that generally remains in veil. Portraying the margin of the Parsis, most of the stories of this book show the dreams, desires, the sufferings of broken ambitions, attempts to adjust oneself in unwanted situations. The characters are in margin or falling into the margin because of their circumstances. Yet the margin comes out as a possibility in last story 'Swimming Lessons'. Filled with autobiographical elements this story shows the marginalization of an immigrant. Like this, all other stories contain the similar pattern which reflects the margin whether it is 'One Sunday' in which the whole community appears as marginalized from the dominant race or 'The Collectors' and 'Exercisers', where the dilemma of the marginalized psyche of the protagonists dominates the themes. It is the story of 'Lend Me Your Light' in which the main protagonist Kersi finds himself living two lives like the Greek prophet Tiresias and marginalized by these two lives, he says:

I saw myself as someone out of a Greek tragedy, guilty of the sin of hubris for seeking emigration out of the land of my birth, and paying the price in burnt out eyes: I, Tiresias, blind and throbbing between two lives, the one in Bombay and the one come in Toronto... (TFFB 180)

These all stories illustrate the declining and marginalized conditions of the Parsi community and Rohinton Mistry being a Parsi displays the margin of the characters in whole anthology.

Rohinton Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) reveals the internal fear of the Parsi community. The novel throws light on the ethnic struggle and identity crisis of the Parsi community. Through the fluctuating fortunes of the protagonist, Gustad Noble, Mistry projects the socio-political turmoil of the sixties and seventies era and in this period the social and political status of the Parsis in India. Like *Tales from Firozsha Baag* Mistry again shows the margin of the Parsis in this novel and through the Nagarwala incident, that involved a Parsi in a scam of sixty lakh rupees, shows the down grading of his community. Through this incident he strongly reacts at the disgrace and insult of the Parsis by contemporary government and reveals the feeling of fear and loss in his community. The main protagonist Gustad Noble's life is shown as the journey of the life and the struggle he has to face is the lot of the marginalized people. Gustad's remembrance of his childhood days, when his father was a rich man and again when he was declared insolvent, exposes the rich past of the

Parsis in India and presents Gustad's personal life, which is full of troubles, is the projection of the dwindling and declining condition of the Parsis in present context. The inmates of the Khodadad building, where Gustad resides, are representatives of a cross-section of middle class Parsis who express the anxieties of a minority class in multi-racial India as well as the age-old superstitions and customs that have cornered them and have also alienated them from the mainstream, keeping them in margin.

Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) is the most darkened and gloomy yet highly admirable and creative. This novel ironically renders how the marginalized and the powerless are forced to maintain a precarious fine balance between life and death, hope and despair while passing through the rigorous ordeals of life. Revolving around a Parsi widow Dina Dalal and two Dalit Characters Omprakash and Ishvar and a Parsi boy Maneck Kohlah, this novel shows the sufferings, traumas, struggles and suppression of marginalized people. Mistry's attention is still on the pessimistic and sordid state of affairs in this novel also. The wretched condition of the poor and the middle class people tortured under the brutal forces of corrupt rules during the period of emergency, offers a criticism of the postcolonial India and the marginalized condition of the subaltern in this period.

The issues like sense of belongingness Indian immigrants experience while shifting to an unfamiliar foreign culture. this results stress, frustration and hopelessness which is why in the post colonial phase of literary practices, the issues pertaining to the existence of immigrants and expatriates have become a fascinating subject for the writers of Indian diaspora. They depict the scene of cultural translation in the process of possessing and re-possessing the past and the present both sequential and spatial in a significant way. The world that diasporic writers portray is set in movement against the cultural anxieties, apprehension and consequential dialogues that take place when two very different sections of the world are present. Immigrant writers show diasporic struggle to keep hold of culture as characters create new lives in foreign cultures. In fact relationships, language, rituals and religion all help these characters to maintain their culture in new surroundings even as they build a hybrid realization. The characters of these writers' works are defined by isolation of some form or other. These immigrants are isolated from their families, culture, homes, and parents and from the communities in which they live. The lives of these immigrants in the works of diasporic writers end with a sense of loss. In their isolation they feel that they are missing something vital to their identities. It is this missing something that defines them.

CONCLUSIONS

Indian diasporic writing has some persistent features with it and its discourses are pertaining to margin, ethnicity and identity crisis, sense of belongingness, cultural differences in a multicultural society. The writings of the diasporic writers reflect this inclination in which writers seek assimilation in heterogeneity. The sense of identity brings forth the social discrimination in the social surroundings of a place or country. All the conditions in which an ethnic group resides are consisted of class, cultural background and location. Identity, therefore, becomes the interface of the individual or that ethnic group to that society in which he is living. However, the process of identity formation is not so simple; it is quite complex and inconsistent. Identity modulates and extends its proportions. It is consisted of a number of factors influencing the social environment or the individual consciousness or ethnic existence. Writers of diaspora well portray the dilemma of identity crisis and sense of belongingness in an adapted land through their writing as crisis of belongingness has always been major theme of their works

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