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Contemporary Diasporic Indian Women Writers

Dr. Pradnya D. Deshmukh

Asst-Professor

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru College, Shivaji Nagar,
Aurangabad. (M.S.)

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Abstract:

In spite of gendered reading, women writers of Indian Diaspora have created a big impact in India and abroad in recent times more than even than male writers. Whatever may be the reason but in the numbers and output, women writers have taken lead. Even in the London film Festival, “stories unfolded from 43 countries....were stories of marginal communities and their struggle for survival against insurmountable odds” (Basu 05). What is the significant about these stories is that almost all stories are of marginalization and displacement of female protagonist and their fight for survival. Today, half of all international migrants are women. Diasporic literatures are inevitable in an era of globalization and upward mobility where in men and women migrates voluntary or forcefully, in search of lands of opportunity. Such spaces are hybrid, liminal and marginal wherein a culture intersects to create multicultural space.

Keywords: Diaspora, Hybrid, Marginal, Contemporary, History, Liminal.

Today’s newspaper, fiction and Bollywood- Hollywood movies deal with diasporic experiences....particularly of Indian Diaspora. Indian Diaspora is the biggest sustained mass movement of humans in history. If not in sheer numbers, certainly in scope and width and diversity not even the Chinese Diaspora can rival it. *Jug Suraiya* has rightly pointed:

From America to Australia from Brazil to Bulgaria and right through the global alphabet to Zaire Zurich and Zimbabwe there is invariably and it seems inevitably, a corner of a foreign land that is far- flung India: the shifting tides of history have created the human archipelago of many India’s stream across the earth. (6)

The diaspora is not one but many narratives, told by many voices. Some are strong and resonant with successes. Others are anguished such as those currently protesting against ethnic discrimination in Malaysia, where their forbears were forcibly brought generations ago and whose plight has proved an international debate. How can one forget the case of *Dr. Hanif* who was declared to be responsible for bombast in London and recent assassination of two Ph.D. students in California: Through Indian Diaspora are making waves in every field, there is a darker side to their sunshine story.

The present research paper takes note of the South Asian American Literature in general and an Indian immigrant's woman's writing in particular. The South Asian American Literature is developing as a new field of study. It is considered one of the subdivisions of multicultural literature. Asian American writers have flourished over the years as they express their ethnic identity, the interrelations, intricacies and contradictions that make up Asian America. Today many are receiving the attention and praise that have been long overdue. The recent explosion of literature from Asian American writers shows that there is an abundance of topics and issues to be covered. There is no single "Asian American Experience", as there exists the political, socioeconomic and cultural diversity among Asian Americans. Their collective and unique experiences form a mosaic that unites world, instead of dividing it. In the contemporary scene of letters, it is an undeniable fact that almost all the major Indian writers in English write from Diaspora spaces in the west the triumphant movement for expatriate Indian writing in English can be dated to 1981 when Rushdie's *Midnight Children* was published. For the Indian writing in English these three and half decades have been a defining movement, a triumphal movement, and mainly on account of the achievement of the expatriate Indian Writings.

The expatriate Indian writers are not a monolithic category and cannot be viewed as a single homogenous group. It is essentially a composite cultural context drawing from different nations, cultures and societies. The only single thread running through them is their Indian background. But even the sense of homelessness is not the same thus both memory and homeland acquire multiple meanings in these contexts. Through they share common history, culture and spiritual belief; the responses of individual's writers vary widely. There are some expatriate writers who like *V. S. Naipaul* insist on an identity that is shaped by exile, loss and the vast betrayals of history. In contrast writers like *Bhakti Mukherji* believe a complete assimilation with the adapted land would be the answer to the discontents of the diaspora and there are writers such as *Salman Rushdie* who celebrate the old and the new, India and the diaspora, our myth and our realities. Writers like *Jhumpa Lahiri*, *Hari Kunzru*, who grow up in foreign land- have announced their desire not to be classified as Indian writers. For *Kunzru*, India is simply a country where his relatives live and where he occasionally comes for family weddings and holidays. But always at the core of expatriate writings there is a haunting presence of motherland.

There are two generations of Indian women writers who wrote from locations outside their homelands. The first generation of these writers includes writers like *Santha Ram Rau*, *Attia Hossain* and *Kamala Markandaya*, all of whom migrated in the forties. Their work is important in historicizing postcolonial diaspora. The next generation of writers includes writers like *Bharti Mukherjee*, *Suniti Namjoshi*, *Leena Dhingra*, *Indira Ganesan*, *Chitra Divakaruni*, *Meena Alexander*, *Geeta Mehata*, *Anjana Appachana*, *Bharati Kirchar*, *Sujata Massey*, and *Meera Sayal*. These writers describe multiple patterns of diasporic movements motivated by different factors: interracial marriage, mobile parents or preference for alternative sexualities. These

writers use gender and sexuality as sites of diasporic negotiations in interrogating racist, nationalist and traditional discourses enclosing them.

According to *C. Vijayasree*,

These women's text focus on shared and dissimilar trajectories of mobility and the fissures in the generally accepted theories of diasporic identities stand exposed. They enable us to perceive the contours of new forms of subjugation and struggle. (50)

Generally the charges on women writers are that they focus on small scale domestic themes like motherhood, husband-wife relationship and tiny family dramas. Infact in family all stories happen. It is in the family that we learn about love and loyalty, about treachery and betrayal. Along with the domestic space they are aware of socio-political space. They write about the question of belongings which acquires an extra edge of poignancy in the case of female migrants. They face the denial of identity both within the marginalized community and by the dominant cultures. These women are doubly exiled *Sheila Rowbotham's* formulation is worth quoting in this context:

But always we are split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another [.....]. We were never altogether in one place; we were always in transit, immigrants into an alien country. (31)

Their writing may be called as discourse of double displacement.

The writing of *Divakaruni*, *Meena Alexander*, *Sujata Bhat*, *Bapsi Sidhwa* and *Jhumpa Lahiri*, focus on home and family, ethnicity and identity, body and sexuality. What is significant about writers like *Divakaruni*, *Sidhwa* and *Lahiri* is that along with domestic problems, they write about contemporary history, international politics. Home as the symbol and metaphor dominates all the diasporic imagination and hence it has been theorized upon sufficiently. Both *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni* and *Bapsi Sidhwa* do not disconnect their lives from the historical past like *Bharti Mukherjee* to become American mainstream writers. On the contrary, they believe it is their tradition, history, memory and ethnicity, which helps them to reroute in the foreign land. So like a typical migrant's novelist they bring "modern" worlds together in their writing. In their fictional work we have, thus different world jostling each other, real world and the imaginary. The demarcating lines are faint: the spheres blend and merge so that is not easily distinguishable. These worlds are mix of memory and desire- memory of bygone time and perhaps the desire to regain the same. Home therefore gets directly linked to issues of marriage, motherhood, child rearing and parenting, all of which acquire specific nuances when sited in diasporic location.

Issues of motherhood and bringing up children are the so called hybrid space occupies the concerns of women writers considerably. Assimilation of children in foreign land and their

upbringing is highly embattled space of diaspora is challenging problem. The working class immigrant's mother in *Divakaruni's* poem "Yuba City School" is deeply heart by discrimination her child suffers in school every day. Divakaruni in her novel *The Mistress of Spices* tells the story of Jaggi- an estranged and radically marked timid child. He is assaulted at school for not knowing English. In the playground they try to pull of his turban. They dangle the cloth from their fingertips and laugh at his uncut hairs and push him down, this worst experience has made him gangster, drug supplier, Jaggi has developed haterate for 'Indianness' has made him 'odd' earlier in school life *Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake* focuses on the problems of child rearing in an alien culture as well as suffering of growing up as an ABCD marriage with doctoral students in MIT brought Ashima, A Bengali girl to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashima feels upbringing her child in this alien place is not normal thing. Lying in the labour room in an American hospital Ashima thinks,

"It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequences motherhood in a foreign land [.....] But she is terrified to raise a child in a county where she is related to no one, where she knows little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (Lahiri 6)

Issues of racism and racial discrimination are looked off from a women's point of view. *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni* herself has become victim of racism before 9/11 and after 9/11. Rakhi the protagonist in *Divakaruni's* novel *Queen of Dream* has to deal with new complexities about her acculturation. Her small ethnic style coffee shop is attacked by an angry mob protesting against the Sept 11th bombing. She was told in rudest possible terms that she is not an American. Born in America Rakhi asks herself –

"But if I wasn't American, than what was I?" (Divakaruni 23)

Meera Sayal's Anita and Me shows how Meera a Punjabi girl growing in mining town of Tollington suddenly becomes aware of her own racial difference when an elderly women call her "Bloody stupid wag stupid waggy wag" (Anita and Me-97) Rakhi and Anita feel heart, angry, confused and powerless face with such hatred. Their experience demonstrates the fragility of an immigrant's situation in adapted land. Ethnicity become an important concern ass one shifts one's location and becomes a member of minority community in alien environment. *Meera Sayal* in *Anita and Me* speaks about the entire Asian Indians in England: "...physical difference becomes defining issues, a signifier, and a mark of whether or not you belong. Thus to be black in Britain is to share a common structural location, a racial location." (Sayal 12) The struggle to resist this authorization is part of the day-to-day living women in the novels *Divakaruni, Sidhwa, Lahiri.*

Dollar- dreams and longing for NRI husbands force numerous women to quit secure home and their desi support only to find disillusionment in an alien land which they imagine to

be “an exotic land with silver roof and golden pavement”. The protagonist of *Divakaruni* rather politically sums up her predicament:

Caught in the world where everything is frozen [...] like a scene inside a glass paperweight. It is a world so small [...] I stand inside this glass world, watching to scream (Divakaruni 26)

Divakaruni aptly summarized the embattled spaces occupied by the Asian immigrant’s women that involve the twin processes of ‘migration’ and ‘relocation’. The immigrants writers undergoes various forms of disruption which *Salman Rushdie* call ‘triple disruption’. He comments:

A full migrants suffers [.....] a triple disruption [...] An this is what makes migrants such important figure because root, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what is to be a human being. The migrant denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. (Rushdie 277-78)

It is very difficult to understand the complexity of the problems of Diaspora- especially women diaspora. To reflect their transitory psychological paralysis which ends in a ‘Trishanku’ space- perpetual hanging location – these won writers break the realist unites of time and space. Their novels are ‘translated’ and they show a constant interaction of style, voices, legends and geographies. Banerjee has rightly pointed the way contemporary South Asian writers’ makes their space in U.S.

Contemporary writing from South Asian Diaspora bears the marks of cultural encounters that combine the rewriting of history with nuanced responses to dislocation and marginalization by hegemonic structures. The raw energy of first generation politics is substituted by a more complex response to issues of race and un-belonging. The new writers retort to their attempted marginalization, not by dissolving into mainstream but by rendering their distinctive voices. (Banerjee 10)

Through these women writers of Indian Diaspora live on the peripheries of the mainstream culture they provide empowered space that promises to create new subjectivities, new identities in US. *Homi Bhabha* writes about this ‘in-between’ space in his essay, “Dissemination: time, narrative and the margins of modern nation”.

The boundary that secures the cohesive limit of the western nation may imperceptibly turn into a continuous internal liminality that proves a place from which to speak both of, and as the minority, the exilic the marginal and the emergent. (Bhabha 300)

It is this location in-between space which has turned in an advantages and which has given leading women writers of Indian origin in America such as *Bharti Mukherjee*, *Kiran Narayan*, *Chitra Divakaruni*, *Jhumpa Lahiri*, *Bharti Kirchner* and *Meena Alexander*. These women writers try to present two different worlds simultaneously as they cannot forget past. There is nostalgia for a world left behind. They deliberately evoke the world left behind and contrast it with the new adopted country. They reconstruct personal and national histories as historical intervention into master narratives imposed upon her by dominant culture. Histories and memories are not sufficient for survival in new land one must remark oneself. To write their stories, the pangs of dislocation the angst experienced during the process of becoming a foreign citizen – the diasporic writer use autobiographical mode for expression. They have use the fictional autobiography where the first person narration provides an impression of autobiographical narration even when this is not the case. These new genre is widely handled by immigrants women writers who strive to break away from racial and patriarchal confinements.

According to *Latha Rengachari*, writers like *Chitra Banerjee*, *Meena Alexander* etc. historicize their existence and the existence of other women in their Asian societies, without dismissing the impact of colonization or understanding the threat of neocolonial projects. These women expatriate novelist also show a keen historical consciousness. Their approach, attitude and treatment of history are different from those of men. They study exploration, which is limited not merely to political power, but as it invades other spheres of life – the men who abuse women, religious movements which harass the public, home, workplace, academic departments which exploit students. The conflictual layers of their narratives are interlinked with the historical structures. Both cultural and political processes go into the making of history in these novels. *Jasbir Jain* points out:

Traditional history and its male centered causation are rejected by these writers and it is in this sense that they feminize history – in their freedom from controlled vision of hegemony. (Jain 167)

Their texts are not frontal attack on patriarchy present in their homeland. They are not feminist. They use the idea of western feminist movement and modify those to evolve a kind of 'Womanism'. Their concerns are totally humanitarian.

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