



Unveiling Diasporic Contrast in the Select Poetry of Derek Walcott, Satendra Nandan and Sujata Bhatt

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Abstract:

History has seen many people torn between two identities as they adapt to new lands, cultures, languages, environments, and societies. On the other hand, there are cases in which an individual is affected by an unfortunate event or incident. Numerous writers have expressed their feelings of being a Diaspora and identity issues through literature after migrating to a distant nation. Such diaspora writers are Derek Walcott, Satendra Nandan and Sujata Bhatt. Derek Walcott is a Caribbean writer, Satendra Nandan is an Indo-Fijian writer, and Sujata Bhatt is an Indian writer who migrated to America in her teens and married a German. All three poets share a similarity: their histories or identities been influenced by colonialism. Derek Walcott's *A Far Cry from Africa* demonstrates the turmoil of an identity crisis. Satendra Nandan's poetry, *Lines Across Black Waters*, illustrates themes of identity and migration. Sujata Bhatt's *Search for My Tongue* depicts the poet hanging in the balance between English and Gujarati.

The paper contrasts their diverse historical backgrounds in the poems, in which they either miss their hometowns or forge new identities in foreign lands. It will highlight the distinct historical backgrounds in the poems, depict the themes of identity, migration, history, and belonging, and also bring to light differences in their writing styles.

Keywords: Diaspora, identity, history, migration.

When I am most deeply absorbed in writing a poem, I feel that I am translating images, sounds, rhythms, and an emotional 'tone' into words.

-Sujata Bhatt

Leaving the native land has not always been easy for immigrants, whether due to job opportunities, further studies, or permanent settlement. Everybody has their own reasons and motives for voyaging to the new land. Their pain and struggles are conveyed through literary pieces, and readers are told about the hardships individual immigrants face. Diaspora studies have been very noteworthy in bringing to light the real tussles, which include identity crisis, sense of belongingness, loneliness, discrimination, and the language barrier/issues. The literature of Diaspora has always been significant in depicting the complexities of identity, language, history, and related issues. In *Exploring Characteristics of Diasporic Literature: A Comprehensive Analysis*, the author exemplifies Diaspora writings as:

Diaspora Literature uses language to navigate cultural boundaries and express the diasporic experience's complexities. Authors often incorporate multilingualism, code-switching and translation into their works to capture the fluidity of identity and language in the diaspora. This linguistic diversity is a powerful means of conveying the hybridity and complexity of diasporic identities (Bah 108).

Writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Satendra Nandan, Bharti Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Derek Walcott and many more have shed light on Diaspora, and their writings reveal the real agony and combats.

Born in 1930 in Castries, Saint Lucia, the West Indies, Derek Walcott was a Caribbean poet and painter who published his first poem in 1944, and it appeared in *The Voices of St. Lucia*. He was awarded the Colonial Development and Welfare Scholarship and a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to study American theatre in 1957. He was influenced by renowned

poets and writers such as William Shakespeare, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. The founder of Trinidad Theatre Workshop, Walcott, has published numerous works that have become popular with readers. His writings mainly include *Epitaph for the Young: XII Cantos, 25 Poems, The Prodigal, White Egrets, Omeros, Far Cry from Africa*, etc. He has also penned several plays, which include *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* and *A Branch of New Nile*. Walcott had become the first Caribbean writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992 and was an honorary member of the American Academy and the Institute of Arts and Letters. He breathed his last in March 2017, in Saint Lucia.

Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and was raised in Pune until she left for the United States in 1968. Her first collection, *Brunizem*, won her the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award. Known for works such as *A Different History, Nanabhai Bhatt, Search for My Tongue, Poppies in Translation*. Bhatt has been a Lansdowne Visiting Writer at University of Victoria, British Columbia. She translated many works, including poems by Günter Grass and Günter Kunert, and has also translated Gujarati poetry into English for the Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women's Poetry. She is married to a German and now lives in Bremen.

Satendra Nandan is an Indo-Fijian writer born in Fiji and the third generation of his family. He has studied in India, England, and Australia. He has been a Member of the Fijian Parliament for Suva Rural Indian and the Minister of Health and Social Welfare. He is famous for his works, *Lines Across Black Waters, The Wounded Sea, Requiem for a Rainbow, Fiji: Paradise in Pieces, Gandhianjali*, etc. Nandan has pursued his bachelor's degree from Delhi University and his PhD from the Australian National University. He has taught at various schools in India, including The Doon School, Dehradun. Nandan has been part of various conferences and seminars, and his writings depict the struggles of the Girmityas, nature, life, and love.

(i) **A Far Cry from Africa**

A Far Cry from Africa by Derek Walcott is a poem that explores the agonising dilemma of identity under colonial rule. The poem begins with a scene from the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya. Walcott has explained the images of blood and corpses, thereby shedding light on the brutality of the conflict during the phase of colonialism. The poet has highlighted the savagery of the scenario and the prevailing conditions. Derek Walcott has expressed this as:

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt

Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,

Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.

Corpses are scattered through a paradise (Walcott, lines 1-4).

The poet contrasts the animals' natural violence with human cruelty. He emphasises the pain and the dread caused by the conflict and the "white peace" which was imposed by the colonial authority.

Further, the poet is now grappling with a personal dilemma. He is confused about his African and British identities, and this reveals how a diaspora feels when they are dangling between two identities and do not delve into the identity issues. The poet is not really satisfied with the identity he should adopt, and the hyphenated identity makes him question which identity he should really accept. Vijay Mishra argues in the introduction to *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorising Diasporic Imaginary* that diaspora people have a hyphenated identity, and that not every diaspora person is happy or satisfied with it, as it leaves them forever

confused about which identity they should have. Everyone has their own feelings, their own pain, their own crisis, and their own way of maintaining their hyphenated identity. He argues:

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diaspora refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia (1).

He was stuck and confused between the suffering of Africans and his ties to English culture and language. The poet brawls emotionally with his mixed identity and does not know which identity he belongs to or which identity he should carry forward. He feels detached from his ancestral roots. He acknowledges the brutality of colonialism and the battle for freedom, as well as recognising his identity. He says:

I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how

choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue, I

love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and live? (Walcott, lines 31-39).

The poem's last lines explicitly depict the pain and the complexity of the web. Both of his grandmothers were African, but his grandfathers were European. So, the poet has a mixed

touch for both cultures. He is showing sympathy for his African people, who were being dominated and mistreated by the British. However, when it comes to writing and speaking, he loves expressing himself in English, the language of the oppressors. The poet is hanging between two cultures and two identities, unsure which to acknowledge and adopt, since both language and culture are the ones he has seen and lived with since childhood. The poem ends with the poet in a state of ambiguity, wedged between two worlds and cultures.

(ii) Search for my Tongue

On the other hand, Sujata Bhatt's *Search for My Tongue* highlights the poet's fear of forgetting her mother tongue. Since she immigrated to the United States, she had to speak English, and no one could understand her mother tongue. She asks the readers what they would do if they knew two languages and were supposed to speak one, but then the other language would be lost. She also refers to the English language as a "foreign language." She says:

I ask you, what would you do

If you had two tongues in your mouth,

and lost the first one, the mother tongue,

and could not really know the other,

the foreign tongue (Bhatt, lines 3-7).

Nevertheless, when she dreams, the mother tongue appears, and it becomes strong right there. The language she feared vanishing was still alive. She expresses this as:

but overnight while I dream,

.....

It grows back, a stump of a shoot

grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins;

It ties another tongue in knots (Bhatt, lines 16- 27).

She begins by writing in Gujarati, then explains the pronunciation, and finally translates the meaning into English for the readers. The poet's emotions at the beginning are sorrow and anxiety over having forgotten her mother tongue. She thinks the English language is becoming superior and dominant compared to her mother tongue, Gujarati. Moreover, this might be because she is not using it in her daily communication or in her writing. However, now she is confident she has not forgotten everything and understands her Indian identity, despite living in an English-speaking environment. She says: "Every time I think I've lost my mother tongue, it blossoms out of my mouth" (Bhatt, lines 30-32). It is her dream to speak and write in her mother tongue, and in her dreams, she loves speaking Gujarati.

When the poet left for the United States to study further, she was not just immigrating; she was also leaving behind her Indian language and culture. Now, in the United States, she was expected to speak and write English, not Gujarati. In an interview, when Bhatt was asked why she chose the English language in her works, she mentioned:

I write in English because it became my language When I was a girl in India, I was sent to an English school, and also in between as a child I had travelled back and forth between the United States and India. So actually I learnt English in United States when I was five, and then we returned to India shortly after, and I continued attending an English school over there, and so that's why I write in English. My native language is Gujarati, and in some of my poems I've mixed Gujarati with English for various reasons, which pertain more to the poem than with anything else, or perhaps the poem reflects the way I think, or it reflects the part of my life, and so I've used both languages

in some poems, but I really feel English is my language, as it is for many other writers from India (Bhatt).

She still did not know what identity she should carry forward. Moreover, she fears losing her mother tongue, but in the end, she is relieved to remain rooted in Gujarati, and she has justified her choice of Hindi, English, or Gujarati in her works.

(iii) Lines Across Black Waters

Lines Across Black Waters by Satendra Nandan depicts the Girimiyas' migration and the development of a new identity. The poet mentions being brought to Fiji from India and enduring harsh British treatment, unaware that the colonisers had been colonisers. The feeling of sorrow, grief, and betrayal would never end for them, as the strange new land of Fiji was now their home. He says: "Kalapani, black waters, a cross across the seven seas/ With blood, betrayal, grief that never cease/A fragment, a shard lay buried" (Nandan, lines 11-12). They left India to build a new identity here. To work on the sugar plantations and work hard daily to survive had become their daily motive, as they were helpless.

They brought their Indian identity with them to Fiji, but it was not what they considered home. Some Girimiyas had died while they were on their way to Fiji. They were not given proper treatment, no matter the disease. In the middle of the ocean, those Girimiyas were battling for their lives too. The poet expresses this as: "The best were thrown into the sea/ Crushed in the juice of murderous cane." (Nandan, lines 34-35) The poem also discusses how the Girimiyas had built a life for themselves in Fiji. They were now creating a new identity for themselves, an Indo-Fijian identity, and had begun with the sugar plantation work ordered by the British authorities. The poet mentions that their ancestors had built a life for themselves and for future generations. They worked hard so that future generations could have a peaceful life and something of their own. They had died struggling in the new land, away from their

homeland. They hoped to live their Indian identity fully when they returned to India. The poet has exemplified this as:

Plantation by plantation, they build a new world.

Sugar sweet, the slave crop grew

Elsewhere, it had depopulated half the universe

Here my father's fathers,

Sleeping on our mothers' breasts

Gave breath and bread to an island

And islands in the ocean

Shipwrecked, trapped in history,

Without the grammar of grandmothers

They died in hope and dread. (Nandan, lines 42-51)

Many had died there in Fiji while working, and only their ashes are there, just like how they came to Fiji with their Indian identity. Their Indian identity was never dead; only their bodies were dead. When they had come from India, they had new hopes of working in the plantations, until the fellow Indians started getting sick on the ship, and some died because they were not treated well and on time. Their joy accompanied them when they boarded the ship, but their destiny had other plans and unfortunate surprises in store.

All three poems depict different complexities, pain, and identity crises. Walcott is confused about which identity he should possess, African or English, as his love for English is constant, yet by blood, he is an African. With the double identity, he still does not know which one to adopt properly. So his identity is not really fixed because he was born in the West Indies,

moved to Trinidad in 1953, and later moved to the United States to teach. Unlike Derek Walcott, Sujata Bhatt has been dealing with an identity crisis in a different way. Both belong to different languages, which are the languages of the roots. Nevertheless, when it comes to writing, both choose English to express what they feel, and their diaspora's feelings are clearly visible in their poems. Loneliness arrives when there is a language barrier, and Sujata Bhatt was dealing with the same crisis. The anxiety of losing the mother tongue, accompanied by an identity crisis, is evident in her poetry. In *Cultural divergence in Sujata Bhatt's poem "Search for My Tongue"*, the author expresses Sujata Bhatt's poem where she fears losing her tongue and wants to balance the languages as she has immigrated to a foreign country. No one there could relate to or understand her mother tongue, so the only language she could use to survive was English. However, when she begins writing her poem, she is relieved she is still acquainted with her mother tongue. Hence, the loneliness stems from the language barrier in the foreign country. This feeling of loneliness has been expressed as:

Being an immigrant, loneliness as a kind of alienation, is found in the absence of contact with others, in the same way Bhatt makes a sense of losing her mother tongue when there's nobody could understand her native language in the immigrated country, where she uses only English as her language of living (Nachiya 22).

Nandan was born in Fiji, and so he too chose English to express the history and trauma of the Girmityas. He never visited India as a child, so he has no memories of his youth there, but he has remained culturally attached to his roots. His ancestors had made him aware of his true roots. Hindi was not his primary language; English was the spoken language, and the Hindi he used was Fijian Hindi, a new language.

Bhatt was born in India but immigrated to various places for education and other opportunities. She even married a Frenchman. So she had to balance three identities together,

i.e. Hindi, English, and Gujarati. Satendra Nandan, on the other side, is an Indo-Fijian. He was born in Fiji, but his ancestors had come there as Girmityas. That is how the identity of an Indo-Fijian was created for him: his ancestors were Indians, but when they came to Fiji, worked there, and lived there, they created an identity that is carried by the generations after them. Nandan was introduced to Indian culture and rituals through the stories and lessons his ancestors and parents shared. He did not go to India as a child to see it and its cultural significance. However, he still maintains a balance between Indian and Fijian identity in his poems. Stuart Hall argues that the transformation of such identity is always in process. The three poets did not share a single identity; they maintained a balance between two identities while still confronting the crisis. Their identity-making was still in process and not fixed. Stuart Hall exemplifies this in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*:

Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past (Hall 225).

Nandan has depicted the lives of the Girmityas, and there, the crisis of identity is the major focus. The difference between these two poems is that Walcott does not know which identity to adopt. In contrast, Nandan's poetry shows the Girmityas building a new identity because they were now in a foreign land. The Girmityas came to Fiji to work in the sugar plantations as per the agreement and rules of the colonisers. Sujata Bhatt's and Derek Walcott's poems share both similarities and differences. For Bhatt, the issue was language identity: which language she should adopt, since she is originally a Gujarati Indian, and Walcott was confused

about which identity he should adopt, since both his grandfathers were European and his grandmothers were African. Sayantan Thakur in Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa" *An Exposition of the Conflict of Culture and Identity* says:

Walcott's divided loyalties engender in him a sense of not being able to adopt the culture of his origin. Though he accepts the "civilised" aspect of civilised culture, he cannot acknowledge the justification of the immoral treatment done by the British towards the Africans in the name of civilising them. The words, "A Far Cry from Africa", do not offer the poet a way to resolve the paradox of his hybrid inheritance (729).

Regarding the poem's writing style, Walcott's poem is in iambic pentameter and alternates between rhymed and unrhymed lines, while Nandan's poem is in very simple language, with a few rhymes or none. Sujata Bhatt also uses simple language that readers can easily understand while retaining deep meaning. The stanzas in her poem are in English, except for the middle stanza, which is in Gujarati. The Indian touch in her poem conveys her fear of forgetting her mother tongue and her love for it. All three poets have expressed their diasporic elements in different ways, using different words, history, rhyme, and meter. Through the simple language of the poetry, they expressed different stories of their lives, language, history, migration, identity, and displacement.

Conclusion

To conclude, the three poets have different reasons for being in other lands rather than in their homeland. History played a noteworthy role in their writings, and through them, they preserved their roots while battling an identity crisis. Nandan preserves the painful memories of the Girmityas, Walcott expresses his identity crisis, and Bhatt explains her crisis and fear of losing her mother tongue. Colonialism brought changes in the lives of individuals like Girmityas, and Walcott and Bhatt migrated for better education. However, colonialism has been the major

turning point for poets Derek Walcott and Satendra Nandan. Sujata Bhatt was born in her motherland but immigrated for future opportunities.

Identity and migration have been major issues for diaspora individuals, and their writings have become a blessing in their lives, allowing them to express their crisis and pain. Hence, the world becomes acquainted with diasporic elements. These differences and similarities help us understand the stories of Diaspora writers and see how they express themselves through their writings. Despite all the writings by diaspora poets, their work still appears complex due to their migration, immigration, history, identity, displacement, culture, and language. The contrast in the end helps us see the crisis they faced due to the circumstances, and it also emphasises diaspora studies, where readers can see different perspectives and the struggles of diaspora writers. Through the works of these poets, one also sees that an individual faces certain crises in life, in which one must establish an image of oneself or carry forward the image established by parents or grandparents. For them, literature became a medium for telling the world about the Diaspora's struggles, pains, and crises.

While analysing the aforementioned poems, it has been observed that the poets have sought to connect with their ancestors or ancestral roots in this way. The poems have been a way to get acquainted with or connect to their real roots, and perhaps keep the history alive. These poets have been blessed with their writing skills to treasure their feelings, emotions, roots, identity, and sensibilities. None of the poets has stayed forever in their motherland, but poetry has come as a blessing in disguise, allowing them to preserve their Diasporic histories and sensibilities. Through these diaspora poems, the diaspora readers or even just the readers, the diasporic sensibilities can be felt, and one easily connects to the history and the world of Diaspora.

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