



Indo-Canadian women writers explore Indianness in their works

Kadri Nashrin. A

Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of International Studies, Diaspora Research Center, Gujarat University,
Ahmedabad. Gujarat. India.
E mail-nashykadri@gmail.com

Dr. Vidya Rao Associate Professor Bhavan's Seth R.A. College of Arts and Commerce, Khanpur,
Ahmedabad. Gujarat. India.

Abstract

Humans have been migrating and dispersing ever since the dawn of time. The Indian diaspora is one of the biggest in the world, as is well known. It is generally accepted that reading a nation's literature is the best way to learn about its traditions and culture. The experiences of migrants, the ambiguity that envelops and fills them in distant nations, and the hardships they experience in trying to find their identity are all depicted in diaspora literature. They are forced to navigate a difficult gap between numerous worlds and cultures where they are unable to fully assimilate into their adoptive home country or forget where they originally came from because of how different it would be now. It is not easy to give definition of Indianness. Indianness is an amalgam of culture, tradition and custom. This research paper explores the Indianness in the writings of Indo-Canadian contemporary diasporic women writers Anita Rao Badami and Anubha Mehta. These women writers artistically describe Indian culture, nostalgic feelings, and their experiences through their works.

Keywords: Indianness, Indo-Canadian, contemporary, diaspora, writers, women.

Introduction

Generally, we use the generic term for the diaspora to migration. People have become aware of the difference between migration and diaspora in the current times. People migrate to a developed country for a better job, good life, and facilities. Migrants attempt to settle in first- or second-world nations after coming there. It does not imply that they have severed all ties to their country of origin. They still feel a connection to their motherland despite having settled there. The second generation always finds themselves 'in the middle.' Moreover, the main point to be discussed is that they always get confused about their identity. The questions arise in their mind, a) what is their original identity? b) Which country is to be referred to as their native land? And c) The most important question for their second generation is to which tradition, custom, and culture do they have to follow? The one explains where they were born and one they settled in the host land. It produces hyphenated identities like Indian-American, British-Bengali, Indian-African, Indian-Canadian, and so forth. They are cut off from both worlds by their ambiguous identity to which they have no particular commitment. For them, this apathy is fictitious.

Since ancient times, people have been migrating in search of food and other necessities. As demands have evolved over time, so have the justifications for migration. People relocate from their home countries to developed nations in search of a better life and future. It is generally referred to as a component of 'diaspora.'

According to the United Nations, the Indian diaspora, one of the largest in the world, is estimated to have 18 million people living outside their native land in 2020 (Hindustan Times. 2021). The eighth-largest Indian diaspora in the world is found in Canada. In Canada, Ontario and British Columbia have the highest concentrations of the East Indian or Indo-Canadian population. The majority of Canadians with Indian ancestry are either Sikh or Hindu. There were 34% Sikh, 27% Hindu, another 17% were Muslim, 9% were Catholic, and 7% belonged to another Christian group in 2001 (Statistic Canada, 2015). If we look at the history of Indians' migration to Canada, some of the primary reasons for migrating to Canada were poor economic conditions, exploitation of the British government, and also the moneylenders of India. The dream of prosperity and a better life attracted Indians to immigrate to Canada. The primary factor in the diaspora is an identity issue that brings rigidity to their lives. However, those who have settled abroad, their second and third generations, are always confused about the dual identity. As their parents follow them up with the home culture, thus, it is not easy to eliminate. This identity crisis creates more conflicts and challenges for Indians, and Canada is no exception.

Indianness: a combination of culture, tradition, and customs

Defining Indianness is not easy. Indianness is not only about national identity, traditions, culture, and our wonderful civilization nor about the way we live and behave, not only about the best religions, but Indianness is a mixture of all these things. Globally, India is known for unity in diversity. India is a huge and diverse multilingual nation with a varying pace of life region to region and community to community. All over India, customs and religious rituals are still widely observed and practiced. Indians like to interpret Indianness in terms of culture and tradition. Indian culture is still developing and is continually expanding. It can be referred to be a living tradition. We creatively manipulate it as we live it; we create and reproduce it. We keep some parts of it and don't use others. Those that are thrown out, are replaced with fresh, contemporary items.

In 1931, Mahatma Gandhi said, "Indian culture is . . . neither Hindu, Islamic nor any other wholly. It is a fusion of all and essentially Eastern. And everyone who calls himself or herself an Indian is bound to treasure that culture, be its trustee, and resist any attack upon it" (Vohra, Ashok 269). Murty justifies this by saying that Indianness encompasses a culture formulated by the peoples of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the Vedic Aryans, and succeeding generations of their off-springs rather than only Hindu culture (Vohra, Ashok 269). It includes Christians, Parsees, Muslims, and Baha'is, in addition to Hindus, Buddhists, Jainas, Sikhs, and various tribal faiths. In a nutshell, it includes the customs of everyone who has made India their home. Indian civilization has practically always been a diverse society, not just in terms of various religions and languages but also in terms of the different lifestyles, values, and ways of living. Indianness is a secular mindset that embraces religious variety along with linguistic, regional, class, caste, economic, political, social, and physical diversity. Shashi Tharoor said, "India is like a thali - a plate. A thali is a selection of fabulous dishes in various bowls. Each has a different taste, and they don't necessarily mix with the next, but they are related together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast. Indians are used to numerous identities and affiliations that all come together in support of a larger concept of India, an India that protects the common space available to each identity" (Tharoor 62). However, the culture of India allows for the peaceful coexistence of numerous castes, ethnicities, social structures, legal systems, religions, sects, and political groups.

A mark of Indianness in the foreign land of Canada

The migration history of Indians to Canada has been fascinating. With 108,000 newcomers admitted in the first three months of the year, Canada is on track to reach its goal of a record 432,000 new immigrants in 2022. This year, the largest immigration group to live in Canada is Indians. Approximately 100,000 Indians moved to Canada permanently in 2021, the year that the nation received a record-breaking 405,000 new immigrants. Between 2021 and 2022, more than 210,000 permanent residents became citizens of Canada (Economic Times 2022). There is an impression of Indianness even on the foreign soil of Canada. In 1908, the first Sikh Gurdwara (temple) was established on Second Avenue in Vancouver (Cook 27). The Hindu community has constructed multi-ethnic temples that are used for rituals and devotion by various ethnic groups. A religious and ethnic group, Ismaili Muslims have long-standing religious institutions. The majority of Canadians with South Asian ancestry can speak one of the country's official languages, as well as Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil, Urdu, and Gujarati. They have shown their sense of identity through their numerous contributions to British Columbia's knowledge and cultural diversity, including their intellectual endeavours,

creative and cultural manifestations, and athletic success. To preserve Indian cultural and societal foundations, the immigrants created a cultural life in their communities. The Gurdwara or temple served as the focal point of this cultural life, which also included musical societies, charitable organizations, language schools and associations, sports clubs, dancing and singing groups, and other community organizations aimed at enhancing cultural diversity of the area. In 2002, the Canadian government signed an official declaration to designate May as 'Asian Heritage Month' to create a community where Pan-Asian arts, culture, and economic contributions are an essential part of society.

Reflection of Indianness in Indo-Canadian women writers

It is generally believed that women are closer to the culture and tradition of their country than men. Women writers can delicately describe culture, tradition and customs in their works. Anita Rao Badami is one of the renowned contemporary writers in modern Indian diaspora writing in English, living in Canada. Anita Rao Badami was born in Orissa in 1964 and moved to Canada in 1991. Anita Rao Badami has made a unique place among Indian diaspora writers. *Tamarind Mem* is her debut novel which is based on her own life. In the novel, Anita Rao Badami describes several perspectives of the mother, Saroja, in India and that of her daughter Kamini in Canada. Badami chiefly describes the mother-daughter relationship and their different perspectives, which adds more richness to her novel. Through the dialogues, Anita Rao Badami artistically describes a sweet quarrel that happens between mother and daughter; when Kamini talks to her mother and tells her that she yearns to get away from this cold city, her mother replies in a sarcastic tone:

“Well, who asked you to go?.....Did somebody tie your hands behind your back and say ‘Go-go to that Calgary North Pole place?’”

(Badami. *Tamarind Mem*. p. 7).

In another dialogue, it is also seen typical Indian mother's care for her daughter:

“I hope you wear that sweater your Aunt Lalli knit for you, you catch a cold so easily.”

(Badami. *Tamarind Mem*. p. 7).

Through Saroja, it portrays Indian tradition and family values; she assumed that Kamini would wear a sweater made by her aunt Lalli in Calgary. One of the traits of writers from the Indian diaspora is that they frequently reference the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Panchatantra* in their works:

“Noni” said Dadda, “come, I will tell you about the Lakshman-jhoola bridge. That bridge is hundreds of years old, it is said, made of rope and wood and prayers. It swings thin as a dream over the River Ganga thundering down a rocky gorge, and on the underside of the bridge is a city of bees. You can hear their buzzing over the sound of rushing water, and you have to walk across the Lakshman-jhoola without shaking it even a bit, for then the queen bee wakes up from her sleep and sends her armies after you”

(Badami. *Tamarind Mem*. p.8).

By retelling legendary tales, sharing memories of their early years in the homeland, and other methods, they aim to preserve Indianness for the next generation. Badami is a fantastic Indo-Canadian storyteller who portrays characters at odds with one another and their own cultures in a real way.

Anubha Mehta is a contemporary Indo-Canadian writer and artist, and she has been a classical dancer, an actor, and a journalist. She has worked in Canadian public service and received recognition for her leadership efforts on behalf of different groups. Her short stories and poems have appeared in numerous Canadian periodicals and journals. Anubha's *Peacock in the Snow* is her debut novel and it was an instant best-seller and launched in Canada and India (Mehta, Anubha). The marriage ceremony of Maya and Veer serves as the book's opening scene. Anubha illustrates each custom and ritual associated with an Indian wedding, as well as the sentiments and emotions of Indian parents, the bride's attire, make-up, and jewellery, the garland ceremony, and rites performed around a sacred fire, among other things. No girl wants to leave her parents and their home before getting married, and Anubha depicts this sentiment. Parents reassure a daughter at this time by telling her, "You will always be our daughter, and we gain a son in the form of a son-in-law," but they

secretly know this is not a reality. Anubha masterfully captures this emotional mother-daughter's conversations:

“.....I am not going anywhere Ma, I will always be with you,” I lied and she sniffed.

“We are not losing you, Maya, we are gaining a son,” Ma said somewhat tritely.”

(Mehta. *Peacock in the snow*. p.11).

Veer Rajasinghania, a man from a wealthy, established Delhi family; Veer goes against the wishes of his parents and marries Maya, who hails from a middle-class family, and she has to work for everything without the servants' help. After getting married, she will have to live in the mansion of Veer's family with aged Sheela as her personal maid. Sheela is aware of all the family secrets, and Maya learns that she resembles Veer's deceased grandmother Gayatri. Veer's mother dislikes Maya and thinks that she married her son purely for financial gain rather than out of love. Knowing the horrific background, Sheela persuades Veer to leave with Maya and their infant daughter Diya. When Maya and her family move to Canada, they discover that their new country has both challenges and rewards.

Famous Indo-Canadian author Bharati Mukherjee wrote novels like *Jasmine* and the award-winning short story collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* that explored the internal cultural struggles of her immigrant characters (Grimes 2017). Bharati Mukherjee immigrated to Canada from India and attained American citizenship in 1989. She agreed to take a job at the University of California, Berkeley, where she would teach postcolonial and international literature. She also produced several collections of short stories and novels. The author of *Caste as Woman and former chair of English*, University of Mumbai, Vrinda Nabar said “Bharati Mukherjee was one of the first diaspora writers. In a way, she created a territory for others, particularly women, who came later” (Hindustan Times 2017). In Bharati Mukherjee's works the main attraction is “the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates as well as on Indian women and their struggle” (Alam 7). The short story *The Middlemen and Other Stories*, which earned the National Book Critics Circle Award, served as the inspiration for Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*. The extraordinary protagonist of the book *Jasmine*, travels from Hasanapur to Florida, New York, and ultimately Iowa while adopting a distinct identity at each location. Bharati Mukherjee explains several time changes via *Jasmine's* journey and weaves together memories of the present and the past to show her numerous identities—from Jyoti to *Jasmine* to Jazzy to Jane—shift with time. *Jasmine's* journey from India to America is a movement for her self-discovery, and realization of her authentic identity. It is not only a journey as an immigrant. Through her continual psychological journey of the mind, *Jasmine's* transformation and movement from the past to the present reveals her internal battle with multiple identities.

Women are typically thought to be more in tune with their country's culture and traditions than males are. Women authors are skilled at providing subtle descriptions of culture, tradition, and custom. The common experiences of the Indian diaspora, such as struggles with adjustment, bigotry, identity concerns, hybridity, nostalgia, and alienation, enhance the diasporic Indian English literature. Ashalata Kulakarani, Latha Rengachari, in her article “Debating Expatriate woman’s Writing,” said:

“In their aim at self-definition and the expression of their expatriate experiences, women from 1970s onwards chose to use literature. Literature became a means of establishing autonomous selfhood. Third world women sought to find words and forms to fit their experiences and have chosen narrative strategies like the autobiography and the quest novel to do so. They use the auto-biography to give shape to an identity grounded in these diverse experiences of expatriation and self-definition.”

(Rengachari. 2000. p 35-36)

Conclusion

The Indian Diaspora is a significant subgenre of English fiction that broadly depicts the experiences and worldview of the Indian Diaspora. The concept of "Indianness" is difficult to describe. Indianness possesses traits that reflect the rich culture of India as well as the diversity of life and unity in diversity. Diaspora literature mainly focuses on themes such as discrimination, cultural trauma, contrasting cultural trauma, problems with adjustment and assimilation, orientalism, identity crisis, alienation and displacement, dilemma,

depression, hybridity and generational gap. It would be fair to say that Indian Diaspora English fiction is an important genre that reflects the experiences and mindset of the Indian Diaspora in a broader sense. It creates space for discussion about the Indian diaspora and provides emotional security to that particular diaspora. Being the voice of Indian immigrants worldwide, diasporic Indian women writers succeed in addressing Indian English Literature audiences with sensitivity while maintaining a sense of the universality of immigration. In diasporic Indian English fiction, which thrives on the experiences and mindset of the diaspora, women writers play a significant part.

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