



EXPOUNDING THE HISTORY OF INDIAN DIASPORA

Dr. Vinod R. Shende

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Seth Kesarimal Porwal College of Arts and Science and Commerce, Kamptee, Dist- Nagpur (India)

Abstract: Indian Diaspora is the third largest and the most well spread out diasporas of the world. The contribution of diasporic writers to Indian Writing in English and other regional languages has been remarkable. This paper is trying to explore the Indian diaspora in a all chronological order, presenting an overview of various issues that are involved. The whole gamut of such writings cannot be contained, in a paper like this. This perhaps is only a bird's eye view of how Indian diaspora began and eventually got recognition all over the globe. In the present times global mobility and technology have changed the previous concepts and their rigid ideas of exile, identity etc related with diasporic writings. The sharp dividing lines seem to fade away or perhaps are merging into each other.

Keywords: Global, Indianness, diaspora, Indian writings, regional

INTRODUCTION

“Diaspora” is a suggestive framework for considering the displacements and connections of peoples within modern global processes of dislocation through war, colonialism, or labor immigrations. It contains the contradictions of the impulse toward cultural unity, on the one hand, and the ruptures of separation and nita dislocation, on the other hand. Shuval defines the concept as: “A diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, dreams, allegorical and virtual elements all of which play an important role in establishing a diaspora of reality. At a given moment ad, in time, the sense of connections to homeland must be strong enough to resist forgetting, assimilation or distancing.” (Shuval 43)

In the present globalizing world the term ‘Diaspora’ ignores the previous divisions of exile and expatriation. In recent researches. various newer categories of diasporas have been identified like 'victim diaspora' 'homeland diaspora', 'imperial diaspora', 'trade diaspora', 'cultural diaspora', etc. (Cohen 24). In another study by Appadurai, the concept of diaspora is located in 'hope', 'terror', and 'despair'. He futuristically views the world as, “In the short run, it is unlikely to be a world of increased incivility and violence. In the longer run, (it will be) free of constraints of the nation form, (with) cultural freedom and sustainable justice in the world, which do not presuppose the uniform general existence of the nation-state.” (Appadurai, 23)

Vijay Mishra and Gayatri Spivak both suggest that diasporas can be understood as falling under two broad categories, what they term as the old and the new: old diasporas are connected with histories of indenture and slavery, whereas the new can be understood as products of transnational cosmopolitanism. The elite and educated class of Indians, went to prospering economies of US and Australia, while the poor or middle working class were absorbed in the middle east countries, Africa etc. Even the so called "new diaspora communities had to strive hard to carve space for themselves and still retain their identity. To be able to understand the manifold complexities of the “shared space” of identity and trans- nationalism, Nicholos Van Hear in his book New Diasporas discusses the “making and unmaking of migrant communities”. (Hear 121) He identifies four novel features on this global issue: a) technological change b) loosening of constraints (political) c) resurgence of ethnic, religious and nationalist aspirations and tensions

and the last which he calls d) rights revolution. The shaping of national identity is a very well researched issue by sociologists and literatures alike.

If an historical overview of the Indian diaspora is taken, it is well documented that cultural and religious strictures restricted their mobility. The early migrants were the Buddhist preachers to Ceylon and various parts of Asia. Indian culture began to spread through migration to Java, Sumatra and Bali. The trading undertaken via Indian Ocean facilitated migration to Africa and Middle East in the 12th century. East Africa became populated with many Indians especially Gujratis. Under the Portuguese rule Gujrati diaspora flourished, which has been significantly recorded by M.K. Gandhi also. By early 18th century British settlements in Myanmar, Malaysia and Burma saw a rise in commercial migrants like Bengalis, Gujratis, Marwaris and Parsis. Indians were taken over as indentured labor to far-flung parts of the empire in the nineteenth-century, to work on Tea, Rubber and Sugar plantations way back in 1834. Under savage conditions and forced migration, shiploads of Indians were taken to Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Malaysia, South Africa, and Sri Lanka. The presence of Indians in these countries is due to forced migration.

Over two million Indian men fought on behalf of the empire in numerous wars, including the Boer War and the two World Wars. Some of them remained behind to claim the land on which they had fought as their own. The system of indenture came to a close in 1917, but not before 1.5 million Indians had sold themselves into debt- bondage. They lived in appalling conditions, in the "lines" formerly inhabited by the slaves. They are the great unsung heroes of the diaspora. Post-independence immigration is more in highly skilled occupations by choice, like the textile industry in the early 20th century saw many Sikh and Sindh migrants. In a study on Indians in Burma, Singh notes, "Since independence Indians have lost the social, economic and political clout they possessed during colonial period." (Singh 99) After the independence, Indian diasporic community has acquired a new identity through its acceptance by the West. Many writers feel that it is an international phenomena, because in more than 100 countries their presence has been recorded.

It is important to look into what makes Indian diaspora "Indian"? This quest raises number of issues of language, culture, assimilation, ethnicity etc. Tracing the common thread between Indo Caribbeans, Indo-Trinidadians, Malaysian Indians, Canadian Sikhs or those who migrated many times from East Africa to Britain or Canada is the bigger issue. India is not a monolithic cultural entity, the diversity in languages and traditions is what comprises of the Indianness in question. The Indian diaspora shares an essential psychology and historical unity. They might shed their regional and linguistic identity abroad, but the bigger identity continues. The assumption that pan Indian identity is homogenous is also not true as many studies show that it is complex and plural, depending on many factors. These dimensions overlap because of personal migration histories, assimilation of host cultures and levels of integration.

The history of diasporic Indian writing is perhaps as old as the West. Writing in English has been the most prominent among the Indian diaspora. Though regional literature written by migrants also has found a strong foot holds in many countries. Native writers, whom one refers to first generation writers, like Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao have the credit of establishing Indian English, were subjects to the British rule in India. They grew up reading Dickens, Woodhouse, Doyal and Hardy. They also depicted the state of exile from their first-hand experience, though they are not catagorised as diasporic writers. Most of the books written by these writers were published by Western publishers. Tagore's travelogues have the flavours of diaspora, while Anand born in Peshwar, left for London at the height of the freedom movement in 1930. While writing his thesis for PhD, he familiarized himself with the London literary scene, forming lasting friendship with George Orwell, T.S.Eliot, Stephen Spender, E.M. Forster and Virginia Wolf. He worked and wrote for many London based newspapers and journals. He wrote novels depicting social degradation of the deprived in India. His trilogy *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) present atrocities of the colonizers from a diasporic lens.

Raja Rao became an expatriate even before the independence of the country. He migrated to the USA and taught philosophy in the University of Texas. Though his mother tongue was Kannada, he studied extensively in France and wrote in English. Many of Indian origin writers settled in the USA and taught in their Universities, like Raja Rao himself taught philosophy in the University of Texas. R.K. Narayan, though wrote about Indian scenario, was well travelled and was greatly appreciated in the US and UK. All his early novels were published abroad and reflected upon the diasporic aesthetics and is often compared to

western counterparts. R. Parthasarthy, the renowned poet also settled in US and taught in New York. He wrote a forceful essay “Whoring After English Gods”, which aptly describes the English speaking minority of the 70’s and 80’s as “tongue in English chains” (64).

As the Indo Anglian changed to Indian writing in English, many writers, poets and critics of the Indian origin scaled academic heights. These educated travellers were both culturally alienated and also culturally rooted and have used English for almost for two centuries now. Many critical and historical studies published in last fifty years, give a better understanding of this genre. Natrajan rightly says that the nature of contemporary diasporic experiences is much more complex and ambivalent, than earlier writes in this category (Natarajan 121). Many writers who have achieved international fame and have also been part of literary academia are Zulfikar Ghose, Padma Hejmadi, Bharati Mukherjee, Suketu Mehta, Mena Alexander, Shankar Menon Marath, Kamala Markhandeya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghose, Prafulla Mohanti, Rustom Cowasjee, Dom Moraes, Farrukh Dhondy, V.S. and Shiva Naipaul, Adil Jussawalla, and Amit Chaudhury are only some of them. These international “Indian English writers live close to their market, in the comforts of the suburbia of advanced capital but draw their raw material from the inexhaustible imaginative resources of that messy and disorderly subcontinent that is India” (Paranjpe, 252). They easily identify themselves with their western counterpart, but the first generation writers like Tagore had a different take on western acceptance.

India has 22 scheduled languages, 122 regional languages, 4 classical languages (Sanskrit, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu) and innumerable dialects. This unique linguistic and literary history shares a common heritage, now commonly known as “greater India”. Many vibrant writings in regional languages are flourishing abroad. Many efforts to preserve these writings, through translation and publication are being made by ILAC (Ministry of Culture), ICCR and Sahitya Academy, to name some prominent agencies. The focus seems to be shifting from the centre to periphery. The shift to unique texts from lesser known places, different story telling methods, beyond metros is being greatly appreciated. Lot of literature has been written in Hindi, especially in the genre like fiction and poetry. Some of the prominent writers are Abhimanyu Unnuth of Mauritius (Lal Pasina) Subramani of Fiji (Dauka Puraan, Marigolds) Dr L.M. Singhvi, Narendra Kohli, Sitiesh Alok, Manohar Puri, Rajesh Chetan are all members of UK Hindi Samiti and Divya Mathur who is a renowned poetess and short story writer settled in UK. Swadesh Rana, Dr Vishakha Thakkar, Rajshree, Anshu Johari, Ila Prasad, Usha Priyamvada and Dr. Susham Bedi are only some prominent names who write in both Hindi and English and are based in USA. They often write for Journals published in India. Many of their publications have also received many National and International awards.

Other regional languages which have shared the diasporic space and have found international readership are Tamil, Gujrati, Punjabi, Bengali and Telgu. P. Shaileja has traced many writers in these languages in her well researched paper. Canada has been home for many Punjabi and Gujarati writings, whereas Malaysia and Singapore have produced Tamil writings. North America has produced significant Telugu writers. Many popular writers like Chittenraju, K.V.S.Rama Rao, Kanneganti Chandra, Cherukuri Rama Devi, Satyam Mandapati, Vemuri Venkateshwara Rao, Kalasapudi Srinivasa Rao have been consistently producing for the past 30 years from their diasporic space. Writings in Punjabi and Gujarati have been very common since the initial migration of Indians to Canada at the turn of the century. In Punjabi, Kashmir Singh Chaman, Santosh Chinna, Darshan Gill, Gurucharan Ramapuri, Iqbal Ramuwali, Amarjit Chahal, Tarlochan Singh Gill, Singh Kesara, are some of the writers who have been known for their writings. The Punjabis also have a number of local newspapers for the Punjabis of Indo-Canadian origin. Among them, Hindustani and Sansar are very popular ones. In Gujarati, Ramunik Shah, Ashwin Vaidya are very significant names in such a group of writers. Manobendra Mukhopadhyay is an important name in Bengali. Writing in Urdu began in the 1960s and continues to enjoy a substantial readership. Although writings in Sanskrit could not get such popularity as Punjabi or Gujarati or Urdu, but their initiative dance dramas had really made a landmark in the writings of Indo-Canadians. Pancha Kanya Tarangi, Veer Kanya Vahini, Kinkini Mala, and Dima Panchakam are very popular Sanskrit dance dramas based on Buddhist themes that reveal the traditions and cultures of India in a different shade.

There are a large number of Indian immigrants who do not use English fluently, while many can express themselves in more than two languages. They promote their regional language and literature not only through books and journals but also music. Regional diasporic literature seems to finding its voice, especially Hindi, because in the recent past large number of publications have gained immense popularity

and readership in the West by diasporic community. Many Universities in US, Australia, Canada and Britain have departments to teach Hindi.

Conclusion

Gradually the dividing line between diasporic writing / writer to that of a native one is gradually fading away. Traveling is becoming a common phenomenon with all types of high tech facilities and electronic media. Eventually it is only the essential characteristics, which differentiates a piece of writing. The communities or communities of individual, living outside the homeland are termed so. Various issues of identity, homeland, solidarity, citizenship and their genesis, mould their sensibility and are being noticeably changed. It is important that these writers should be understood on the conditions of subjectivity and not just analysis. Citizenship negotiates institutional and legal relationship. Literature on the other hand, has many functions like voicing the discourse of citizenship, nation narration and form new social structures. Concepts of global citizenship, hybrid identity, all arise from literary discourse, highlighting the complexity of the issue.

There are many intertwined facets of displacement and “genealogies of dispossession.” Critically diaspora is often related to hybridity, globalization, postcolonial and minority, though over the centuries it has broken the definitional and disciplinary boundaries. Many critics feel it is now only an offshoot of imagination. Indian diaspora has continued to increase and flourish. Indian diaspora began with geographic displacement, and now in the 21st century it is the direct result of globalization. For evaluating diasporic writings of the recent years, a lot of rethinking is required. The cultural reinvention, mobility and connectivity have changed the whole identity of diasporic writings especially with regional languages finding recognition. As the world continues to shrink this very dynamic and powerful space diasporic writing occupies is in for greater acceptance and higher visibility.

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