

## **INTERPRETING DIASPORIC IDENTITY, DIASPORIC CULTURE AND TREND IN INDIAN CONTEXT**

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### **Abstract**

*Diaspora is the concept developed by many post-colonial critics to challenge the supremacy of national paradigms. More recently the term has been adopted by the post-colonial scholars and artists to refer to the forced and voluntary migration set in motion by empire. The term 'diaspora' is roughly defined as a dispersion of the people from their original homeland and theoretically it is a way of thinking or feeling rootlessness. Diaspora element is identified in these migrated individuals with the feeling of alienation, nostalgia and rootlessness at the place of migration.*

*The post- modern context of diaspora fundamentally suggests a hybrid and ever-changing nature of identity and diaspora identity implies a diversion of culture. It demonstrates not only the issues of origins and belongings but of what we refer to 'transnational identities, multi-rootedness and cross- ethnicity generated through worldwide migration.*

*Diaspora literature is the result of diasporic expression of feelings of rootlessness of the immigrants. The diasporic ideologies are put together in such literature. Many writers wrote about their diasporic life in foreign countries. Indian diaspora refers to that body of writing in English who are persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad. They represent diasporic identity in its historical, geographical and cultural context. In the studies of Asian literature Indian diasporic literature written in postmodern period becomes significant in its cultural and ethnical sense. It is in the focus of many literary discussions and debuts.*

*In the light of cultural and transnational upheavals in Indian diasporic literature the present paper attempts to interpret the diasporic identity focusing Indian diasporic culture and trend emerging in modern period expressed through Indian modern fiction in English.*

**Keywords: alienation, rootlessness, diasporic, transnational, immigrants, culture**

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### DEFINITION AND THE CONCEPT OF DIASPORA

Diaspora is the concept developed by many postcolonial critics to challenge the supremacy of national paradigms. In post-colonial studies, Diaspora can appear both as naming a geographical phenomenon the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group as well as a theoretical concept a way of thinking or of representing the world.

**Etymology of the term Diaspora:** Diaspora is derived from the Greek: 'Dia' means over, 'sperien' means to sow or scatter. It invokes images of multiple journeys (Brach, 181). It was originally used to refer specifically to the exile of the Jews from Palestine. More recently the term has been adopted and adapted by post-colonial scholars and artists to refer to the forced and voluntary migration set in motion by empire.

**Definition:** Diaspora is defined roughly as a dispersion of people from their original homeland. It is a community formed by such people. It is the 'dispersion' of an original homogeneous entity such as a language or culture. (e.g. diaspora of English – into several mutually incomprehensible languages )

**Origin:** Diaspora is meant historically the body of Jews or Jewish communities. Outside Palestine or modern Israel- it refers to the dispersion of Jews outside of Israel from the 6<sup>th</sup> B.C. when they were exiled to Babylon; until the present time.

**Historical Reference:** The term 'Diaspora' also carries religious, philosophical, political and aesthetic to logical connotation in as much the Jews perceive a special relationship between the land and Israel of themselves. One view of

their dispersion is that the disperse of the Jews was providentially arranged by God to foster monotheism throughout the world. Historically diasporic Jews outnumbered the Jews in Palestine even before the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. There after the chief center of Judaism shifted from country to country of e.g. Babylon Persia, Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Russia and U.S. Jewish communities gradually adopted distinct language rituals and culture some submerging themselves in non-Jewish environment more completely than other white some lived in peace others became victim of violent anti-Semitism. The vast maturity of orthodox Jews have supported Zionism, some orthodox Jews go to so far as to oppose the modern state of Israel on the ground that it is a godless and secular state defying God's will to send his messiah at the time he had preordained. 'Diasporism' then became etho-national widespread phenomenon, not confined to the Jews. Some diasporic communities of Jews were disappearing and other historical, modern incipient diaspora are multiplying and flourishing all over the world, including the Middle East.

'Much discussed modern term colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement. It involves the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of European over the entire world', says Bill Asbcrtt Hellen Giffi(Giffi 69).

However, diaspora is not something that simply happens in the colonies.

**The Diaspora in Middle East:** They were of various ethnic backgrounds who permanently reside in foreign host countries within and the outside region. The larger diasporic communities in the Middle East include Palestinian, Egyptian, China, Pakistani, Korean, Filipinas who reside in the Gulf of States and Saudi-Arabia, Rumania, Turkey- a small number of Greek in Egypt. Some of these diasporas such as American came from the established states like- Kards, Drure, Gipson, Palestine. They are stateless. The term diaspora has also been applied to other peoples with large numbers living outside their traditional homelands.

### **Common Characteristics of all such Diasporas:**

- They are resulted from both voluntary and imposed migration.
- Their members wish to and are able to maintain their etho-national identity which is the basis for continued solidarity.
- Core member establish in their host countries an intricate organization that are intended to protect rights of their members and to encourage participants in the cultural, social, political and economic spheres.
- The members maintain continuous contracts with their homelands and their segments of the same nation.

**Diasporic element** is identified in the migrated individuals with the feeling of alienation, nostalgia of the past and rootlessness at the place of migration as he or she is still clinging to the cultural beliefs, practices norms of the homeland. Makarand Paranjape has made correct observations in this regard. He says, 'there is a clinging to the old identity and a resistance to making a transition' (Paranjape 35-36). Sociologist N. Jayaraman names the concept of Diaspora as "the socio-cultural baggage" carried by an immigrant. The post-modernist context of diaspora fundamentally suggests a hybrid and ever changing nature of identity and diaspora hybridity implies a diversity of culture, that co exists compete merge and emerge in cultures that may be the outcome of a cultural meeting or of suppression, exclusion and domination. It demonstrates not only the issues of origins and belongings but of what we refer to transnational identities, multi-rootedness and cross-ethnicity generated through worldwide migration. Once in a foreign land the migrated people find in their culture a defense mechanism against a sense of insecurity in alien cities (49) and they try to stick to their identity of home and nation. This leads to the formation of diasporic and ethnic communities.

### **DIASPORIC IDENTITY**

The diasporic identity develops among the children born of the immigrants who belong to the second generation of diasporic. They are born in different country which is not similar to the country of their origin. This fact makes the

difference in the development of identity of those children as they are tossed between two different cultures and society one of the host culture and another of the home culture which is held fast by their parents in the land of migration. Thus torn between two polarities they develop a sense of in-betweenness which results either in the loss of identity and alienation or in hybrid identity. They adopt both elements of host and home culture. It creates tension and conflict in both the generations when parents want to maintain cultural ethnicity and the children want freedom to be more American. This gives scope for dual identity. 'Diasporic is defined then as an identity of the immigrant living in a diasporic condition. It is a plural identity and always in a flux' (Kulkarni 164).

#### **Diaspora in Literature- Diasporic writers and their writing:**

Diaspora literature is mainly the product of the writers who are diasporic people dwelling in other countries than their own and writing in Diaspora perspective about their own homeland and the host country. They are diasporic means dispersed people who write not in their native language but in the language of the country they are living in, however, they are writing about their native land and about their present position with nostalgic, critical or satiric approach as per their experience. They deal with the multicultural multi-linguistic and multi-professional theme. These multi-cultural and multi-linguistic apprehensions are diasporic in nature. They write stories that evoke memories of their homeland and of their being foreign in both the lands. According to Homi Bhabha the discourse of the wandering people of the diaspora marks a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation (Bhabha 36). The diasporic ideologies are put truth in such literature. Patriarchy-class structure and ethnic conflicts too can well be reproduced and reinforced by diasporic ideology. More and more diasporic writers are becoming aware of the relativity of the concept diaspora, its inherent contradiction. Many writers wrote about their diasporic life in foreign countries e.g. Indian writers wrote in post-modern period of their diasporic life in America and Britain. Since long time many Indians are migrated to foreign

countries for education and settled there, engaged themselves in writing about their experiences. In the field of fiction Raja Rao is the famous example who suffered cultural crisis being a diasporic and his novels show this diasporic element very significantly.

### **INDIAN DIASPORA**

With the term Indian diaspora, it refers to the persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad. Emmanuel S. Nelson defines the Indian diaspora as 'the historical and contemporary presence of people of Indian sub-continental origin in the other areas of the world' (Nelson15).

The literature of Indian diaspora is considered to be that body of writing in English produced by persons who identify themselves by Indian heritage who are living or have lived sometime outside the nation India in such places as Australia, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana and Mauritius, Malaysia, East- Africa and in countries, U.S.A. U.K., Canada. The history of Indian diasporic literature is as old as diaspora itself. Dean Mohomed is the first Indian migrated writer who wrote of diasporic experience in 1784. His book *The Travels of Dean Mohomed* is based upon his experiences in foreign country. Then Chander Dutt's *Imaginary History A Journal of Forty Eight Hours of the Year1945* was published in 1835. The first Indian English novel Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* was published in 1864. Then the novels of descendants of the Indian independent laborers in the so called 'grimit colonies' have predominantly favoured writing in English. V. S. Naipaul, Cyril Dabydeen, David Dabydeen, Sam Salvon, M. G.Vasanji, Shani Muthoo, Marina Budhas are significant contributors in this field. The novels of the older generation of diasporic Indian writers like Raja Rao, G.V.Desani, Santha RamaRao, Balchandra Rajan, Nirad Choudhari and Ved Mehata predominantly look back at India and recorded their experiences away from India as expatriates. It is as if they discovered their Indianness when they are out of India. The distance affords them the detachment that is so necessary to have a clear perception of their native land. But even if they looked

back at their homeland, it is often in an elegiac tone rather than in nostalgia. This is the marked difference in the writings of the old and new generations. Makarand Paranjape writes,

‘...the new diaspora of international Indian English writers live close to their market in the comfort of the Suburbia of the advanced capital but draw their raw material from the inexhaustible imaginative resources of that messy and disorderly subcontinent that is India’ (Paranjape 252).

Thus the writing of the diasporic Indians is not new but now it has late raised complicated issues which are discussed and talked in post-colonial cultural and literary discourses.

The formation of the Indian diaspora is one of the significant dislocations of modern times and can be classified in old and new diaspora. In modern times Indian Diaspora emerges as a concentrated phenomenon. The diaspora discourse essentially associated deeply with the sensitive human experiences such as nostalgia, pain, suffering ‘rootlessness, homesickness. The postcolonial wave of migration produced diasporic literary output. The post-colonial configuration of Diasporas has raised various serious issues pertaining to ‘nation’, ‘culture’ and ‘race’. To understand post-colonial Indian diaspora one has to comprehend the mixing and mingling of boundaries, nations, communities, its people and their ethos.

The famous Indo- Fijian critic Vijay Mishra aptly notes,

‘Diasporic epistemology locates itself squarely in the realms of the hybrid, in the domain of the cross- cultural and contaminated social and cultural regimes and therefore the diasporic cultural identity by its very nature is predicated upon the inevitable mixing of cast and peoples’ (Mishra 67-85).

**Indian Diasporic Literature:** The Indian diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population and not in the Jewish sense as an exodus of population in a particular point of time. This sporadic migration traces a steady pattern. Sudesh Mishra in his essay *'From Sugar to Masala'* divides the Indian diaspora into two categories the old and the new. He writes,

‘This distinction is between on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of Indentured peasants to non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa Malaysia, Surinam and Guyana, roughly between the years 1830 and 1917; and the other late capital or the post-modern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan countries such as Australia, the USA, Canada and Britain’ (Mishra 276).

Now a days the concept of ‘Indianness’ is much discussed with controversial issues. The diasporic Indian writer has given in his writing his own perception of native country. Several Indian writers are engaged in projecting India in their own view with alternative nationhood. The multiple possibilities of alienation and assimilation retreat into remember pattern and revolt against them, of being the colonizers and the colonized marginal and central are the different aspects of diasporic literature. Many other Indian writers of modern time and of post-modern time are writing in English. They are living in foreign countries, visiting native- country time to time and project the picture of different immigrant communities from Indian foreign lands. The theme of diaspora has become major then in the writing of Indian writer of modern time. Many Indian born writers, novelists have won the prestigious awards for their work e.g. V.S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. There are complexities of diasporic life depicted in the stories and novels of well-known Indian writers like Vikram Seth, Tanuja Desai, Sabrina Saleem, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Deswani, Gita Mehta, Manju Kapoor. Their novels are remarkably diasporic in nature with the diasporic themes.

‘The modern diasporic Indian writers can be grouped into two



distinct classes. One class comprises those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. The other class comprises those who have been bred since childhood outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin. The writers of the former group have a literal displacement whereas those belonging to the latter group find themselves rootless. Both the groups of writers have produced an enviable corpus of English literature. These writers while depicting migrant characters in their fiction explore the theme of displacement and self-fashioning. The diasporic Indian writers' depiction of dislocated characters gains immense importance if seen against the geo-political background of the vast Indian subcontinent. That is precisely why such works have a global readership and an enduring appeal. The diasporic Indian writers have generally dealt with characters from their own displaced community but some of them have also taken a liking for Western characters and they have been convincing in dealing with them. Two of Vikram Seth's novels *The Golden Gate* and *An Equal Music* have as their subjects exclusively the lives of Americans and Europeans respectively' (rupkatha.com).

**Diaspora element in the literature of Indian Women novelists:** There are many Indian women writers who are in USA, Canada, Britain and other parts of the world wrote about their experiences and about cultural cross in between two families. Some are recent immigrants while others are second generation immigrants. These writers carry autobiographical elements. They have explored female subjectivity in order to establish their identity that is not imposed by patriarchal society. Their writing mode creates the image of a new woman and her struggle for identity that needs support structure in and outside the family to enable woman to survive. There is marked difference in the writings of first generation (Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukharjee, Kamala Markanday) and the writings of the second generation women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Tanuja Desai, Gita Mehata

,Manju Kapur, Sabrina Saleem , and Chitra Banarjee. The writers of first generation projected the issues of rootlessness, racism, nostalgia and longing for ease and identity. The writers of second generation projected their imaginary homeland as they are not directly in the contact of the reality of India. They have weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India. This distance leads to the objectivity and ossification of cultural constructs. This construction allowed the middle class Indian woman who was caught between two discursive ideological constructs to negotiate her identity in conflicting spaces. This is problematic for female writers of the period, particularly for diasporic women writers who need to negotiate transnational gender identity and empowerment in shifting terrains of the first and the Third World diasporic spaces.

The diasporic writing of the modern women writers mark that woman even in her transnational space is ultimately defined through the inherited ideology, although modified and refined through the contact with Western cultural influences. This is represented in the diasporic novels of women writers not forgetting the reality what C. Vijaysree states,

‘Women are born into an “expatriate” status and they are expatriated in patria, hence a geographic movement away from home to an alien country is only an accentuation of gender exile that they all along born. It is this sense of perpetual elsewhere-ness that steadily reinforces the woman’s need for survival and self-preservation’ (Vijaysree 131).

Some examples can show this difference. Anita Desai’s *Bye Bye Black Bird* and Kamala Markanday’s *The Nowhere Man* are the novels that depict how racial prejudice against the Indians in U.K. in 1960 alienates the characters and aggravates their sense of displacement.

The recent women writers are exploring the cultural clash suffered by Indian woman who is given western education. The experience of being caught between has remained a prominent theme in their novels. For instance, Sabrina

Saleem's novel 'A.B.C.D.' (*America Born Confused Desis*) has strong theme of diasporic life. The very title makes it clear that it is about diaspora. It is about the American children born to Pakistan parents and about the contrast in the views of attitude of parents and children being belong to two different culture and nation. The children are American born enjoy fun and life while their parents hear the persistent call of the old country.

In Tanuja Desai's '*Born Confused*' we hear a funny and thoughtful story about finding culture and place in America by a girl of Indian parents. She is born confused spends her whole life resisting her parent's tradition and is in search of a suitable boy to marry that she never finds.

*The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri is a story of a boy brought up as Indian in America. The question of the new born child in America takes interesting yet pathetic turn as it becomes story of his search for true identity and place in foreign country with Indian origin and traditional legacy; his path is strewn with conflicting loyalty, love and loss.

*Inheritance of Loss* is Kiran Desai's famous novel deals with the theme of multiculturalism, migration, class-crisis, split identities and loss of loyalties to both. The very title suggests the diasporic loss of the immigrant Indians.

Kavita Desai's '*The Village Bridge of Bevedy Hills*' is a novel about a new-married Indian girl who went to America and is expected to be an Indian ideal daughter-in-law. Her pitiable yet humorous predicament is due to her double identity. It is story of her disintegrated marriage life like many other Indian girls who marry husband living or migrated to America.

Meera Syal in her novels, *Anita and Me* and *Life is not All Ha, Ha Ha Hee Hee* has represented the lives of the first generation as well as of second generation. Sunetra Gupta has shown with candor both the unpleasantness of intercultural relationships through characters like Moni and Neharika from her novels *Memories of Rain* and *A Sin of Colour*. Jhumpa Lahiri's book of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* and her novel *The Namesake* illustrates the lives of

both the first and the second generation migrants in USA. In this way the diasporic novels depict culture clash dilemma and problem of such diasporic people. This is possible because big issues like religious intolerance and racial discrimination are no longer the main concern of these writers. It is examined that the Indian woman writers of diaspora have been writing variously upon the lives of men and women. There is vividness in the portrayal of gender which ranges from old generation to new generation and represents the various situations in a woman's life in alien land. These writers portray the predicament, the joys and sorrows and mainly the issue of the identity of Indian woman of Diaspora. As women writer they view gender from a woman's point of view and thus extend the boundaries of human experience from different perspectives and dimensions.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we see many others writing now in English language are from various colonized countries of common wealth group deal with diaspora. Diaspora has become major theme of modern and post-modern literature with an increasing number of diasporic writers. This also demonstrates that the inner needs of all human beings are the same. Alienation is a part of the experience of the Indian diaspora and if people are at home in any part of the world it does not mean that they will not become victims of the sense of alienation. An increasing acceptance in the host society does not indicate that the diasporic characters can feel at home and then social alienation will be replaced by metaphysical alienation.

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