

## A CALL FOR A LIFE OF JOYFUL AND MEANINGFUL INTEGRATION: THE BALANCED MODE OF DIASPORIC LIFE IN SACRED WATERS BY MEIRA CHAND

*Sijo C. G<sup>1</sup> & J. Amalaveenus<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India

**Received: 14 Feb 2019**

**Accepted: 20 Feb 2019**

**Published: 22 Feb 2019**

### ABSTRACT

*The life of people on the globe is a phenomenon that escapes an easy grasp. People live with a dynamism which enables them to get adopted or adjusted to the new living conditions. Diaspora literature captures the vibrant rhythm of lives of people who happened to be in different countries other than their homeland due to either enforced situations or self made choices. People began to migrate and settle more with the advent of colonialism and its effects on the lives of the people.*

*Thus in the changed living conditions people responded in very many ways and tried to strike a balance among the different meaning giving sources. Some of them lived a life of regret, or at least with a predominance of remorse and alienated feelings whereas some happened to be fully absorbed to the new vistas and continue to live. Here surprisingly, some of them tried to imbibe what is better from the old and new and by integrating them resorted to construct a joyful mode of existence. And this did not invite much remorse and feelings of loss. Rather, they found a more meaningful and dynamic way of life.*

*Meira Chand, in her novel Sacred Waters, portrays the lives of Sita as an attempt for the joyful and meaningful integration which inevitably reflects a balanced mode of diasporic life. Without being fully loaded by the past and avoiding a total absorption, this mode helps to find out an effective and meaningful existence by coming out the barriers. The adopted daughter of Sita, Amita also shines as an embodiment of powerful choices amidst the situations necessitated by the nature of diasporic life.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Post Colonialism, Diaspora, Identity, Integration, Absorption*

### INTRODUCTION

The life of people on the globe is a phenomenon that escapes an easy grasp. People live with a dynamism which enables them to get adopted or adjusted to the new living conditions. Diaspora literatures capture the vibrant rhythm of lives of people who happened to be in different countries other than their homeland due to either enforced situations or self made choices. People began to migrate and settle more with the advent of colonialism and its effects on the lives of the people.

Thus in the changed living conditions people responded in very many ways and tried to strike a balance among the different meaning giving sources. Some of them lived a life of regret, or at least with a predominance of remorse and alienated feelings whereas some happened to be fully absorbed to the new vistas and continue to live. Here surprisingly, some of them

tried to imbibe what is better from the old and new and by integrating them, resorted to construct a joyful mode of existence. And this did not invite much remorse and feelings of loss. Rather, they found a more meaningful and dynamic way of life.

The literatures which deal the lives of people in the Diasporas come under diasporic literature which falls under the wide canopy of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial literature called for a different outlook with which one can approach literature in order to assert the mini narratives without taken away by the grand narratives.

According to McLeod, Postcolonialism is a theoretical procedure that is used to interpret, read and critique the cultural practices of colonialism, which have left grave marks upon the original culture and lives of the people in the colonies. James Rajesh explains, as a theory, it focuses on the question of colonized people who suffered under colonial invasion and rule and tries to show how the colonial powers pictured the colonized under the labels of aboriginal, native etc. in order to justify their attempts of intrusion into the lives of the people. The colonial discourse attempted to highlight to the world the people of colonized countries in an inferior and marginalized way (1).

McLeod continues to explain that Postcolonialism is not the same as ‘after colonialism’ as if colonial values are no longer to be reckoned with. A radically new historical era is not defined by it, nor does it announce a brave new world where all the ills of the colonial past have been cured. To make it clearer, Postcolonialism recognises both historical continuity and change. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. At the same time, it asserts the promise, the possibility and the continuing necessity of change while recognizing the important challenges and the changes that have already been achieved (33).

Simon During quotes the words of Homi Bhabha to support the kind of reconciliatory postcolonial thought, that to live in the modernity characteristic of such communities built by both sides was to live, “more around temporality than about historicity: a form of living that is more complex than ‘community’; more symbolic than ‘society’; more connotative than ‘country’; . . . more hybrid than in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications that can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism (qtd. in During 31).

Postcolonial studies try to highlight the new identities that emerge as a result of the mixing up of new cultures because of the coming together of more than one culture. Often the new identities are dominated and coloured by the coloniser’s culture.

Nayar explicates that the identity in the postcolonial world is very much escaping. Identity in diasporic writing can take various forms:

- A split consciousness of being Indian and American
- Multiple identities and solidarities or,
- A reassertion of native cultural identity (197).

Nayar explains that postcolonial writings bring the realities and dynamism of diasporic life. Diaspora is the displacement of a community/culture into another geographical and cultural region. This was very much common in the colonial setup. A

culture in diaspora is the effect of migration, immigration and exile, which is a particularly fascinating phenomenon because it has existed since the arrival of humans on earth (187).

The word diaspora comes from the Greek language, which means to disperse. According to Nayar, it is the result of voluntary or involuntary movement of peoples from their land of origin to different new places. There, they negotiate two cultures, old and new and often develop a mixed culture and style of life (189).

Two invariables of their experiences viz. exile and homeland are captured by diasporic writings. Almost all the diasporic writings are attempts to negotiate between these two polarities. Meena Alexander puts the temporal and spatial moves involved in the particular area of literature. She continues to propose that the temporal move is a looking back at the past i.e. analepsis and looking forward to the future i.e. prolepsis, a negotiation with a retreating history, past, traditions and customs. It produces nostalgia, memory and reclamation as literary themes. Prolepsis involves a different treatment of time, where the writer looks forward at the future, seeking new vistas and new chances. This produces themes of the ethics of work survival and cultural assimilation (qtd. in Nayar 188).

According to Silky Khullar Anand holds that diaspora may not necessitate generation of angst, still some writers show the evidence of angst. More or less we see a mixed reaction in this regard (vi). Some cling to the nostalgia and defend the homeland culture to the extent of often condemning the new culture. But mostly, the writers having roots in homeland and the host land, tend to be balanced and at the same time concerned to show the unique nature of their existence.

Diasporic literature is an area where the writers like, V. S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri, put forward attempts to reconstruct the new identity in postcolonial period. They try to remould the identity with a creative bent of mind rather than taking a hostile and exclusivist stand.

Meira Chand is one of the diasporic writers, who have portrayed the life in the diaspora in its manifold varieties. Her way of portraying tries to be just by addressing all the possible approaches by the people in diaspora. She meticulously observes the plethora of diasporic life situations and brings them forward without losing the originality and genuineness. Her novels deal themes like memory, home, homelessness, rootlessness, empowerment, finding new meaningfulness and what not

In this paper the researcher tries to highlight how Sita the main character of Sacred Waters coming out of the cocoon which the so called homeland and its traditions had imposed upon her. Though she finds it difficult to cope up with the new living conditions, she accomplishes a new and independent life balancing here old and new elements. She is one of the powerful women characters in the novels of Chand. Amita is another important character in the novel. Though she is the daughter of Muni, she has been made to believe that Sita is her mother. Only towards the end of the novel, she comes to know that Sita is her foster mother only who adopted her and looked after her as her own child. Amita also shows steady development in the course of life events and come out as a person who could find a new rhythm of life without despising both and the same time having a full blown life.

As common in diasporic novels, there are characters that tend to cling back to the roots and be defensive in their own life. Grandmother of Sita and Dev insisted Dev should not abroad because it “would mean a loss of caste and identity and an end to the possibility of a good incarnation” (29-30). She thinks that the homeland and their original place is something unique and the life outside of it will result in the loss of his identity. Coupled with her religious beliefs of karma and incarnation, she

fears that he will lose a better second life also if he crosses sea and travels to a foreign land. She is worried and tells Dev that, “in those places the gods cannot protect you. Also, no water from the holy Ganges or Yamuna is there to wash away your sins” (30).

The woman who assists in Ramakrishna Mission School, Usha, known as the old Usha, always echoes her displeasure in having a girl child though she herself is a woman. The value system of the society is so strong that even a woman desires that baby girl should not be born. When Sita undergoes a miscarriage, seeing the baby was a girl, she consoles Sita, saying, “It was only a girl, so better it came out early. Next time I will help you get a boy” (139). Even Sita herself wished only a baby boy she always wanted to have a boy; Sita always prayed that she should get a baby boy.

Amita wonders about her students who attend her classes on Feminism. Her students mostly were all young Asian women, Chinese, Indian or Malay. They appeared to be modern in their outward appearance. Still, according to Amita, they were subconsciously shaped by traditional cultures that valued women less than men. Amita though she was against these types of dispositions and system of her original country, had a desire inside to find the village of her mother, which was of course an ambition to trace the roots (55).

The second category of people wanted to always leave what is old and traditional. Also mostly they have a negative picture of the old. Dr. Sen, when trying to convince Sita about her trip to Singapore she says, “It shows your brother cares for you, and does not have the old fashioned attitudes that hold this country back. He sounds like a fine young man. Whatever awaits you, you will have a new life, and it will be better than this” (102-103).

Amita too, once embraced, without any links to her origin, the new ways that a western style offered to her during the time of her studies in United States. She had been leading a very independent life beyond any limit without any restrictions about which she herself wonders later on (263).

Again, there is another group of people who try to find a meaningful existence amidst of the newness that encircles but not fully denouncing the old. Their strategy is more of an integrating endeavour which renders them to live happily accepting the things as they are and still finding a way out which enforces them to bring out the dynamism of positive rhythm of life.

Sita was always fond of the picture of Devi on the calendar, on which she used to stare while listening old tales from her grandmother. It was picture depicting the devi on her tiger steed, gazing down upon them, her face radiant, the architect of her own life. Her many arms held the tools of self reliance as she navigated her way through her celestial world. This image for Sita was always a source of inspiration and encouragement. Though it is from the mythology of the so called traditional input, she could face many harsh realities of her life in India and later on in Singapore gauging energy from this mythological figure. According to her grandmother, “the devi was no-child no-husband woman, an so could do the things she did” (31).

This image could give her inspiration to think beyond the conventional male dominated solutions for the problems of life. The devi was taken form to accomplish a difficult task where all the male gods failed in their attempt to kill Mahishasura. When all of them wanted help the Great Source, the devi was born. Her grandmother describes the incident:

So many powerful male gods, all of them strutting around the universe like brave warriors, and yet they could not defeat that wily old Mahishasura. The great Force created a goddess to do their work for them, not another male god! That is

how powerful a woman's shakti is. (33)

Sita's life was one of constant struggles to come out of the shackles of conventions and anathema imposed upon her by the society and the customs and traditions. Her plight is shown:

Nothing. Her life had been shaped by that word. You are nothing, her mother-in-law had told her. We are nothing, Billi had insisted as they begged for alms in the street. You women are nothing, the Japanese had laughed. You were nothing until I married you, Shiva had told her. Anger rolled through her as it always remained alive within her when everything else was forgotten. (16)

In way her journey from this nothingness to being something was marked by constant effort from her part to face the situations and adopt herself to do away with anything that can relegate her to mere nothingness.

The story of Sita develops side by side the attempts of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose to build an army to fight against the British government in India. As Sita reaches Singapore immediately she is given in marriage to Shiva, young man with progressive thoughts and taken up need to fight back for the freedom. Her marriage was the result of an expression of Shiva's ideological pursuit. He happened to hear a talk of Mahatma Gandhi where he urged be the change you want to see in the world. This led him to receive Sita, who was already a widow. From Dev, he came to know the hardships those she underwent just because of the fact that she was a widow (107).

Slowly Sita's life began to take a turn when she was given preliminary education by Shiva. She began to learn to read and write Hindi. Shiva was patient enough to adjust to the mistakes she made and taught her. By marrying here again he saved her from the stigma of being a widow, and now giving her education, he has returned her to life. Also when she asked by him to give some lessons to five orphans boys, she was finding herself in the new world, some sort of meaning and importance to the rest of the world (129).

And later when the Japanese attack happened on Singapore against British Government, Sita was asked to be a volunteer to help the wounded people. The empty classrooms of Ramakrishna Mission School were turned into emergency accommodation for the growing number of homeless people in the city. With the help of the urchins to whom she had been giving tuition, she was trying to manage the situations as far as she could. And there happened powerful transformation to her: "Soon, to her surprise, she found herself taking control of situations, giving directions, feeling her own fear ebb away, her voice projecting from her with new strength. At times she felt that she could no longer recognise herself" (149).

Having been taken up by Netaji's inspiring words, she wanted to join Indian National Army formed by him. When she shared her idea Dev her brother disagreed to that by reminding her that she is a married woman. After few days, she was visited by two girls who went on searching recruits for Jhansi Rani Regiment. As soon as she understood the purpose of their visit, she made her mind clear that she will join and fight. As soon as she told the decision, elation filled her. She was very much happy because it was the first time that she made a decision on her own regarding her life (180).

As she joined INA training, she was surpassing all her limits one by one. She began to feel comfortable in her uniform and could undergo the training the men undergo. She proved her mettle as a soldier showed valour and zeal for the country. She fired a gun and killed a man, she lived the way of warrior, careless of death. Chand says that "she had crossed the threshold into the world of men and written her name in blood (336).

Later when she returned to Singapore, she decided to live on her own and adopted the child of Muni, name her Amita, the name meant boundless, without limit. She looked after the child and the child has reached the level of university professor. This daughter, Amita, too transcended her limitations and was able to make choices on her own to eventually find a balance between the different sources of her life in Singapore in the future.

Sita proved that “a full life required embracing not running away and she was free to choose her own narrative. Amita “was not made in Sita’s image, but she had grown up within the rhythm of her spirit and found her reflection mirrored within herself” (404).

Thus, Meira Chand in her novel *Sacred Waters*, portrays the life of Sita as an attempt for the joyful and meaningful integration which inevitably constructs a balanced mode of diasporic life. The adopted daughter of Sita, Amita also shines as an embodiment of powerful choices amidst the situations necessitated by the nature of diasporic life. Chand, in one of her articles in newspaper, “A Strangely Mixed Bag of Possibilities”, calls for a joyful combustion of even disparate parts and inspires to move on optimistically (1). Without being fully held back by the past and at the same time avoiding a total absorption, this mode helps to find out an effective and meaningful existence by coming out of the barriers.

## REFERENCES

1. Anand, Silky Khullar. *Introduction. Women Writers of Indian Diaspora. Ed. Silky Khullar Anand. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2010. vii-ix. Print.*
2. Chand, Meira. "A strangely mixed bag of possibilities." *The Straits Times* 23 Apr. 2016: n.pag. Web. 3. Mar. 2018.
3. ---. *Sacred Waters. Singapore, Marshall Cavendish, 2018.*
4. Doring, Simon. "Postcolonialism and Globalisation: A Dialectical Relation after All?" *Postcolonial Studies* 1.1 (1998): 31-47. PDF file.
5. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010. Print.*
6. Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction. Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2008. Print.*