

IDENTITY CRISIS OF THE DIASPORA

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Received: 08 Nov 2018

Accepted: 19 Nov 2018

Published: 30 Nov 2018

ABSTRACT

The Indian diaspora is "one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times". In the old classical sense, the term diaspora is used collectively for "the dispersed genes after the Babylonian captivity, and also in the apostolic age for the genes living outside of Palestine." (Chamberer's Twentieth Century Dictionary, 356). Etymologically speaking, connotatively, in Greek the term means to disperse and signifies a "voluntary or forcible movements of the peoples from their homelands into new regions." William Safran suggests that the concept of the Diaspora can be applied to the expatriate minority communities whose members share some of the following characteristics: (1) either the ancestors or they themselves, have been dispersed from a fixed original 'centre' or two or more 'peripheral' or foreign locations; (2) they keep in their minds a collective vision myth or memory about their actual homeland-its geographical and physical location, history and achievements; (3) they always retain the fact that they are not—and perhaps can never be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; (4) they consider their ancestral homeland as their original, true and ideal home and as the place where they or their descendants eventually return (when the circumstances would be appropriate); (5) they believe that they should together be committed to the well-being, safety and prosperity of their homeland; (6) they always continue to relate, personally and collectively to that homeland in one way or another and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.³

KEYWORDS: Concept of the Diaspora, Emotionality Versus Rationality, Demographic Dislocations of Modern Times'

INTRODUCTION

In literature, the Indian diasporic writers have been fairly holding the center stage in the last decade primarily because of the theoretical formulations which is being generated by a critique of their work and the rising interest in cultural studies cultures and language which are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. Diasporic writings gives rise to the questioning of the definitions of 'home' and 'nation' Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia are often the major themes of these writers as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. Besides this, diasporic writing takes into account beliefs and ideas about many other issues such as:- emotionality versus rationality, religiosity and blind faith versus secularism and scientific attitude, groupism versus individuality, tradition versus modernity, stagnation versus change, subjectivity versus objectivity, globalization versus locality, adaptability, assimilation and the problem of cultural shock and the resultant mental conflict find a voice and adequate space in the works of such Indian diasporic writers like V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, KamalaMarkandya, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, M.G. Vassanji and others.

Bapsi Sidhwa, an Indian-born Pakistan writer now settled in the United States also belongs to this category. She began her literary-career with *The Crow Eaters* (1978) and achieved success with her each forth-coming works like *Pakistani Bride* (1983), *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), *American Brat* (1994) and *Water* (2006). Bapsi Sidhwa was born before partition and was brought up in Lahore, Pakistan, married to a Parsi from Mumbai, India. She was divorced after a couple of years and married a second time to a Pakistani-based Parsi and migrated to the U.S.A. As a teenager, she witnessed the bloody incident of the Partition of India and its repercussions in 1947 in which seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted from their homeland to witness one of the most horrible and shocking exchange of population that history has ever known. As a result of a complicated set of social and political factors, including religious differences and the end of colonial rule in India, the burdens of Partition had to be borne by the cannon set of people. Sidhwa witnessed these horrible events, including an incident in which she found the body of a dead man in a gunny sock at the side of a road. This is how she describes her experience at that time:

I was a child then. Yet the ominous roar of distant mobs was a constant of my awareness, altering me, even at the age of seven, to a palpable sense of the evil that was taking place in various parts of Lahore. The glows of fires beneath the press of smoke, which bloodied the horizon in a perpetual sunset, wrenched at my heart. For many of us the departure of the British and the longed-for Independence of the subcontinent were overshadowed by the ferocity of partition.⁴

Lahore, her home city, became a border city in Pakistan and it was flooded with thousands of refugees. Most of them were victims of rape, torture, killing, uprootedness and thus experienced diaspora. Bapsi Sidhwa has recorded that historic moment of the two nations in her novel *Ice-Candy Man/Cracking India*. This novel has very appropriately captured this decisive moment leading to Partition and diaspora like many other novels. *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Kushwant Singh, *A Bend in Ganges* (1964) by Manohar Malgonkar, *Azadi* (1975) by Chaman Nahal, *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni and *Midnight's Children* (1980) by Salman Rushdie. Many critics consider *Ice-Candy Man* as one of the most moving book on the partition and human diaspora. The events narrated in the novel are horrifying. There are thousands of examples of rape and memory-losses because of partition. Sidhwa writes:

Despite the residue of passion and regret, and loss of those who have in panic fled-the fire could not have burned. Despite all the ruptured dreams, broken lives, buried gold, bricked-in rupees, secreted jewelry, lingering hope the fire could not have burned for months.⁵

Bapsi Sidhwa deals with the horrors and after-effects of Partition in a very touching manner. The politicians of that time became more selfish as they were more interested in their motives. They bred hatred and jealousy among the people of that time. They are caricatured in the novel. Friends turned into foes and traitors and there were mass-killings in villages, even killing their own country-men. The *Ice-Candy Man* is adversely and psychologically affected on seeing the brutally murdered bodies of his family members on the train which arrives from Amritsar to Lahore. As a result, he becomes a cruel person and joins the fray to kill the innocent people. The horrors and crimes of the partition left a permanent mark on the psyche of the people of both sides. As Jinnah himself admitted, Pakistan had been the biggest mistake of his life. Partition of India is truly the worst point of Indian history. The novel aptly captures that moment in history when everybody is themselves and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, when identities which existed side by side, gets sharpened against each other like a two-edged sword. Not only Lenny but everyone in the novel experiences a substantial change in the psyche due to partition. Ayah undergoes a traumatic transformation at the hands of

the Ice-Candy Man, who finally possesses her. There is also the Ice-Candy Man's moral erosion during Partition which turns this normal, God-fearing man into a beast. Apart from Lenny, Rana, a Muslim-child also tells about his horrible and traumatic experiences.

Ice-Candy Man thus reflects diasporic consciousness. During Partition, communal riots spread among the Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims. There was a partition not only of the communities but also of the regions. Whereas Lahore went to Pakistan, Amritsar and Gurdaspur became the parts of India. The village, Pir, Pindo, where these communities lived peacefully, suffered the worst. People were deeply attached to the place where they lived and hence refused to vacate their homes and leave the lands of their ancestors. They could not bear the brunt of separation from their home and country, where they had spent their childhood. Parsi, being a microscopic community, Sidhwa for the most part of the action, remained only a silent spectator. She states:

"As a Parsi, I can see things objectively. I see all the common people suffering while the politicians on either side have fun."⁶

Thus the novel *Ice-Candy Man* is a novel on partition dealing with the theme of diasporic consciousness; Sidhwa defends here the role of her community and its humanity and loyalty for the country and the people who are its citizens.

Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie is another diasporic Indian writer, a Britisher and an essayist. His second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1980), won the Booker Prize in 1981. Much of his works are set on the Indian subcontinent. In his novels, he combines magical realism with historical fiction, he is concerned with the many disturbances, interference, associations, attachment, relocation, resettlement between East and West. His fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), was the center of a major controversy, provoking protests from Muslims in a number of countries. Death threats were issued against him, including a fatwa by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran, on 14 February 1989. This fatwa required Rushdie's execution as proclaimed on Radio Tehran by the spiritual leader of Iran at that time, calling the book "blasphemous against Islam" (Chapter IV of the book describes the character of an Imam in exile who comes back to instigate a rebel from the people of his country with no concern for their safety). Rushdie was thus forced to live under police protection for several years and resultantly, the United Kingdom and Iran broke up the diplomatic ties over this controversy on 7th March, 1989.

The decades of 1980s and 90-s was quite challenging especially in making the task of choosing the top ten authors of this genre i.e. Indian writing in English. The renaissance was led by Salman, Rushdie with his path breaking novel *Midnight's Children* in 1980. After his success, there has been an overabundance of Indian authors writing in English. These contemporary writers are concerned not only with people living in India, but like Rushdie, many of them are a part of the Indian diaspora. Earlier writers such as Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Nirad C. Choudhri used English in its classical form. However, Rushdie with his Pidgin English initiated a new way in writing along with giving voice to multicultural concerns. Displacement has no replacement and this is the truth of diaspora. Since the provocation of humanity, people have been bestriding throughout the world without having any theoretical knowledge of borders and boundaries. He has always been suffering from a sense of alienation without realizing the actual outcome of migration.

Midnight's Children, his tour de force, paved the way for postcolonial literature in English. Rushdie takes the credit of decolonizing English from the English and his methods are being pursued by him as well as others. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai like Salman Rushdie wanders among three countries i.e. India, Pakistan and

Bangladesh but is unable to find a proper identity and place to live in anywhere. The novel is a narrative of displacement and rootlessness, alienation that is caused by relocation. Similar is the case of Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhari, Rohinton Mistry and others. Graham Huggan explains it more clearly thus,

"Meditated events (refers to the Barcelona conference India: Fifty Years After, 12 Sept. 1997) such as these are characteristic of the current appeal of India, and more specifically of Indian Literature in English consumer item." However, at the same time, Huggan accepts such a trend as specific Diaspora writer as he further states,

"The future of Indian literature in English at the millennium seems indisputable, the reputations of its best known writers intact, its commercial success virtually ensured. Yet it remains a cause for concern that nearly all the recognized writers are located in the Diaspora."⁸

Not only this, Diaspora writing exhibits its postmodern features also as pointed out by Linda Hutcheon,

"Post modernism has art forms that are fundamentally self—reflexive, in the other word, art that is self consciously art (on artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present."⁹

M. G. Vassanji, too can be bracketed under the same category with his novel, *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*, which brings out the various implications and consequences of dislocation, rootlessness, alienation and relocation at the level of an individual and community as well. Vassanji makes his narrator, Vikram Lall, a mouthpiece of various types of dislocation in the novel: physical in the case of the first generation migrants of the Punjabi-Hindu community, psychological and emotional as in the case of the protagonist. Vikram, his mother and his uncle Mahesh, and ultimately the political marginalization as depicted by the black native community. The writer make use of memory both as a narrative device to put the dislocated present into the perspective of the past and as a relief agent to bear the pressure of living in an alien and hostile environment. Memory has the tendency to make one feel the agony of "homelessness" lesser and lesser. Vikram's mother and uncle Mahesh often go down their memory lanes, and feel home sick. Mahesh recalls their childhood games and Vikram's mother describes her old house, of the ceilings which used to leak in the monsoons, its broken floor under the dining table---- the small details which are hardly of any interest to an outsider.

For the first generation migrant memory plays a significant role in invoking a remembrance of the part, drawing up legends, myths and tales embedded in the collective consciousness. The collective memory of the people becomes a reservoir to present facts from, consequently linking the history of the community to the contemporary scenario. Vikram's mother, in a cultural nostalgia recalls the story connected with the two important festivals of Hindu, i.e. Dussehra and Diwali". The novel also takes into account some of the specific cases of racism to show how the post-colonial Africa has been treating the Asian and Indian immigrants than the colonial Africa. Vikram's uncle, Mahesh's please to return back to Kenya from India where he has a wife and children and that he is serving as an assistant to the minister Okello, falls on deaf ears. Mahesh is permitted to return only on the condition that he would desist from social activities. Another example of racial exploitation pertains to Vikram's own family. Vikram father is asked to hand over his business to one Mr. Peter Ogwell. It is only after Vikram gives the ultimatum to approach the President that his father is spared. The third case is similar to the second one. Vikram's brother in law (Deepa's husband) Dilip is forced to resign in front of a powerful lady, mother Dottie who is a favorite of the president. He is directed to hand over his business set up. Mermaid chemicals for a nominal sum to her. Here also Vikram has to take the help of the President to nullify the threat.

The account of Sakina's story does not signify her unhappiness, though it can be very easily concluded that it would have been difficult at times for her to balance the systems of to entirely different cultures. She must have felt scared, lonely, lost and baffled in a contrary cultural setup. She has the advantages and disadvantages of occupying a "diaspora space" where different cultural identities become "Juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed, or disavowed, where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate..."¹⁰ The diaspora in general shares the fate of Sakina. It has "a Trishanku existence", a state of in-betweens. Thus, the novel employs history to bring to the force the disturbing truth about the hopelessness of diaspora's uncertainty, its continuous state of in-betweenness, an ineluctable destiny from which it cannot escape. It also brings to the fore the fact that instabilities and dislocations constitute the diasporic experience. It focuses how historical events determine the choices made by the individual and shape the destiny of the whole community.

Bharati Mukherjee is another writer who can be bracketed in the same category, though she considers herself an American and claims to have overtaken "the smothering tyranny of nostalgia and surmounted the temptation of ghettoization". Her literary career from *The Tiger's Daughter*(1971) to *Desirable Daughter* (2001) showcases her movement away from the 'aloofness of expatriation' to the 'exuberance of immigration'. She confesses about her mentor Naipaul;

"In myself I detect a pale and immature reflection of Naipaul; it is he who has written most movingly about the pain and absurdity of art and exile, of 'third world art' and exile among the former colonizers; the tolerant incomprehension of hosts, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a 'Desh'."¹²

Her character of Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* is a typical product of Indian society, a victim of Indianness, fails to cope with the American cultural milieu, suffers from a sense of insecurity and instability and she is unable to find a place for herself; She is very much like Naipaul's Mr. Biswas, O'Neill's Mr. Yank who find themselves to be "Not belonging" to any place. The novel may be taken as an instance of a satirical picture of an Indian woman who resorts to the security of her father or a father like figure or husband whenever she comes face to face with crisis, obviously passive and dependant, in the grip of fear and isolation just like Dimple of *Wife*. Dimple is obsessed with the concept of 'Americanization' and therefore she prefers to extirpate her past/roots and ultimately disappointed, her imaginary world is ruined, leading to the murder of her husband as an act of self bumptiousness, this is the devastating and unfortunate journey of an Indian wife beginning her odyssey from the so called advanced American Society of adultery, gestation, termination, killing and blackmail. This is typical theme of diasporic fiction, often called East-West confrontation, a psychic-social problem or psychoanalytical approach of expatriate writing.

Jhumpa Lahiri is one another celebrated diasporic writer who was born in London to parents who emigrated from India. Lahiri's early short stories faced rejection from publishers. Finally, *Interpreter of Maladies* was released in 1999, her first collection of short stories. The stories take into account the sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants basically focusing on themes of martial disharmony, miscarriages and the loss of faith and connectivity between the first and second generation immigrants in United States. Lahiri once wrote, "When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life". The collection was praised by the critics in America but it drew mixed reactions from those in India. *Interpreter of Maladies* sold 600,000 copies and received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. The book is a collection of nine short stories and these stories are

about the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are lost between the culture they inherited, their roots and the "New Culture" of which they have recently become a part.

The opening story "A Temporary Matter" is a story about a failed relationship. Though beginning with a defeat, Lahiri seems to foretell that her stories will be about the problems of relationships and communication, but, at the same time, each has the possibility of success. In another story "Sexy", Miranda and Dev end their relationship as Miranda can see that their relation has no potential. Food is another important theme in her stories. In "A Temporary Matter", the haunting absence of food in the household is parallel to the lack of affection in their marriage. In "This Blessed House", Twinkle is not that accomplished cook that Shobha is. She does not have any knowledge of Indian cooking being born in California. However, it is a surprise for Sanjeev when he saw her attempting to her creative streak in the kitchen. Although he is annoyed for her not being able to cook authentic Indian food, but still he is pleased by the meal she serves him. His attitude towards the food cooked by her reflects his attitude with her Overall the book received generally positive reviews and appreciation from a number of publishers. Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times praises Lahiri for her writing style, citing her "uncommon elegance and poise". Born of educated middle class parents in London, brought up in Rhodes Island, Lahiri beautifully and accurately brings out the diasporic familiarity in her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. The "living in between" condition is very agonizing and marginalizing for the Diasporas. There is a constant fascination and longing, an urge to go back to "the lost origin" and "imaginary homelands" are brought into existence from the scattered, scrappy and fractional reflection of the native land. They confront the civilizing predicament when their development customs and conventions are laughed at and there is a intimidation to their societal, communal and civilizing existence. They experience bewilderment and confusion, redolent and heartsick for home and exhibit counteraction also to the discourse of talent and skill in various forms. In the ensuing contemporaries these distractions, complications and eagerness become lesser agonizing as they get altered by the culture of that country and also accustomize themselves to it.

CONCLUSIONS

In my paper, I have tried to establish that Indian Diaspora fiction in English coming out of writers in different countries focus on the same pattern of content, which appears to be fresh and innovative every time it is presented. I have cited writers living in America, England and Canada to prove my point. I feel that Indian Diaspora fiction in English is an experimental recreation of the third world consciousness and a valuable tradition in itself.

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