



Aesthetics of Immigrant Literature: Shifting Perceptions and Changing Dimensions

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Abstract

Immigrant literature tends to bear the distinct mark of the migrant sensibility of the author, who has relocated himself from his homeland to an alien land. This crossing of geographical boundaries, which would earn for him the indelible label of an 'immigrant', will lead to a particular mind set characterized by feelings of schizophrenia, rootlessness, alienation etc. All these divisive forces experienced by the immigrant are born out of a sense of 'non-belonging' engendered by the loss of a 'home'. The literary output of an immigrant very often reflects his need to fabricate an alternate space for himself. Having abandoned the 'primary space' of his homeland, and feeling marginalized in the 'secondary space' of the migrated land, the immigrant becomes a victim of spaces. The intersection of these two spaces creates a new interstitial space, which is located on the margins of two cultures. The urge to find an alternate space persistently finds its literary expression in many immigrant writings. However, the era of globalization, and the ever widening horizon of the digital world have necessitated a redefinition of what constitutes immigrant literature. The emergence of global citizens whose identity transcends and even defies geographical or political borders, has led to a shift in perception, which in turn has brought in new dimensions to immigrant writings.

Key words: alternate space, belonging, binary conflict, border, home, immigrant literature

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Milan Kundera's character Tereza in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* observes, "Being in a foreign country means walking a tight rope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood" (75). The statement aptly presents the predicament of an immigrant, who crosses the geographical borders of his homeland and enters into the territory of an alien land – a relocation which poses a threat to his very identity. Because, once the migrant reaches the land of destination, he is labelled an 'immigrant' – an appellation that sticks to him as long as he remains in the land of adoption. Arnold Itwaru, the Canadian immigrant writer rightly points out how the label becomes integral to his identity:

The stranger categorized in the name and label 'immigrant' is already invented as 'immigrant', a distinctiveness which is also anonymous, upon arrival. This person is no longer only the bearer of another history, but has now become a particular *other*, the bearer of a label invented by the "host". This person has become the immigrant - this term of depersonalization which will brand him or her for the rest of their lives in the country of their adoption. (13-14)

Immigration is a multifaceted phenomenon. Varied might be the reasons that instil the migratory instincts in an individual. It might be a dissatisfaction with life at home and the hope of a better life elsewhere that instigate an individual to immigrate. There are also the cases of those who are driven out by fear of political, religious and communal persecution. Thus the reasons behind immigration might be a search for freedom, security or social, economic, academic and professional betterment. Hence, it is difficult to define a common agenda for the phenomenon of migration. Aijaz Ahmad observes that no firm generalization can be offered to so large and complex a phenomenon like immigration which involves so many individual biographies because:

Immigration, has had its own contradictions: Many have been propelled by need, others motivated by ambition, yet others driven by persecution; for some there really is no longer a home to return to; in many cases need and ambition have become ambiguously and inextricably linked. (263)

Equally ambiguous is the attitude of the immigrant towards his mother land and the adopted land. It depends on the conditions that led to his migration and also the kind of reception he gets in the host country. In an

immigrant who abandons his homeland in search of greener pastures, the feeling of guilt may be intense and this stands in the way of his assimilation. There are others for whom the past is not at all a burden. For a person like Raja Rao who has spent a major part of his life abroad, 'belonging' is not problematic because he carries his past with him: "My India I carry with me wherever I go" (qtd. in Trivedi and Mukherjee 224). At the other extreme, there is Nirad C. Chaudhari's highly disparaging opinion about his homeland: "To live in Calcutta would have been death" (qtd. in Dasgupta 23). Dom Moraes, settled in England, considers himself more of an English than an Indian: "The colour of my skin was not English, but my mind was" (43). Significantly, countering the immigrant's lament that he belongs nowhere, Salman Rushdie asserts that the predicament of a migrant is not in his 'ontological unbelonging' but in his excess of 'belongings.' It is "not that the migrant belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to too many places" (qtd. in Ahmad 127). Aijaz Ahmad interprets Rushdie's "excess of belongings" as "multiplicity of subject positions," by which, "not only does the writer have all cultures available to him or her as a resource for consumption, but he or she actually belongs in all of them, by virtue of belonging properly in none" (130). This very fact that different people display different attitudes to the same experience reveals how complex a phenomenon this is.

Migration, which involves relocation from one's homeland to another geographical territory, leads to the development of a migrant sensibility. The feelings of schizophrenia, rootlessness, displacement, alienation and anonymity which are identified to be the typical characteristics of an immigrant psyche are born out of this 'migrant identity' thrust upon him by the host country. The experience of being caught between two geographical entities – that of his homeland and adopted land – contributes to the schizophrenic temperament of the immigrant. Edward Said brings out this duality that is inherent in an immigrant's life: "The sense of being between cultures has been very very strong for me. I would say that's single strongest strand running through my life, the fact that I'm always in and out of things, and never really of anything for very long" (qtd. in Saluszky 123). This in-between position leads to divided loyalty in the immigrant, who is at once under the spell of homeward pull and loyal to the host country. This duality experienced by an immigrant is clearly brought out by the British-Indian writer Sasthi Brata who even after years of immigrant experience, describes himself as a "Tiresias, strung astride two worlds" (qtd. in Indira and Shivram 188). An immigrant's experience is thus marked by an endless fluctuation between two polarities. It is this conflict that makes him schizophrenic. Anita Desai presents such a predicament in her protagonist Dev (who has recently arrived in England from India) in her *Bye Bye Blackbird*: "[He] is

perfectly aware of the schizophrenia that is infecting him like the disease to which all Indians abroad . . . are prone. He is not sure what it might be like to be one himself, in totality” (86).

Immigration is a process of transplantation, and transplantation implies uprooting and replanting. Consequent to these processes, the immigrant has the feeling of being adrift in the world or rather being ‘rootless’. “When individuals come unstuck from their native land, they are called migrants,” defines Rushdie about those ‘uprooted drifters’ who have escaped the ‘gravity’ of ‘belonging’ and “have floated upwards from history, from memory, from time” (*Shame* 87). This experience is so traumatic that he is forced into a search for roots. The ‘physical relocation’ very often leads to a ‘psychological dislocation’, more so for a sensitive human psyche. It is the sense of a ‘lost past’ that intensifies his feeling of being rootless. Analysing this ‘lost feeling’ in an immigrant, Rushdie points out, “It is made more concrete for [an immigrant] by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being elsewhere” (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). And once transplantation has occurred, seeking old roots is as much difficult as sprouting new roots. Hence the obsessive ‘quest for roots’ in an immigrant.

All these negative feelings of schizophrenia, rootlessness and displacement accumulate and finally make the immigrant an alienated soul. The inability to assimilate with the new society is a psychological block the immigrant finds difficult to overcome. His emotional identification with the people of the host country remains unrealized, because of the clash of cultures he has to face in the adopted land. In order to preserve all that is indigenous, he insulates himself against all that is alien to him. Mrs. Pickering’s advice to Srinivas (who has settled in England) in Kamala Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man*, “If one is cut off from one’s culture there is always the adopted one to draw on,” (68) is no solution for one whose mind is riveted on the distant homeland. Srinivas tries to convince himself, “This is my country now. My country. I feel at home in it, more so than I would in my own,” (58) because he knows that, “If he left he had nowhere to go . . . a nowhere man looking for a nowhere city” (166). Equally significant is the practical wisdom of Babu in Arun Joshi’s *The Foreigner*: “You don’t develop fully if you stick around only with your own countrymen” (80). This leads the immigrant to an enforced camaraderie with the citizens of the new country. But the discriminatory treatment of the hosts tend to make him more and more alienated. To counter the antagonism, the immigrant clings on to what Rushdie calls the “treasured mementoes and old photographs of the past” (*Shame* 63). This over-idealization of nostalgia alienates him still further from the mainstream.

All these divisive forces experienced by the immigrant are born out of a sense of ‘non-belonging’ engendered by the loss of a ‘home’. Discussing the ways in which ‘home’ is imagined in diaspora communities, John McLeod observes that the idea of home, besides giving one a sense of one’s place in the world, also tells him where he originated from and where he belongs (210). When severed from this haven of belonging, one naturally feels a sense of loss and consequently an immigrant’s concept of home will be different from that of one ensconced in its bosom. ‘Home away from home’ being a mirage and ‘back to home’ remaining an unfulfilled even undesirable dream, home becomes for the immigrant “a mythic place of desire – a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory” (McLeod 209). Return, the immigrant knows, cannot assuage the conflicts of his tormented soul. Bharati Mukherjee, who immigrated to Canada from India and later to America, punctures the inflated nostalgic feeling of an immigrant when she remarks: “I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous, driven, underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no desire for permanent return” (3). Because, very often what awaits him back home is nothing but disappointment and disillusionment. The experience of Naipaul is a good instance in point. Naipaul, after his much longed for sojourn in India, finds it a “dead world”, an “area of darkness” beset with corruption, nepotism and still under the hangover of colonialism. He laments: “It was a journey that ought not to have been made, it had broken my life into two” (265). Naipaul’s journey proved disastrous when all the romance associated with ‘home’ was shattered. India remained for him an “area of darkness,” which only made him all the more conscious of his “separateness from India” (Area 252). However, later he modified his opinion that he had succeeded in “abolishing the darkness that separated [him] from [his] ancestral past” (*Million Mutinies* 516).

Denied the privilege of a ‘home’, the immigrant strongly feels the lack of a sense of ‘belonging’. It is this innate urge to ‘belong’ that leads the immigrant – Rushdie’s “itinerant layabouts” (*Moor* 329) – to a ‘quest for home’. It is not just an existential quest for the immigrant, but mapping out a geographical territory which is exclusively his own. That is why the word ‘home’ when articulated by an immigrant assumes a different signification. Displacement, whether compelled by choice or necessity, makes one all the more conscious of a sense of his place in the world. Writing of the ‘politics of migrancy’, Leela Gandhi cites Aijaz Ahmad:

Among the migrants themselves, only the privileged can live a life of constant mobility and surplus pleasure Most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment; what

they seek is not displacement but, precisely, a *place* from where they might begin anew, with some sense of a stable future. (164)

What is problematic for the immigrant is that though permitted to cross the geographical borders of the nation, he is not accommodated inside the borders of the minds of the natives. This makes it difficult for the immigrant to set up a 'home' in the new land. He is always made conscious of the fact that his home exists elsewhere, across the borders. Thus the concept of home always eludes the immigrant.

The prolific creativity of the immigrant writers has led to the emergence of immigrant writing as a distinct genre. The immigrant having suffered what Rushdie calls "triple disruption" – that of "roots, language and social norms" – is "obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human" (*Imaginary Homelands* 277). It is only natural that this self-inscription of the immigrant writer will be shaped by the peculiarity of his existence. Having opted to abandon his homeland in search of better prospects, the immigrant realizes that he cannot retrace his steps. The perpetually deferred 'return journey' becomes a nagging pain that he tries to relieve by re-creating his homeland in his writings – to recreate the "lost home in a lost city in the mists of time" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 9). He wants to regain through his writings what he has lost, and a mind under the strong grip of nostalgia, over-idealizes the picture of a 'lost Eden'. Distance very often lends a new halo to the immigrant's vision of the past, making him evade the bleak aspects that led to his exit. In stark contrast to the immigrant's romantic and idyllic vision of the past, what Neil Bissoondath calls "an edited and prettified version of the past" (126), there are those writers who denigrate their homeland highlighting the squalor and decay, which forced them out of their homeland. In between over-sentimental nostalgia and bitter resentment, there are those for whom 'home' is just a privileged point of reference – a familiar locale which forms the background to unravel the universal drama of human life. Re-creating homeland is not the only agenda before the immigrant writer. At times, it borders on what is called 'resistance literature' – voicing out the injustice meted out to the immigrant in the adopted land. It also carries the pangs of rootlessness, displacement, and anonymity that symptomatize an immigrant psyche. In certain cases, moving away both from the culture of their origin and from the culture of their adoption, some immigrant writers create what Jasbir Jain citing Homi Bhabha calls a "third space." Jain remarks that, "In the construction of a third space, the writers are moving away from engagement with their own cultural and historical past [and] from the reality of their present world" (114). Thus immigrant literature defies all systematic categorizations and distinct characteristics.

The literary output of an immigrant very often reflects his need to fabricate an alternate space for himself. Having abandoned the 'primary space' of his homeland and feeling marginalized in the 'secondary space' of the migrated land, the immigrant becomes a victim of spaces. The intersection of these two spaces creates a new interstitial space, which is located on the margins of two cultures. An immigrant's writings will be an attempt to capture this predicament of being an in-between citizen who lives "between domains, between forms, between homes and between languages" (Said 403). Uma Parameswaran calls such an immigrant a *Trishanku* – the mythical figure who found himself suspended in the space in-between heaven and earth. Likewise, the immigrant remains suspended in the fluid interstitial space of the border, which becomes one of the defining criteria of an immigrant's identity. Homi Bhabha who approaches the question of identity from a migrant's point of view argues that the life on the border leads to new ways of identity which goes against the concept of national identity based on rootedness. In his *Locations of Culture* which addresses those who live 'border lives' on the margins of different nations, Bhabha advocates new, exciting ways of thinking about identity. According to him, borders are intermediate locations where one contemplates moving beyond a barrier. He defines it:

The 'border' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past . . . we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (1)

In the interstitial space of the border, the immigrant is subject to a conflict between 'here'/'there' binary (the spatial entities of adopted land and homeland); 'then' and 'now' (conflict engendered by past/present binary); and the 'we'/'they' binary resulting from the marginal status accorded to the immigrants vis-à-vis the natives who occupy the centre. Occupying the border space, the immigrant partakes of both the entities of these binaries. He cannot claim to belong entirely either to the migrated land or to his native land ('here' and 'there'); his immigrant status prevents him from identifying himself with the fellow citizens of his adopted land (resulting in 'we' and 'they' differentiation); he cannot resist the intrusion of the past into the present or the regression of the present into the past ('now' and 'then'). The clash of these binaries characterizes the spatial conflict which is a predicament consequent to the process of migration. Negotiating an alternate space becomes an imperative for those who occupy the interstice, because accepting one space at the expense of the other is most often no solution. Rather, they have to grapple with the opposing binaries that characterize each space. The manner in which the writers resolve the conflict and fabricate a new space for themselves reveal the immigrant vision of the writers.

The urge to find an alternate space that persistently finds its literary expression in immigrant writings, could very well be a reflection of the unconscious impulse working in the immigrant psyche of the writers. The diversity of experiences where varied individual forces are at work, define the different contours of this alternate space.

The rhetoric about globalization, transnationalism etc has posed a challenge to the very concept of a spatial construct circumscribed by borders. By extension, it has led to the emergence of global citizens whose identity transcends and even defies geographical or political borders. This has necessitated a redefinition of what constitutes immigrant literature. It will be very reductive to talk of writings by immigrants as obsessively and solely pre-occupied with spatial conflict or identity crisis. Edwidge Danticut, the Haitian-American novelist observes:

The idea of this great anguish of living between two worlds has diminished somewhat for many immigrant people, artists and non-artists alike. Not that there is not some uneasiness, but it is no longer the single most urgent anxiety of every immigrant's life. I would like to move beyond these tropes of speaking *to* and *for*, and of being only between two worlds. We are at the same time speaking to no one and everyone. (qtd. in Reyn)

The Russian-American writer Irina Reyn has strong reservations about the very label 'immigrant literature'. She observes :

Our stories are rich with fluid identities, carrying a multiplicity of allegiances and touchstones. . . . Immigrant literature is a redundant category, and I'm optimistic about a future where authors from a certain country will not solely be compared with authors from the same country or lumped together with other immigrants, when immigrant writers will not feel pressure either to write or avoid the vast and multi-varied subject of the immigrant experience, where we move beyond native countries as trends, and simply treat all stories as human stories. (lithub.com)

Salman Rushdie considered the migrant to be the central or defining figure of the 20th century and migrant sensibility as the characteristic of the displaced individuals. Two decades into the 21st century, in a cosmopolitan, transnational globalized world of hybrid identities, any stereotypical classification of immigrant writings and highlighting the motifs of homeland and adopted land, identity crisis, border living, loss of home, quest for roots etc. might sound hackneyed. The ever widening horizon of the digital world has considerably reduced or even

nullified the distance between spaces; altered the traditional perception of time; and made the boundaries separating cultures more permeable. Pointing out to this shift in migrant writings, in her article “Defining Migration Writing” Joanna Kosmalka observes, “The (migrant) texts often contain the most brilliant explorations of identity issues and elucidate the impact of globalizing cultural processes on identity formation . . . [and] about such notions as nationality, borders, belonging or home” (doi.org/10.1515/jlt 2022-2028). What Aijaz Ahmad refers to as the “cultural excesses” rather than “cultural segregation” of the migrant (130); or Edward Said as their “plurality of vision” (qtd. in Trivedi and Mukherjee 227), or Rushdie as the “double perspective” of the migrant (*Imaginary Homelands* 19) – all speak of the productivity rather than the deprivation that comes from dislocating oneself from one’s original community. Over the decades, there has been a definite shift in the perception of an immigrant, from a sense of ‘non-belonging’ to ‘excess of belongings’; from alienation to adaptation; from ‘homelessness’ to ‘multiplicity of homes’; from ‘rootlessness’ to a branched out fibrous root system which help them survive in any soil. The immigrant of the 21st century is no longer a ‘Tiresias’ or a ‘Trishanku’, but a ‘cosmopolitan man’ who is at home in all cultures. Granted that this shift in perception has brought in new dimensions to immigrant writings, it cannot yet be denied that the severance from one’s roots and the pangs of dislodgement are likely to agitate any sensitive human psyche. And the creative output of a writer who is preternaturally sensitive to this issue will definitely be shaped by this traumatic experience. It is this complexity and multiplicity of responses that contribute to the diverse and distinct aesthetics of immigrant literature.

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