
Diasporic Women Writers: As a Social Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

India has the second largest Diaspora in the world. The overseas Indian community estimated at over 25 million is spread across every major region in the world. Yet, it is difficult to speak of one great Indian Diaspora. The overseas Indian community is the result of different waves of migration over hundreds of years driven by a variety of reasons-mercantilism, colonialism and globalisation. Its early experience makes up a saga of trials, tribulations and the eventual triumph of determination and hard work. The Indian Diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population and not, in the Jewish sense, an exodus of population at a particular point in time. This sporadic migration traces a steady pattern if a telescopic view is taken over a period of time-from the indentured labour of the past to the IT technocrats of the present day. That is in the last three decades of the 20th century the character of migration began to change and a 'new Diaspora' led by high skilled professionals moving to the western world and semi-skilled contract workers moving to the Gulf, West South East Asia emerged.

INTRODUCTION:

The overseas Indian community thus constitutes a diverse heterogeneous and electric global community representing different regions, languages, cultures and faiths. The common thread that binds them together is the idea of India and its intrinsic values. Overseas Indians comprise People of Indian Origin and Non Resident Indians and today are amongst the best educated and successful communities in the world. In every part of the world the overseas Indian Community is recognized and respected for its hard work, discipline, non-interference and for successfully integrating with the local community. Overseas Indians have made significant contributions to the economy of the country of residence and have added in considerable measure to knowledge and innovation. It comprises the creative writing on the Indian Diaspora by the Indian writers, diasporic Indian writers and non- Indian writers. Indian-English writers like Anita Desai, Bharathi Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing aboard. Their concerns are global as today's world is afflicted with the problems of immigrants, refugees, and all other exiles.

Jumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* (2004) focuses on the problems of child-rearing in an alien culture. The central theme of Lahiri's fictional aura is Indian-American life and the dilemma in the lives of Indian immigrants who encounter problems such as identity crisis, alienation, nostalgic feeling etc. In the *Namesake* she plays a role as an impersonal detached storyteller. She pays a visit to Bengali immigrants in America where the state of exile is cultural as well as emotional. The Diasporic themes such as the uncomfortable position of the immigrants, the large gulf between

the developed world and India and between family tradition and individual freedom are reflected in *The Namesake*. The novel is a recurrence of what ensues to diasporic people. It is a story of Bengali Immigrants family which surrendered itself to the country of adoption. The novel describes the hardship of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to lead a comfortable life.

The story opens as Ashoke and Ashima go away from Calcutta of India and settle in central square in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashoke is a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT. They are expecting a baby, later named Gogol in America. Ashima is about to deliver her first child in a hospital in Massachusetts. They experience suffering and isolation being far away in a foreign land. Ashima's anguish is indescribable as the alienation and the pain of becoming a mother in a foreign land surround her. Her mind is enveloped with a sense of fear as to how she can raise a child in a country where she is related to no one and where she is unmonitored and unobserved. Though she encounters language problem and cultural barriers, she gives birth to her first baby. After the birth of son, they are ready to take their son home. But they are astonished to know that they have to give their son a legal name before leaving the hospital. In most of the Indian families usually, the elder gives the name to baby either the grandfather or grandmother. Their grandmother to name their baby son. But she is no more. Ashima feels that if she had been in Calcutta, she would have her baby at home, surrounded by all the women in her family and would have celebrated cradle ceremony in Bengali way and would have named the baby son traditionally. All these Diasporic characteristics certainly evoke a kind of sympathy for the people.

For the moment, Ashoke prefer the name of Gogol for his son due to two reasons: It is the name of his favourite Russian popular writer, Gogol. Prior to embarking for the US in the 1970's he met with a horrific train accident. He was reading Gogol just before the accident. The train was derailed. It occurred at two thirty in the morning. People were shouting for help. After an hour the rescuers arrived. Some of the people were found dead and some of them were injured: "He remembers to shout back, unsuccessfully, this mouth emitting nothing but the faintest rasp. He remembers the sound of people half dead around him moaning and tapping on the wall of the train, whispering hoarsely for help, words that only those who were also trapped and injured could possibly hear.... He remembers being unable to see anything at all.... Believing that he was dying, that perhaps he was already dead.

At the time of accident, he was reading Gogol--- a page of that book clutched in his hand. The paper had drawn the attention of the medics who had come to rescue him. Infact when he raised his hand, the roll of paper dropped from his fingers, then he was spotted and was rescued. Because of that page of Gogol's book, Ashoke was saved. This incident remains forever in his memory for the rest of his life. At the age of fourteen, Gogol starts hating his name. Ashoke, his father endeavours to elucidate the significance of it; Gogol was not in a mood to digest it. While pursuing high school studies, he dislikes and hates his name more and more and informs the same to his parents. But, in the beginning, they pay a deaf ear to the opinion of their son. Finally the father consents to the idea of Gogol. Gogol reaches the Courthouse and has his name legally changed to Nikhil Gogol Ganguli. Once Gogol finds that four letters of the GANGULIS on one side of the box had been abbreviated to GANG with word GRENE scrawled in pencil following

it and he felt insulted for the world like ABCDs being used for the immigrants and expatriates though they know that he was born in America. Lahiri reflects the Diasporic characteristics such as hostility and marginalization by the unwelcoming society. This occurrence clearly exposes the experience of the immigrants in America.

Gogol becomes an architect. He meets an American girl called Maxine who is socially aggressive. As she is attractive, he falls in love with her. Now Gogol spends much of his time with her and also with his family members and is completely wrapped up in her and her family. Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents but they do not accept her. One day Gogol receives a call from his mother to see off his father who is leaving for Cleveland on business trip. He had other plan with Maxine, but finally accepts to say good bye to his father with Maxine. Gogol spends his vacation with Maxine's parents in New Hampshire where he gets a call from his mother that his father has died of massive heart attack while teaching a semester in Ohio. Gogol arrives at his father's apartment in Cleveland to bring his belongings. We can find a kind of transformation in Gogol's character. He feels that as a son, it is his moral obligation to shoulder the responsibility of the family since his father is no more. He slowly withdraws Maxine and compromises with his emotions. Gogol disassociation with Maxine and prefers to spend much of his time with his mother and sister, Sonia. He performs all the Bengali ritual after the death of his father, though he was born in America. He resolves to do what his parents always wished him to do –marry a Bengali girl.

Ashima suggests Gogol to contact the daughter of one of her friends. Her name is Moushumi whom Gogol knows from his childhood. For the sake of his mother, Gogol marries her. But one day, unfortunately, he finds out that Moushumi has an affair with another man and he divorces her. He realizes that he is Bengali, It does not mean that he is going to find happiness in just a Bengali girl and he can marry anyone.

At the end of the novel, Ashima disposes the family home so that she can live in India with her children for half of the year. Sonia, sister of Gogol, is ready to marry an American named Ben. Gogol once again feels alienated. But Gogol feels happy when he recollects what his father told him as to why he had chosen that name for him. It is found that Gogol is comforted with the decision of his father and accepts his name and picks up a collection of the Russian author's stories that his father had given him as a birthday gift many years ago.

Gogol comprises with the conflict of double name. Lahiri paints a new dimension to this conflict by drawing the twin concept that Gogol attains with his double name. "There is a reason Gogol doesn't want to go to kindergarten.... instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name...Nikhil, is artfully connected to the old... it bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol.... who doesn't know him... his father says, To me and your mother you will never be anyone but Gogol."(56-57). He thought that no one can split his name either in India or Russia or America. He isolated from his self, living in two worlds concurrently. Gogol is related to his family and India whereas Nikhil is an American. Thus he lives in two cultures and he is torn between two countries, India and America. Racially he is an alien, a second class citizen in America and he crosses over from one culture to another. Thus he is a mixture of eastern and western cultures and tries to assimilate the social value of two

communities. He endeavors to maintain his affinities within native land as well as with alien land.

All these Diasporic elements are mirrored by Lahiri in this novel. One of the critics, Poornima views that “the salvation in the Diaspora’s disquiet journey in an alien land lies in adopting the assimilationist approach, in unearthing the realities of American way of life while maintaining bonds with his home-land to replenish his emotional bankruptcy that has come to be his lot. The expatriates and immigrants have encountered the Diasporic enclosure such as the cultural isolation, the loss of identity, the clash between the East and West, love-hate relationship that subsist between the two societies of homeland and foreign land. Lahiri deals all these Diasporic characteristics with deep insight in her novel, *The Namesake*.

After his miraculous escape from the accident, Ashoke leaves for America to pursue his engineering studies and he feels that he was twice in India and a thire time in America and thanked Gogol, the Russian author whose book is instrumental in saving his life. Lahiri attempts to present Indian migrants who try to integrate with the circumstances and her characters try to adjust and accommodate their life predicament in an altered situation of America which offers plenty of prospects. It is clearly evidences in his transformation. At the end of the novel, after disposing her family home, Ashima frequently journeys between American and Calcutta. Gogol realizes the reality of his father’s precious gift, a collection of short stories of Russian author, Gogol reconciles with his name and heritage which he had earlier refused to concede.

Thus we find that Jhumpa Lahiri either consciously or unconsciously reflected Diasporic characteristics in her novel, *The Namesake*. She sensitively portrays the trials and tribulations of immigrants in the novel *The Namesake*. She uses very simple, yet very impressive language. She presents the conflict of evolving in the midst of a new hybrid culture, an Indo-American sensibility. This new age sensibility gives them a distinct identity in society. Undoubtedly, she succeeds in depicting identity crisis of immigrants in a simple but very mature style.

Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss* has actually highlighted the plight of the unorganized domestic workers of India, by portraying the character of the cook. According to the ILO’s recent *Advocacy Brief on Decent work for Domestic Workers*, the total number of domestic workers in Asia and Pacific, though hard to estimate, is believed to account for as much as 10 per cent in some developing countries. In India, domestic work is a vast area of employment, but there is no precise sense of its exact size and content. The estimated number of domestic workers in India is 90 million this is probably an underestimate because there has been no scientific study to document such workers in the country. Panna Lal is treated badly by the judge only because he is an economically marginalized person. So his devotion to his master goes unnoticed and unrewarded. At par with the general mentality of the rich towards the poor, the self-conceited judge is not ready to understand the cook’s poverty and helplessness.

It would be too incredible to anticipate a culture, inundated with predicament of its own distinctiveness, to cast away its history and emerge unchained from the accoutrements of the past. *The Inheritance of Loss* is a narrative of marginalized individuals, where people like the Cook, by and large, represents all those less educated powerless men, who work like donkey all

their life, because they accept it as their destiny. But what Desai tries to portray through the characters of the vulnerable Cook and other marginalized human beings are some basic human emotions, which perforate through the murkiness of the darkness like the first emission of the sun. The Cook's behaviour is apparently puzzling, but the reason for his, almost suicidal actions lie in his mental praxis. It is actually, PannaLal's tryst with destiny which prompts him for self-negation and self-abasement.

Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* presents a vivid description of immigrant lives in an alien land, and reveals deep into the psychology of its characters. It examines the encounter of east and west and talks about the vanity, the perplexity and dilemma of immigrant Indians of their existence in England. The novel highlights the susceptibility and vulnerability of Indian minds to English culture and hence to rich England, that enchanted them by its magical grace and tranquility; enthralled them by its abundance and sophistication. But at the same time, it also entangles, enslaves and disdains them with its authority, empire and disapproval for being 'colored' Indians. 'Blackbird' is the term given by the author to the immigrant Indians thus exposing the social disparity and discrimination prevailing in England.

Adit's character deals with the identity crisis in the novel. Though he projects himself much at home in England something draws Adit back to India. He is tormented between his longing for his homeland, India, and his love and fascination for England. In the beginning he wanted to dazzle everyone with his oriental wit and fluency. He is much attracted to the England life style and tries to imitate the England people. It is the sense of self-description, as he tries to consider himself as an Englishman. It is obvious when he tells Dev "Come on, yar, be a man, an Englishman." Adit's love for England is shown through "O England's green and grisly land, I love you as only a babu can". Although he is ill-treated and insulted as an Indian immigrant, he still loves England and admires all the English ways of life. It is apparent when he declares "well, I always say English cooking is wonderful."

Even after spending many a years in a foreign land, the immigrants still are known as expatriates; and their past keeps haunting them. Many of them keep wandering aimlessly along the margin of the two countries and the past becomes unrecognizable. At this juncture the immigrant faces the crisis of identity and unbelonging. Very often the immigrant tries to negotiate a new space for him but experience a sense of dislocation. The immigrant's inability to adapt to the new world, takes its toll on him at the mental, psychological and spiritual spheres. At this point, they begin to search for their roots and this process leads towards the relocation of their identities. This is when the self analysis sets in. All the characters of the novel make self discovery and very often find themselves alienated.

Nostalgia is another aspect which plays havoc with the immigrant's identity. His desire for the past makes it difficult for him to relocate himself in the adopted country. This is the focus of Anita Desai in this novel—the quest for self and survival of self. The diasporic characters are caught up in the conflict between two countries and its codes. This living between two cultures creates a need and desire to fashion new identities.

Bharathi Mukherjee's *Jasmine* depicts the American society where people and their relationships are always in motion. Jasmine may be epitomized as a rebel, an adopter and also a survivor. Her confidence is revealed in this statement. "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remark one self. We murder who we were so we can rebirth our selves-in the image of dreams."(29)

Jasmine has the courage to transform her dreams into reality. Which not only boosts the immense confidence of woman but it also serves as an energy for woman who wish to be liberated from the shackles of age, 'old dogmas.' We assume the shifting images of Jasmine as the life of a woman engaged in quest of values she confides in. Bharathi Mukherjee celebrates these values as she drifts from one identity to another. In other words she celebrates the images of her multiple identities in this novel *Jasmine*. Jothy becomes Jasmine, Jazy, Jase, and Jane. In this way, Bharathi Mukherjee recounts the lives of the illegal aliens, who's brave face the worst humiliations and sufferings in a new world. Through her character, the novelist underlines the propensity to spiritual metamorphosis as a precondition to cultural assimilation with each new address. Whenever she acquires a new man she earns a new name. Jasmine symbolizes love and epitomizes courage and Jane stands for cunning. Bharathi Mukherjee created an innocent child like character Jyoti who transformed later into Jasmine with an element of love for her husband, Prakash. Jasmine becomes an illegal immigrant and journey to America. It reveals the courage of Jasmine. She marries Du and becomes an American which exhibits her cunning and selfish nature of the character besides craziness for American culture. Her marriage with Du evidences that she imbibes the spirit of American Culture. Thus she transforms from Indian image of women to American new image of woman. The juxtaposition of the twin themes of assimilation and resistance explain the peculiar rhythmic fluctuation between acceptance and rejection, inclusion and exclusion, happiness and suffering that is characteristic of Diaspora thematic structures. Jasmine is transformed by fulfilling her dream with her immigrant experience, while Maya, protagonist in *The Tenant* fails to sustain a meaningful relationship with her male counterpart she comes across. Unable to reconcile herself to the new culture. Maya is taken back to her roots.

CONCLUSION:

Religion and transporting religion as a concept and form have connotations that need a deeper inquiry than a simplistic understanding of history or cultural description. Cultural migration has a trajectory of historical cultural development within the framework of migration. The process of migration irrespective of the fact that it was voluntary or inflicted can be understood as an experience where nationhood/ citizenship changes and thus change dimensions in the post industrial and travel economy motivated society. The rationale of such an argument is to obviously attempt to locate itself within broader codes and structures like industrialization, colonialism and citizenship. The process of Cultural Migration then becomes a site where these codes can be read and described. The act of rehabilitation then becomes historical evidence speaking for the utilitarian benefits of these concepts and ideas.

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