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Diasporic Writing: A Perspective

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Diasporic writing occupies a significant position in the post-colonial literature in English. As more and more people migrate in search of better opportunities, they carry a bit of their culture and traditions with them. Also, with the former colonies gaining political freedom and some of the colonial powers emerging as multicultural and multiethnic, the distance between the centre and the peripheries has been reduced considerably though old prejudices and suspicions have not entirely disappeared. Innovations in literary theory in the last two or three decades have led to a fresh look on the relationship between the centre and the periphery. These innovations have interrogated the legitimacy of such a division based on hegemonic colonialist ideologies that saw the world only in terms of the binary of black and white. Such conceptual interrogations have helped the literatures of the colonised people to enter the hallowed premises of the Western academia in a big way. The writers of the Indian diaspora have greatly benefited from this paradigmatic shift and consequently their works have come into the centre stage during the last two decades or so. The growing interest in cultural studies in metropolitan universities has added a rehabilitation of this literature.

New impetus to the Diasporic writing, in its theory and practice, is the work of the exile and the expatriate who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the existential, political and metaphysical levels.

But neither dislocation nor absorption can be total or uniform in the diasporic context. There has to be an ongoing involvement with reality and thus the experiences of diaspora vary from writer to writer.

Transcended from its Jewish source, the concept of 'diaspora' has now become an umbrella term in post-colonial/post-modern literary discourses.

In recent years, the use of this term has been extended to refer to situations other than the experiences of the Jewish people outside the Jewish homeland. The application of the concept of diaspora, thus, offers a new paradigm to investigate Indian literary production outside India.

The phenomenon of diasporic movement is by no means new, but its scale in the twentieth century has become dramatic. Countries and cultures long-defined by region, place, and religion are undergoing rapid transformations in this period of globalization. The pace of border-crossings has risen to a new crescendo with migrants seeking to transfigure cultural territories

and recreate new representations of their selves, their pasts and their new milieu. Often, for the increasing numbers of middle-class professionals arriving in the West, immigration becomes a self-imposed exile driven by social, educational and economic aspirations. In the contemporary world of transnational cultural exchanges, movements of people between nations is no longer only a fact of exile in any strict sense. Identities and cultures get delocalized but these delocalizations do not snap the expatriates' emotional and psychic links with the 'home'. Even so, received identities and cultures undergo a crisis and a need is felt to redefine them. And since memory of the home becomes the central point of reference in this redefinition of identity, the diversity and eclectic nature of this memory becomes extremely important in the diasporic imagination. The world of the diaspora is thus never static or monolithic. As Gupta and Ferguson remark:

In a world of diaspora, transnational culture flows, and mass movements of populations, old fashioned attempts to map the globe as a set of culture regions or homelands are bewildered by a dazzling array of post-colonial simulacra...as India and Pakistan reappear in postcolonial simulation in London...and a thousand similar cultural dreams are played out in urban and rural settings all across the globe.¹

In view of such configurations of the diasporic cultural scenario, the sensibility of the diasporic writers is naturally challenged by a multiplicity of affiliations and they are compelled to assess the value of the 'root' and 'home' in the culture of the diaspora. "As expatriates", writes K.H. Katrak and R. Radhakrishnan, "they are 'deshis' and 'videshis' at the same time".² The cultural arena of the diaspora, thus, is a dynamic and changing terrain within which the expatriate both belongs and is an outsider. Configurations of diaspora are significantly mediated by the ever-shifting forces of history, politics, mass culture and ideology both within the West and within the writer's own birth-place. Expatriation, therefore, is a voluntary and terminable form of exile.

The supposed distinction between diaspora, exile, immigration and expatriation may be acceptable in analytical terminology, but they are rarely absolute in terms of experience.

These terms have large areas of overlap and a commonly shared sense of loss, dislocation and displacement.

Expatriation, which is crucial in diaspora, can be identified as an emotional and psychological state of being between two worlds without belonging entirely to either one or the other and also operating in a space permeated by continually shifting alter- nativities. There is need to realise the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural pulls and the creation of a new culture that finally emerges. Writers who have moved away from one centre to another periphery are caught between two cultures and are very often engaged either in a process of self-recovery through resort to memory and history or in a process of self-preservation through an act of transformation. Caught between two worlds, the diasporic writer negotiates a new imaginative space. Further, the geographical dislocation raises several questions with respect to the poetics of exile, the nature of expatriate writing, the writer's relationship to his culture and his work, the specifics which

govern identity construction and the concept of decentring. The shifting designation of 'home' and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the difficulty of going back are perennial issues in diasporic literature, which provide ample evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted; only the margins have expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space. The West continues to be the place of exhibition, recognition and judgement.

The bi-cultural predicament which is the inevitable consequence of occupying two cultural and geographical spaces is a condition of tension whose configuration manifests itself into patterns such as domicile vs diasporic consciousness, dislocation vs relocation, exile vs involvement and hybridity vs heritage. The impressive body of diasporic literature which has emerged in the recent times is the direct result of this tension which has acted as a catalyst of great creative energy. It is an interesting paradox that a great deal of Indian writing in English is being produced not in India but in the countries of the first world like the USA, Canada and Great Britain. The critical and conceptual possibilities of this paradox are immense and need to be studied.

For several writers the choice between living in India and living as an exile now appears to be a product of a time before low cost international travel, the internationalisation of the economy and increased opportunities to study, live and work abroad. In such situations, when writers may be part of a large and increasing diaspora, the issue of who is or is not an Indian poet is different from what was in the past, specially in the pre-Independence period when non-resident Indian writers were often looked upon with a sense of distrust in their relationship to and perception of Indian cultural traditions and values. The idealisation of the past was the essential feature of the nationalist Indian because in his fight against the colonial regime he had always to construct his identity in terms of the symbols of the past. No such necessity attaches to the new diasporic writers because as an exile he/she transforms his/her uprootedness by creating imaginary homelands which indeed have the elements of the past but the writer is aware of irretrievability of that past in actual existential terms. Freed thus from insularity and chauvinism he/she turns the loss and dislocation into a more encompassing vision.

There are now many generations of poets who travel most often to and from India, poets who were born of Indian parents abroad, or had an important part of their childhood and education abroad, or who seem always on the move. Many teach in foreign universities or are married to non-Indians and live outside India. A.K. Ramanujan has spent his entire active life in teaching in the United States. Several Indian poets are also parts of the new multiculturalism of the USA, England, Canada and Australia. An international literary market has also emerged with the result that some Indian poets are better known abroad than in India. As each poet's life and experience is different, there is no single pattern which can be made into a universal standard for studying them. Vikram Seth has been part of the literary and cultural scene in the United States but now lives in India. Agha Shahid Ali and Meena Alexander are parts of a diaspora, Indians who having spent part of their youth abroad, came back to India, then settled abroad,

but who also periodically return to India. Such diasporic lives have produced a different kind of poetry from that of an older generation. The contemporary literary scene will be incomplete without what the diasporic Indians have written or still writing.

The English poetry of Indian poets living in America constitutes an important part of the Indian diasporic writing which has been gaining critical attention specially in the aftermath of post-coloniality and post-modernity. The poets who came to America from India in the post-Independence period such as A.K. Ramanujan, G.S. Saratchandra, Agha Shahid Ali, Chitra Divakaruni, Meena Alexander and Vikram Seth are varied in contexts and forms but common to all of them is an intense belief in their own voices which express their specific diasporic experiences. Their effort is to recreate the life of the community native to them through the use of history, ritual, myth and memory. At the core of their diasporic writings is the haunting presence of India and the shared anguish of personal loss. The following statement of one of the Indian diasporic poets, Uma Parmeswaran, is revealing in this context:

India is always there, back of our minds; in the deep recesses of the unconscious. While like most hyphenated Indians world over, I too tend to romanticize this emotional bond with spiritual dimensions, in my more brutally cynical moments I wonder if the concept of Mother India apostrophized by nationalistic poets and leaders such as Tagore, Bankim Chandra, Gandhi and Subramania Bharti perhaps not only positively reflected the attitude of mother worship that is part of traditional India but also perpetuated it in a regressive way in the psyche of post-independence emigrants.³

It is clear from the above that the contemporary diasporic Indian writers are more critical and matter of fact and in spite of occasional romantic lapsings they maintain their mental poise. The nativist Indian, specially during the anti-colonial struggle had nothing to compare his nativism with. Moreover when nativism is being used as a weapon in the war against enslavement, there is neither time nor patience to examine and scrutinise one's heritage. The diasporic writer is under no such nationalist obligation. And further he is domiciled in a country with which he has to come to terms and which has its own specific customs, rituals and myths which offer the diasporic writer plenty of scope and opportunity to compare and contrast his native cultural experiences. The condition of diaspora confers upon him the gift of a 'double vision' to articulate his unique construction of consciousness. Thus what has been lost in the process of crossing the border is at least partly compensated and the gifted writer turns his necessity into virtue. The upheavals of re-locating and re-shaping their lives have prompted these poets to express in their works the dynamics of ethnicity, gender and class through their cross-cultural stances. While transfiguring their cultural boundaries, the poets of Indian diaspora in America bring a unique register of language and experience through their expanding consciousness. Since these poets left their homeland by choice or by necessity and created homes for themselves in America, the perspective of their works is a result of diaspora, and that is crucial to an understanding of such writing. Therefore, before coming to focus on the history of the formation of Indian diaspora and the related issues, it will be proper at this point to present the various concepts and the constructs of 'diaspora' in general and 'Indian diaspora' in particular.

II

'Diaspora' is an ancient word, which was given a decidedly modern flavour by its unanticipated usefulness to the nationalisms and subaltern imperialisms of the late nineteenth century. The term has provided a model which the modern cultural theorists and critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Arjun Appadurai, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Vijay Mishra and Paul Gilroy have eagerly adopted for developing a conceptual scheme to analyse inter-cultural and trans-cultural processes and forms. Like several other key concepts that have been used to perform parallel duty such as border, hybrid, creolization and even locality, diaspora has become a part of the new post-colonial vocabulary in which are included the varied connotations of space, distance travel and itinerancy. Concepts such as home, rootedness and fixity which were used in human science prior to the colonial period have now been almost displaced and decentred in a world which prides itself on demolishing and dismantling walls and barriers that obstructed the free flow of creativity.

'Diaspora' literally means the dispersal of the peoples and communities who settle in different countries away from their original homelands. Traditionally, this term has been used to describe the experiences of the Jewish people who were forced to flee from Palestine with the onset of Christianity and were scattered all over the globe. The Hebrew word for diaspora (galut) means 'exile' (i.e. from the Holy Land) and though it refers to the physical dispersal of the Jews throughout the world, it also carries religious, philosophical, political and eschatological connotations in as much as a special relationship is understood to exist between the land of Israel and the Jewish people.

The Jewish diaspora, thus, is the basic ethnic model from which the contemporary concept of diaspora has largely been derived though the new diaspora is so complex and constituted by so many different factors that the Jewish model has become grossly inadequate. Today's diasporas have practically no connection with religious persecution. In the post-modern, post-cold war global scenario, the old geographical boundaries are collapsing either on their own or being forced to collapse and thus the natives of yesterday have been pushed outside the border and have become refugees deprived of roots and homes. Otherwise too, demographics are in a state of flux. The reasons for this flux are political, ethnic, linguistic and only remotely religious. Vijay Mishra thus suggests a new concept of diaspora, which can take into account the new political and ethnic realities:

But what we must now do is to take away from that model its essentialist regressive and defiantly millenarian semantics and reread it through alternative models much more attuned to spatio-temporal issues and to its own discourses of disruption and discontinuity in the mosaic of history. In this argument the Jewish experience is a sign that is both history's conscience and its allegory of the democratic nation-state. We place under erasure a narrative that requires at every point, a theory of homeland as a centre that can either be reconstituted (as it actually happened with the creation of Israel) or imaginatively offered as the point of origin and replace it with a narrative of social interaction in the border zones of the nation-state. A people without a homeland is not an aberration, but prefigured cultural 'text' of late modernity. In other words, the

positive side of diaspora (as seen in the Jewish experience) is a democratic ethos of equality that does not privilege any particular ethnic community in a nation, its negative side. (which is a consequence of its millenarian ethos of return to a homeland) is virulent racism and endemic nativism.⁴

In contemporary usage, the term 'diaspora' has been extended to refer to situations other than the experiences of Jewish peoples outside the Jewish homeland. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have witnessed events that have resulted in several millions of expatriate peoples whose exodus from home was marked by varying degrees of violence, persecution, and hope. Many of today's diasporic groups (Africans, Chinese, Palestinians, Armenians, Jews, Indians, to name a few) have a long history of travel away from original homelands. Yet very often within mainstream literary studies, terms like 'exile' and 'homelessness' are read at a purely metaphoric level or as experiences afflicting the "lost generation". However, in recent years critical texts by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Salman Rushdie, and William Safran have brought the everyday realities of exile, immigration, refugee status, migrancy, community dispersal and dislocation to the notice of literary practitioners in English speaking world.

The majority of diaspora critics consider the movement or dispersal as a crucial element in the construction of diaspora. But critics like Paul Gilroy approach it differently. To him, diaspora does not only refer to the moment of dispersal but has deeper connotations. His idea of diaspora assumes a new meaning in the modern immigrant context. He writes:

It is not just a word of movements though purposive, urgent movement is integral to it. Under this sign, push factors are a dominant influence. They make diaspora more than a vogueish synonym for peregrination or nomadism. Life itself is at stake in the way the word suggests flight or coerced rather than freely chosen experiences of displacement. Slavery, pogroms, indenture, genocide, and other unnameable terrors have all figured in the constitution of diasporas and the reproduction of diaspora-consciousness, in which identity is focused less on common territory and more on memory, or more accurately, on the local dynamics of remembrance and commemoration.⁵

An important feature of deterritorialized groups such as immigrants is that they live in, to use Arjun Appadurai's term 'imagined worlds'. Nostalgia is the critical building material for the construction of such an imagined world, a new cultural space inhabited by the diasporic individuals. The idea of the dispersal of people and their eventual return to the homeland implied in "diaspora" is often sustained by nostalgia. The disjuncture between place and culture cannot be characterised either as a mere homogenisation of cultures or as a heterogeneous blooming of distinctive identities independent of one another. In Geertz's memorable phrase "like nostalgia, diversity is not what it used to be". Diasporic people summon up the past in highly selective manners and construct a present, which is a hybrid of multiple cultures and experiences. Consequently, neither nostalgia nor diversity remains un-problematically pure and simple. The 'homelands' diasporic people reconstruct tend to be fictive communities, part real and part imagined. In Imaginary Homelands, Salman Rushdie articulates the sense of loss felt by exiles

and expatriates and their urge to reclaim what was lost. In this process of reclamation, Rushdie writes:

Exiles or migrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.⁶

In a diasporic situation, what Rushdie calls the India of the mind becomes the writer's possession with which he might quarrel, might criticise, sometimes even might feel like throwing it off. But he never does so. Rushdie himself has confessed in this regard while answering questions about his new novel:

There is the thing which I can't let go, which is where I am from. It is where I was born and brought up, where my parents came from, it's my mother tongue, it's all kinds of things obviously and those kind of things don't change. They are part of what is given, they are part of how I see the world, why I am this kind of writer and not that kind of writers. Yes, so I think one should never say never, but at this moment I just feel that I have not even written out of that part of my experience which is not Indian....I thought the novel would leave India faster in fact and I got stuck. I got stuck for a number of reasons. One is I am writing about people who leave, and for whom the dream is not of Home but of Away. But I thought if I am going to do that I have to show the depth and the importance and the value of what's being left.⁷

This dichotomy between Home and Away is thus at the centre of the diasporic sensibility. The writer's responses to Home are never uniform but always complex and problematic. In any case, it remains a pervasive presence in the writer's mind. His imaginary 'return' to Home takes a variety of modes but it is always triggered off by the question of identity.

Identities and memories get transformed over time and therefore the constructions of reality are tinged by subjectivity. Thus the diasporic representations of the lost reality are never objective. The condition of homelessness which the deterritorialized emigrants experience once they land on their new 'home lands' immediately sets off the process of imaginative reconstruction of the original home through diverse ways myths, legends, rituals, religious and cultural tokens, even relatively recent historical and political events. Through these devices the expatriate tries to rehabilitate himself in the new environment. For the displaced persons, it is a movement and journey from the ex-colony to the post-colony where they express their nostalgia for the past in different forms. Gupta and Ferguson point out that the idea of such imagined community assumes a new significance and life in the diasporic context:

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