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Diaporic sensibilities: The Poetry of AK Ramanujan, Meena Alexander and Agha Shahid Ali

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Abstract: The present research paper is an attempt to discuss understand the diasporic predicament of the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan, Meena Alexander, and Agha Shahid Ali in terms of their diasporic predicament.

keywords: Diaspora, Girit, Expatriate Experience

Diaspora as an idea is of relatively recent origin though as a human experience it goes a long way. Its use as a tool of critical analysis began with the dismantling of the hegemonic political structures and their cultural discourses specially in the post structuralist period. With the new privileging of the literatures of the margins and minority discourses, the period has witnessed a radical shift from the essentially Eurocentric literary canons. Ethnic and religious minorities and other marginalised have come to the centre stage of literary theorizing. Diasporic Indians constitute a major minority group at the global level. The poets chosen who embody the tenets of diaspora are the three Indian expatriate poets who migrated to USA in the post independence period, thus they constitute a category within a category and must be distinguished from the 'girit' diaspora of the later nineteenth century despite the fact that their responses to their diasporic condition have certain common conceptual and rhetorical features.

The article tries to understand the history of the Indian diaspora and briefly examines the various theatrical formulations that have come forth in recent years. The paper proceeds with a reference to the transcoding of the term 'diaspora' from its original use to describe the Jewish experience of persecution and immigration from Palestine and its subsequent application to investigate the literary production of various ethnic and religious minorities outside their original homelands. The research piece also gives a brief account of the dispersal of Indians to far away places during the heyday of European imperialism in the nineteenth century. The first dispersal is known by the term "girit", referring to the agreement which the indentured immigrants were forced to sign at the behest of their colonial masters. In contrast to the 'girit' diaspora is the new Indian diaspora comprising mostly middle-class professionals who migrated to Europe and America in the post colonial period. They have become exiles by choice rather than by force. In the popular parlance they are known as NRIs (non-resident Indians). Their long stay in the west has made them rootless and they share with the indenture diaspora a longing for home despite the fact that unlike their older diasporic counterparts they make frequent trips to India and in a

majority of cases maintain 'homes' in the original country. The poets discussed in the research paper are members of the new Indian diaspora. These members constitute the different tropes of diaspora and largely represent the diasporic sensibilities.

AK Ramanujan's poems in the first two volumes *The Striders and Relations*. The majority of these poems are satirical in tone, and it appears that the poet is figuratively celebrating his emancipation from meaningless rituals and traditions. But this heavily negativist and reductionist attitude towards India does not mean that the poet has abandoned his roots and accepted his new home. In fact, it is his excessive preoccupation with India and his desire to identify the essential India beneath the trappings of modernization and westernization, which act as springboards of these poems. He redefines originality as a return to origins but not in any narrow, parochial or revivalist sense. The India that he is trying to relate with is not merely a geographical or political construct but a vision of life which is pluralist and inclusive, which takes account of the historical changes over the millennia, but which also has preserved its assimilative accommodative and cultural and spiritual vision.

"English and my disciplines (linguistics and anthropology) give me my 'outer' forms-linguistic, metrical, logical and other such ways of shaping experience, and my first thirty years in India, and my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional preoccupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give me my 'inner forms, images and symbols. They are continuous with each other and I can no longer tell what comes from where."

As one moves to the poems of *Second Sight* and *The Black Hen* one notices a new substance entering the poetic imagination of Ramanujan, a substance derived from Upanishads and the devotional poetry of the saint poets of Tamil and Kannada. At the rhetorical level, too, the predominantly imagistic style of the first two volumes gives way to a more expansive, more descriptive but highly symbolic poetic style. The skeptical, a historical modernist imagination enters a new phase in which it becomes more meditative and also more affirmative. Alienation and ambivalence are gradually diluted if not entirely replaced by rootedness and arrival.

Another very significant voice of the Indian diasporic writing in America is Meena Alexander. She has described herself as a woman cracked by multiple migrations, making her a fault line between past and present.

"I think there is always a confusion that is attached to a separation from home, whatever home is, and for me I think the landscape of Kerala and this house provided that home emotionally. So that on the one hand I think I tried to look at the shift and the multiplicity and the constant change of the world, as I have been travelling from one place to another, as something that gives me access. At the same time, there is this need always to return, sometimes to a place that is constructed in the mind, I mean the shelter.

Shelters are actual but also become part of what mind makes up, almost imaginary homelands, if you wish”

Meena ,in her verse and prose writings she has created her own characteristic version of diaspora. Her poetic vision spans Africa, Europe and America but her roots lie in India. Being a woman, she looks upon herself as an exile in a patriarchal society and when she searches for ancestral figures, her mind goes back to her grandfather and even further back to her grandmother and even further back to Meerabai, the sixteenth century saint- poet of Rajasthan. She is essentially a poet of multiple selves, which she tries to objectify in her poetry. The poems from “House of a Thousand Doors” (1988) which mixes her recent poems and prose pieces with poems published in “I Root My Name” (1977) and “Stone Roots” (1980). These poems deal with the familiar diasporic themes of root, home and identity. memory, nostalgia, and desire mark her poems. Though she lived in America for a fairly long time, she regarded herself as an Indian poet, because home for her is a place where her spirit can inhabit, and rest and that place is India. Her poems offer many evocative pictures of family and relationships. She has brought a new power and poignancy to her delineation of the themes of belonging and unbelonging, rootedness and dispersal and cultural location and diasporic dislocation.

Agha Shahid Ali is the third poet who defines the diasporic sensibilities He shares many similarities with A.K.Ramanujan and Meena Alexander. Like them he is an academic and scholar and has a firsthand knowledge of the Anglo-American literary tradition. Like them his poetry also thematizes loss and recovery, migration and return, cosmopolitanism and a profound sense of home and rootedness.

“My poetry has all along revealed a triple heritage (through certain historical permutations of course) of which I have only in the past few years become truly conscious: Hindu, Muslim, and Western. This triple heritage has given me and other Indo-English writers a privileged position of this specific post-colonial moment in history, the ability and confidence to breathe something rich and strange into English (for example, I hope readers can detect the music of Urdu in my work), the arrogance, if you will, to reinvent the language and to do so on our own terms.”

Product of multiple migration in India as well as abroad, Agha Shahid Ali went to school first to Shelley and then to T.S. Eliot but neither could adequately equip the young acolyte to face history’s arrogance. Consequently, he returned to the Urdu poetic tradition whose high points are represented by Ghalib, Meer and Faiz Ahmad Faiz. An avid translator like Ramanujan, Shahid Ali has introduced the western reader to the revolutionary idealism of Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Again, like Ramanujan Ali does not idealise past and denounces religious orthodoxy and cultural parochialism but his sense of loss is much deeper than that of either Ramanujan or Meena Alexander. He looks back longingly to the pre partition composite culture of the region of Avadh in India. The poems in *The Beloved Witness* which is a compilation of Ali’s poems selected

from the five volumes of his poetry-Bone Sculpture (1972), In Memory Of Begum Akhtar (1979), The Half Inch Himalayas (1987), A Walk Through The Yellow Pages(1987), A Nostalgist's Map Of America(1991)

In the conclusion an effort has been made to put together the distinguishing features of the three poets and their significance in post-colonial, post –modernist cultural scenario.

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