



PLACE, DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY: INDIAN DIASPORIC FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Place and displacement are always featured in Indian diasporic writings. This feature opens up a broader concept where post-colonial crisis of individuality comes into reality. When a novel carries elements of place and displacement, the theme of identity is always reflected, this originates from a sense of displacement. The sense of displacement may have derived from migration, enslavement or even alterity which may be put forward by similarities or differences between different cultures. This concept has been heavily reflected in Indian diasporic fiction. The present paper explores the theme of identity and diasporic writers' negotiation with space.

KEYWORDS:

Displacement, Space, Identity crisis, migration.

Introduction:

Globalization and postcoloniality are significant terms in social and cultural theory. Since the 1980s, these two terms have functioned as two of the dominant paradigms for explaining the transformation of political and economic relationships in a world that has become more and more interdependent with the passing of time, with boundaries that once defined national cultures becoming indistinct. It is difficult to imagine an area of literary studies, from medievalism to postmodernism, that is not affected by debates on postcolonial theory and postcoloniality.

In this respect, this paper intends to explore the impact of migration on post colonial literature and it seeks to understand transnational turn in post colonial literature in the context of globalization. The paper strives to examine the way in which the people experience transformation as they crisscross the national borders, both physically and metaphorically, in the meantime negotiating multiple identities.

The visible impact of globalization can be found in the metropolises across the world which have suddenly become cosmopolitan and multicultural. This is 'neocolonialism' making itself felt not through violent political strategies, but by slowly and quietly confiscating the market as well as culture. The one major difference is that unlike colonialism, this process is decentred. "It is in this context of globalized cultural regimes of new forms of domination and exploitation of multiple displacements and cultural alignments that new approaches to culture and literature and new forms of writing and cultural practices emerge". (Pramod Nayar, p.164.)

It is suggested that the relationship between globalization and postcolonialism functions in two directions: Globalization cannot be understood without understanding the structure of global power relations that flourished in the twenty first century as an economic, cultural and political legacy of Western imperialism. But postcolonial theory, especially of textual and cultural practices can provide very clear models for understanding how local communities achieve agency under the pressure of global hegemony. Postcolonial theory is very useful in its analysis of the strategies by which the local colonized engage large hegemonic forces. (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, p.6)

These attempts to define "globalization" over the past few years have conveyed only different aspects of the phenomenon. An exhaustive definition is not possible. All these tenets are useful for a discussion of globalization's relationship to postcolonialism.

As Simon Gikandi has asserted, in 1990s it was postcolonialism that brought a range of terms such as transculturation, Third space, hybridity, and some others into the realm of cultural globalization. Accordingly, there are many interdisciplinary keywords that provide the meeting points in the relationship between globalization and postcolonialism. (Simon Gikandi, p.634)

Globalization provides a context for studying literary texts and the cultures from which they have emerged in ways that acknowledge their relationship to complex systems of transnational and intercultural exchange, appropriation, and transformation. Globalization studies can be productively linked to postcolonial studies in ways that particularly facilitate the study of literatures grounded in diaspora communities linked to the phenomena of exile, displacement, and migration. The expansion of diasporic literatures in English accentuates the sense in which contemporary writing is produced not just in a postcolonial context defined narrowly, but in a postnational, global flow of deterritorialized cultural products appropriated, translated, and recirculated world-wide. (Paul Jay.)

The contemporary texts like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* are grounded in the history of colonization, decolonization, and postcolonialism, struggle more specifically with the emergence of a global economy and with the transnational flow of cultural commodities and hybrid identities. Globalization studies offers a useful framework for studying the emergence of global literatures like the ones represented by these texts, but only if we understand that the history of globalization is inextricably connected to the history of postcolonialism. (Paul Jay.)

Literature of Post- colonial times reflected the increased flow of people from one country to the other – mostly to the land of colonizer and dealt with consequent issues like migrancy, hybridity, loss of identity, multiculturalism and disappearance of rigid national identities. Globalization hastened this process and resulted in the merging of cultural practices and increased marketing of culture.

Due to globalization, the migrants have had to confront a number of issues and these are portrayed in the diasporic literatures. Literature as a product of culture becomes the source by which we understand and interpret the global multiculturalism. The diasporic writers are now writing about the cross-fertilization of cultures in terms of subject matter, linguistic experimentation and heteroglossia. There is involvement in the issues relating to race, homelessness and nostalgia. subaltern and minority issues are taken up. The diasporic writers of today are questioning, protesting and asserting. Contemporary diasporic literature is not monolithic or uni-centric but a mixture of many world orders.

Dislocation of culture, of place, of self, have long been associated with postcolonialism and diaspora, and these are dislocations which have now been exacerbated in the late 20th and early 21st centuries by the rapid onset of transnationalism and globalization.

Indian Diasporic Fiction:

The term Diaspora literally means 'scattering' or 'dispersion.' Derived from Greek word 'dia' (over,through) and 'speiro' (to sow, to scatter) (Cohen, 1997; Bhat and Sahoo, 2003), the word 'Diaspora' was

originally used to refer to the dispersal of the Jews to the lands outside Palestine after the Babylonian captivity. Since the late twentieth century, the notion of Diaspora has been used to describe any ethnic population that resides in the countries other than their own historical homelands.

The term Diaspora has been approached in various ways. Cohen (1997) proposes a typology in which he classifies diasporas as: victim diasporas, labor and imperial diasporas, trade diasporas, cultural diasporas, and global-de-territorialized diasporas.

Some scholars conceive Diaspora as an identified group characterized by specific social relationships despite their dispersal. Sheffer (1986), for instance, defines modern Diasporas as "ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin—their homelands" (p. 3). The dispersed people are those who preserve their distinct identities from those of the countries of settlement. With radical developments in technology and communication over the last decade, new approaches have emerged in the study of diasporic communities. Diaspora from this point of view is defined as a phenomenon of globalization. It is used to refer to socio-economic and political networks of ethnic groups of people which internationally connect diasporas to their homeland as well as to other members of the same ethnic groups living elsewhere. These networks also provide the possibility of participation in production and reproduction of a kind of transnational culture. (Appadurai, 1996).

The boom in information technology has bridged the gap between diasporas (Patel

2000) and the current period of globalization has enhanced the practical, economic and the affective role of diasporas (Cohen 1995). Diasporas can be studied as social form, as a type of consciousness and as a mode of cultural production (Vertovec 1999). Diaspora as a mode of cultural production involves the production and reproduction of transnational social and cultural phenomena and covers the discussion of globalization Displacement as one of the major elements of diasporic fiction:

Different responses to migration, as an attendant phenomenon of globalization, are articulated in literature produced in places where diasporic communities exist. The interaction between the 'host' and 'immigrant' cultures raises new questions of identity politics and other issues involved. Questions of identity politics arise out of migration, diaspora and exile. Identity politics driven by migration, diaspora and exile have in turn mapped literary imagination and produced literary writings of distinct characteristics.

Indian Diasporic Fiction:

The Indian Diaspora today is one of the largest diasporas in the world. The old diaspora was made up of subaltern and unprivileged class which being mostly illiterate, hardly produced any literature. Theirs was an oral culture.

Writers of Indian diaspora today portray the cultural dilemmas, the generational differences, and transformation of their identities during displacement. Their 'living in-between' condition is very painful and they stand bewildered and confused. They are deeply attached to their centrifugal homeland and they caught physically between two worlds and this double marginalization negates their belonging to either location.

Some of the famous Indian diaspora writers like Bharathi Mukerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Uma Parameswaran, V.S. Naipaul express their longing for their old country while at the same time portray an objective picture of Indian society. Though having migrated to different countries in search of better economic prospects, they still consider 'India' as 'Home' a safe place, where there is no need to justify themselves to others. But, as members of diaspora they have to redefine their own identity in the hostile environment. They are caught between two cultures and one can experience the conflict between the Indian ethos and the forces of marginal existence in the adoptive country.

Though the sense of displacement may be an essential condition of diaspora literature, it is not experienced precisely with the same intensity by all; it differs according to time and place of migration.

Generally speaking, diasporic literature is concerned with two relationships: one with the motherland which gives rise to nostalgia, memories and reminiscences, and the other, the new relationship with the adopted country and its people which gives rise to conflicts and split personalities. Thus one reads about alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, exile, cultural conflicts and at times of a sense of rejection by the host country in the works of these writers. The cultural baggage that they carry is characteristic of the region that they come from and their descriptions of their homeland differ in every way. What is distinctive about the Indian diaspora is that the Indians settled abroad do not share a common religion, language, cuisine, dress etc. This diversity is reflected in their literature. Many writers who have left their homelands describe their immigrant experiences, predicament of displacement, questioning or celebrating their encounter with the new alien countries.

Due to globalization, the migrants have had to confront a number of issues and these are portrayed in the diasporic literatures. Literature as a product of culture becomes the source by which we understand and interpret the global multiculturalism. The diasporic writers are now writing about the cross-fertilization of cultures in terms of subject matter, linguistic experimentation and heteroglossia. There is involvement in the issues relating to race, homelessness and nostalgia. subaltern and minority issues are taken up. The diasporic writers of today are questioning, protesting and asserting. Contemporary diasporic literature is not monolithic or uni-centric but a mixture of many world orders.

The diasporic fiction tell us about the hardships the immigrants encountered before they adapted themselves to the alien traditions and culture, with the memories of their homeland still unforgotten. Social identity depends on the sense of displacement, loss of home, nostalgia, tradition, culture, religion, ethnicity etc.

Most of the immigrants write to cherish the past, to overcome the fear of loss and consequently to preserve their ethnicity for the coming generations. The feelings of the migrants who are staying away from their motherland but still clinging on to the past culture and traditions are often expressed by the diasporic writers. In this sense the opinion of the writers of diaspora is an invaluable source of information to comprehend the diverse complexities of the migrants. There is a need to realize and expose the cultural- encounter, bi-cultural pulls existing among the individuals in the alien nation. Many writers have successfully portrayed the theme of diasporic elements through their literary works. A few among such writers are Bharathi Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh.

Although there are certain common resonances in the writings based on the experiences of writers of the 'new' Indian diaspora, the responses and the narratives of the individual writers vary significantly. Writers like Ali, Bharati Mukherjee, M.G. Vassanji, Meena Alexander, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Satendra Nandan, V.S. Naipaul, differ from each other not only in their socio-cultural backgrounds but also in their thematic preoccupations and literary styles. Further, the responses of the diasporic writers to India are also varied and not always adulatory; they range from sentimentality and nostalgia to a cynical celebration of their coming of age. Despite the variations, a thread of certain common themes runs through the diasporic writing. Nostalgia, longing and desire for home have become the central concern of the diasporic writers. The sense of exile is discernible in all diasporic writing and it is the key component of diaspora. These themes bind all this writing into a single entity. The themes, the characters and the stories are thus a true reflection of the reality of globalization and immigrant life of the people in the alien country.

Conclusion:

Diasporic fiction is thus a useful resource to study the psychology of the migrants. It speaks of diasporic experiences that the diaspora undergoes resulting from geographical displacement, alien customs, problems of adjustment, longing for the homeland, the burden of

beliefs, myths and heritage. These writers have double obligations. They write about their homeland for the natives of the adopted country and also speak of their diasporic experiences to the readers of their homeland. Hence diasporic literature can well be studied from Socio-Cultural point of view.

The Diaspora fiction from the west thus assumes greater importance in the context of globalization. The major English writers of nearly all underdeveloped nations reside in the west. It is a case of the metropolis extracting not just culture, but even the producers of culture. Many Indian English novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth etc. reside in the west. Even those who live in India like Sasi Tharoor and Arun Joshi are products of different cultures, residing in one, educated in another, moving from one country to another, partaking of different cultures, presenting what Will Kymlicka calls a "multicultural citizenship" in a globalized world.(qtd by Nayar) These writers are cosmopolitan in outlook and even celebrate in their writings the fluid condition of the hybrid possessing multiple identities and transcending national barriers.

Diaspora fiction has made a significant contribution to Indian-English literature by its rich exposure to multi-culturalism. A large number of diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge and have brought credit to the Indian English fiction as a distinctive force. The writings of the Indian Diaspora have received a great deal of attention and critical acclaim. Writers such as Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri have been recipients of international literary awards.

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