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Role of Transculturalism in ‘Indo’ Diasporic Women Writings to Resolve Conflicts and Discrimination

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Abstract:

Dwelling between cultures never fixes one’s identity but it may turn out to be an aspect of combating conflicts and discrimination through strong women characters in the manoeuvres of “Indo” Diasporic Women writings. Writers like, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Chitra Divakaruni, Indira Ganesa, Kamila Shamsie, Bapsi Sidhwa and Sara Suleri present such voices in a transcultural setup to resolve issues related to crisis, oppression, hegemony, sense of belongingness and many. This paper tries to highlight the unique chain of “Indo” Diasporic Women Writers with fierce pen and feisty mind as it explores how transculturalism has narratively interpreted the contradictions and challenges and negotiated the gendered gaps.

Keywords: Diaspora, Discrimination, Conflicts, Women Writers, Transcultural.

“Women and fiction remain, so far as I am concerned, unsolved problems.”

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

From the tradition of bold feminist writings (Virginia Woolf, Judith Butler, Mary Wollstonecraft) to Contemporary Global themes (Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai) women writings is an integral part of literary canon. Women writings has always portrayed the real image of societal problems and their potential solutions. Similarly, conflicts and discrimination across all the cultures find strong voices of Women Novelists to showcase the trauma and find a negotiable space for the existence of women. Adding to this array, women

diasporic writings accentuate the diversity of diasporic literature by incorporating feeling of love for distant land with no real intention for permanent return.

The woman away from roots is placed at the junction of the distinct, quite conflicting and hegemonic discourses. Her culture is focused on race and gender problems. Innovation advancements have enabled free movement across so far impermeable boundaries for citizens, knowledge and money. The fresh and changed collective consciousness has been removed at the national borders, praising the composite ideologies.

As "cross pollination of cultures" (Rushdie 1991) or "transculturation" by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) who defines it as an occurrence known as the "contact zones" and as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other..." (Mary Louise Pratt 1992)

South Asian diasporic writers have also contributed to the imaginative recreation of the forgotten partition experiences of millions. During the nineties, a renewed interest could be seen in the writings of South Asian diasporic writers to voice the impact of partition on people. Colonialism was responsible for the mass migratory movement of people across international boundaries, leading to an amalgam of disparate cultures and identities. The body of writings produced within these new global societies demand new conceptual terms and categories of analysis. Terms such as 'expatriate writing' and 'immigrant writing' have been widely used but each of these has its own pitfalls. These terms are heavily charged with implications of the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have prompted the act of migration itself. While 'immigration' defines a location, a physical movement and an upward mobility, 'expatriation' indicates a compulsory isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. Expatriate writing then, is more involved with the situation at home and the circumstances that prolong the individual's exile or expatriation, than with the émigré community's relationship with the dominant society. Though it does not totally ignore the attachment to the homeland, immigrant writing, focuses more keenly on the current experiences in the adopted home. P. A. Abraham (1998), in his discussion on Indian expatriate writers in Canada, sums up the argument as:

...expatriation focuses on the native land that has been left behind, while immigration denotes the country into which one has ventured as an immigrant.... In other words, the expatriate lives on his 'ex' status while the immigrant celebrates his presence in the new country.

Moreover, some of the writers are second or third generation immigrants, who, though they share their parents' or grandparents' anxiety for their homeland, have never experienced migration at all and it would be inappropriate to categorize their works as 'migrant writing'. Hence the postcolonial critics and theorists looked for a more neutralizing term that would hold together these disparate experiences and the single signifier 'diaspora' was their choice. Its analytical versatility, theoretical resilience and neutralizing tendencies were most appealing to them. The term 'diaspora' was originally coined to describe the experiences of the Jews, who were exiled from Palestine. Since then, its application has been expanded to include any group, which has been scattered from its homeland. It has been widely employed with reference to the descendants of Africans, who were torn from their native continent and brought to the 'New World' as slaves. In its postcolonial usage, the notion of diaspora loses some of its historical and material edge. Though it involves the specific trauma of human displacement - whether of the exiled Jews or the Africans scattered in serving slavery and indenture - postcolonialism is generally concerned with the idea of cultural dislocation contained within this term. Dwivedi and Lau admit in *Indian Writing in English and the Global Literary Market* that Indian women writers writing in English mobilize "the production, distribution and consumption" (Dwivedi and Lau) of Indian writing in English by enhancing a book's marketability. In this connection, William Safran (1991), enumerates the conditions necessary to be members of a diaspora to people who "regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return when conditions are appropriate". (William Safran 1991)

Safran's suggestion that the diasporic communities are committed to restoring their homelands, to which they should ultimately return, may have been true in the case of the Jewish conception of the term but the modern diasporas' relationship with their homeland does not involve such compulsions. Stuart Hall (1994) highlights this point in his study of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, "... diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return".

While the members of the diasporic group do not necessarily come home wherever their displacement left, they maintain a knowledge of latent allegiance to their ancestral homes' rituals, customs, beliefs, religions and languages. Home may be far removed in time and space but they return to it through an act of the imagination. Rushdie (1991) terms it as 'imaginary-homeland'. With reference to the Indian migrants, he writes: "... our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that

was lost; and that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homeland, India of the mind”.

The Indian women diasporic writers subvert hegemonies through a reconciliation of differences. They challenge and resist the false notions of cultural purity and authenticity by emphasizing the importance of cultural negotiations, which Homi Bhabha (1994) too recognizes and acknowledges in his '*Location of Culture*'.

The theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter'- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.... And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our own selves. (Homi Bhabha 1994)

Stuart Hall (1994) makes a similar observation regarding the Afro-Caribbean experience. He writes, "...these symbolic journeys are necessary for us all – and necessarily circular. This is the Africa we must return to – but 'by another route': what Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of 'Africa': 'Africa' – as we re-tell it through politics, memory and desire". If home is conceived as an ambivalent location, the seminal position of the diaspora has raised some interesting questions regarding identity. The diasporic identity perceived as being fluid and in transition, has demolished received notions about the subjectivity and purity of culture.

Bhabha's use of the term 'hybridity' to stress the interdependence and mutuality of subjectivities that mark the relationship between the colonizer and the colonize aptly describes the diasporic identity which is a product of diverse cultures. Though linked by common histories of uprooting and dispersal, common homelands and common cultural heritage, the diasporic communities are not monolithic or homogeneous entities but richly diverse communities, their diversity originating from the political and cultural histories of their host societies. Hence, an account of the social fabric of the North America is essential to understand the Indian diaspora there and it shall be briefly traced.

Shauna Singh Baldwin, born in Montreal to Sikh parents, grew up speaking both French and English. Her collection of short stories, '*English Lesson and Other Stories*' (1999) explores

immigrants' experience of cultural ambivalence. An earlier publication, '*A Foreign Visitor's Survival Guide to America*' (1992) co-authored with Marilyn Levine, is a source book for immigrants. Novels by Baldwin pertaining to historical events are scrupulously written and industriously researched. Entirely gripping, her stories delve into woman's world and explore the meaning of survival in a world where even in contemporary globalised cultures male child is welcomed to the sounds of wind chimes and a female child is despised. Her characters face the struggles in a trans-cultural setup and present solution of such conflicts by fiercely recognising the scenario. Regarding *What the Body Remembers*, Baldwin in an email interview to The Hindu states:

Women are subjected to the most negative dreamscapes (from more powerful men and women) saying women's life stories aren't real or important. But women's life experiences can be recreated through a writer's imagination, and the truth told to power. (Baldwin, The Hindu)

The women face the existential predicament when they find themselves in an entirely different culture. After marriage, a woman is supposed to live in her husband's house where she does not belong. She is to live in a different cultural condition. Even the immigrant women also try to adjust in an estranged environment. In this situation, they look for support and emotional aid from their family and this isolation leads the women who are emotionally and economically dependent on their husbands, to the problems like depression, alienation and nostalgia with a sigh of cultural agony and consequently they suffer from alienation, weariness, boredom, rootlessness, meaninglessness in their lives.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is the story of conflict and discrimination where Geeta and her family members also suffer the alienation. Though Geeta's father settles down in the Oakland and her grandfather comes to live with them as he has no other means. He recollects the memory of the motherland, its customs and traditions. The family of Geeta seems to accept language and culture to some extent, but they were against of Geeta's marriage to Juan, a Chicano. Geeta is feminist and doesn't like to confine herself. Tilo experiences the brutality in the form of the attack on Mohan and the suffering of both Mohan and his wife Veena.

Indira Ganesan's *Inheritance* traces the identity formation of fifteen-year-old Sonil, who has come from the US to recoup from an illness. Ganesan's treatment of two different

cultures is quite identical and completely balanced. Renu's experiences at two different cultures makes her conflict in her mind on self-identity, materialized world and implications on life which is associated with Indian and American cultures. In her novel *The Journey*, Renu Krishnan and her sister Meenakshi Krishnan whose lives are designed by two different cultures. Renu's trauma is associated with the sudden loss of her twin cousin, with whom she had assumed a rare proximity. She is made to acknowledge her own repressed sexuality and incestuous love she had for her twin cousin Rajesh. Lastly, Renu prepares for a return to America and rejects the escape and metaphorical flight offered by the burning oil drum and Sati.

Kamila Shamsie grew up in Pakistan before going to the US for her higher studies. All her novels are set in Karachi. She characterises a marginalized Pakistani woman. She can objectively narrate her experiences as an outsider, with a neutral perception. Shamsie helps to create independent women defying stereotypes. The plot revolves around the disappearance of Samina Akram, a feminist activist, two years after her lover a famous Pakistani poet, described as The Poet, and is brutally murdered. In the character of Samina, Shamsie has created a "fiercely independent woman" (*Broken Verses*, Pg. 87). She becomes the symbol of the educated class willing to taste emancipation and soon finds herself invited to speak at girl's colleges and join panel discussions on women's upliftment.

Bapsi Sidhwa intends to suggest is the clash between the different ways of the individual, group and society as a whole, though her novels. she depicts the difficulties of passage in and out of Pakistan and America, and points at bridges that cannot be built between the two cultures. She describes herself as a "Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman." Sidhwa in her novels has taken up the issue of the cultural difference and the problems arising out of it. *An American Brat* deals with the intercultural theme, which has assumed vital significance for many postcolonial novelists. This has captured Feroza's journey to self-awareness begins with her flight to America; practically it turns out to be a journey from innocence to experience. The flight of the plane symbolizes the shift in culture and tradition. Sidhwa has explained a very different type of the experience through Feroza's character.

Sara Suleri's works deny all possibilities of the destruction of the network of power, which is portrayed as absolute and unchangeable. Suleri puts up strong and brave resistance against the network of power, but promises nothing more. Her two major works are *Meatless Days* (1989) and *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992). She creates a complete disillusionment

in the readers with national, religious, patriarchal, and statist discourses. She has a postmodern temperament which is validated by her writings, that culture plays the most important role in this era of globalised capitalism and digitally monitored world. Suleri, consequently suggests that the prime question today is no more that of overthrowing the dominant culture, but rather of carving out an autonomous niche within it.

Thus, Transculturalism is an active ingredient to stir the composition of ethnicity and identity. It helps in manifestation of will power to resolve conflicts and discrimination caused by hybridity. By focusing on the life condition of women in diverse circumstances, the study investigates the way they are bonded by the concept of religion and nation. The transcultural analysis done intends to shift woman issues from the paradigm of binary opposed and places woman as a socially constructed product.

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