

DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN LITERATURE

RADHIKA S. MUKHERJEE
DNYANASADHANA COLLEGE,
THANE, INDIA

Abstract

The Diaspora encompasses narratives of displacement, immigration, identity, transnational's and the cross-fertilization of ideas. The immigrants feel lonely and solitary, because of the difficulty they come across in lack of adaptability, lack of acculturation, multiple identities in the foreign countries. Diaspora Literature comprises of an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement or dislocation occurs and narratives of merciless journeys of the migrants from one place to another. Indian Diaspora, today, has emerged with the multiplicity of histories, variety of culture, tradition, and a deep instinct for survival. The process of survival of the diasporic individual in between the "home of origin" and the "world of adoption" is the voyage undertaken in the whole process of "Alienation" which the migrants experience in real life situations. Alienation and quest for identity has always been a theme in literature.

This paper is an attempt to study the Diasporic Identity in literature with reference to the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri. This paper also aims at tracing the quest of the protagonists for his/her identity in the novel.

Key Words: Diaspora, Alienation and Identity Crisis.

DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN LITERATURE

-RADHIKA SUBHANKAR MUKHERJEE

The Diaspora encompasses narratives of displacement, immigration, identity, transnational's and the cross-fertilization of ideas. The customary description of Diaspora seems to be a group that recognizes its separateness based on common ethnicity or nationality, lives in a host country, and maintains some kind of attachment to home country. Diaspora Literature comprises of an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement or dislocation occurs and narratives of merciless journeys of the migrants from one place to another.

'Alienation' is a situation in a social relationship where an individual suffers from the feeling of not belonging to his social institution that surrounds him. This feeling is also known as 'Isolation' or 'Foreignness' in one's own surrounding. Alienation is a feeling that one experiences in life whether in one's work place, family, society, culture, community, and country at large. When one feels alienated, it is more difficult to understand that feeling of not belonging to one's own social institution. They lack in having belongingness to their surroundings. The creation of literary characters that strive hard with alienation and often found struggling is a result of the real life struggle of the people. They often have the feeling of discontentment in life. Alienation is a powerful force which moves an individual towards the negative impulses of self-pity, helplessness, violence and deep self introspection. Many authors have used this theme to trace the feeling of discontent which is a result of this alienated self.

'Identity Crisis' is a term coined by the renowned Psychologist Erik Erikson who considers the formation of consciousness in an individual is due to the psychosocial and psychobiological development. It neither is such a state of mind when the individual comes across a psychosocial or psychological crisis and his unity of identity is nor achieved and then the person is a said to

be in identity crises. The theme of identity crisis is predominant in literature and it often arouses concerns when we see someone experiencing it in his/her life. The individuals experience the identity crisis when they come across their identity not secure in the family, work place, society, culture, country, etc. These individuals are unable to disentangle themselves from the difference between whom they are and who they are supposed to be. They have unanswered crisis in the conceptualization of their basic identity, basic self-image and basic 'I' consciousness. They strive hard to establish their identity but somehow fails in having awareness about their true selves which somehow unable them to achieve self actualization.

Today everyone can witness that the world is suffering from Alienation and identity crisis. The progression of survival of the diasporic individual in amid the "home of origin" and the "world of adoption" is the voyage undertaken in the whole process of "Alienation" which the migrants experience in their real life situations. Alienation and the quest for identity has always been a predominant theme in literature. Most of the Indian Writers such as, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others, have used the diasporic elements which are also used as the recurrent themes in their literary works.

Bharati Mukherjee is an Indian born Canadian/ American novelist has made a deep impression on the literary works of the 'Alienation' and her novels honestly; depict the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement from her land of origin India to Canada and from Canada to United States of America. Bharati Mukherjee's characters in her novels are autobiographical portraits of her interpretation and reaction of her personal experience in America. Her novels identifies the matters of unsteadiness and anguish, which explores the problem of nationality, identity, location, alienation, and more of her historical memory in Canada that she herself faced both as a human being and a writer.

Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter* is the dilemma of her belongingness and the alienation of the Indian expatriates in a diasporic

community. Tara Banerjee, the protagonist, is a Brahmin girl who travels to America for advance studies and in order to assimilate herself to her new surroundings she marries an American boy. Tara Banerjee struggles to hook-on to the nationalized community by entering into the wedlock with an American is alienated in her American set of connections and then alienated from her roots of descent. She also suffers the tremor of separation which is very terribly ill-fate for her. Her pain of alienation is evidently apparent when she wonders "how does the foreignness of the spirit began?" (Mukherjee, *The Tiger's Daughter*, p.37). Her alienation is not only in Canada and America but also in her own native land Bengal when she returns to India after seven years. It is that instant when she realizes, that she is neither an Indian nor an American.

When Tara returns to India, she sees India through the eyes of a Western imagination rather than through her own childhood eyes. Her sense of alienation in Calcutta is symbolized by her regular visits to the Catelli-Continental Hotel, from where she views the turmoil of Calcutta from the safe heights of a tourist, cut off from the real India which agitates below her. Tara is no longer able to feel a part of her own family, who belong to an old Bengal and which is now lost to her. Tara's cold response to her pet name 'Tultul' and her inability to feel at ease with her old friends who belong to Calcutta and in their different ways are as alienated as Tara. Tara a migrant woman who is sandwiched between personalities and suffers the identity crises that is very different to her American life. Tara felt self-estrangement at a 'loss of her identity' and her alienation both in Canada and her own land Bengal forms a predominant theme in this novel. Bharati Mukherjee in her truthful confession bemoans the state of "overseas citizenship while expecting the permanent protection and economic benefits that comes with living and working in America" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine*, 148).

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is a diasporic novel which reflects the identity crises and is very well portrayed by the help of his forceful and touchy characters. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is about India's transition from British colonialism to Independence. In the novel, the story is articulated through various characters and actual historical events taken place

during that period in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. *Midnight's Children* is an unsteady parable for events occurred in India before and after the Independence and the partition of India, that had taken place at the midnight on 15 August 1947. The protagonist and narrator of the story in the novel is Saleem Sinai, born at the exact moment when India becomes an independent country. Saleem discovers that in fact all children born in India between 12 AM and 1 AM on 15 August 1947 are imbued with extraordinary powers.

In the novel *Midnight's Children*, the historical recreation of the individual fate is realized as part of an imaginative mechanism in satisfying the larger thematic rationale i.e. the quest for identity in Saleem Sinai's mind. Rushdie explores the term 'Midnight' as: "Midnight has many children; the offspring of Independence were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed, and peppercorns.... I had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than I—even I—had dreamed." (333).

Saleem Sinai unfortunately drifts away from India's national history though by birth is truly and most crucially placed there as he is a close spectator and also a eyewitness of the national growth, over a period of nearly three decades, he is recurrently dissatisfied with it and later one can see him becoming a "peripheral hero" of post-independence India. According to Rushdie the children born on Independence Day are different as he says: "We, the children of Independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he, Emergency-born, will be already more cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist. Already, he is stronger, harder, more resolute than I...." (489).

We often find Saleem Sinai taking way out to fantasy to seek his roots with the Indian psyche, through fantasy and memory of a former past, as a form of accomplishment, in his quest for true identity. Saleem Sinai moves in and out of Time in the description and when he is in Time, i.e. as an 'observer', he is nowhere found to be taking part in the national history; which becomes a matter of pain and acute disillusionment for him.

However through the medium of Fantasy and memory Saleem Sinai look

for his liberation and establishing his roots, where he can retrieve himself into his distressed psyche and resolve his national identity between India and Pakistan. To attain his complete identity, Saleem tries to explore into the entire Indian phenomena. Saleem's quest for identity is not settled in his secret drift into India and Pakistan but his quest for the national identity with India not only becomes a historical necessity but also a personal necessity at large. Later Saleem not only becomes alienated by the psyche of India and Pakistan but also loses his own self and identity as an individual, and reaches a state of history-less mystery. The Bangladesh War also adds to the agony of Saleem, by making him feel injured of the consciousness of the Indian subcontinent that he is outside the values of both India and Pakistan and his sense of identity over troubles him as he suffers from amnesia until he enters a quasi-mythological exile in the jungle of Sundarban, where he is re-endowed with his memory.

Saleem's eventual glide into Sunderbans is an instance for the total loss of identity of Saleem. Later Saleem sought realization that in the journey of his quest he is not alone but he is having the company of his family members as well in his journey. After his rootless in Pakistan, his roots continue to be weak in India as well but still Saleem looks ahead to find his emotional and spiritual house in fantasy. Towards the end of the novel we see Saleem gaining realization that he and the children born at midnight were not ordained to identity. He and the children born at midnight seems the subject of sucking to the eddy of multitudes and it is a situation where one is neither said to be living nor to be dead. Thus, the novel *Midnight's Children* ends on a message of fear and unpleasantness of identity.

Kiran Desai has very emblematically and impressively depicted in *The Inheritance of Loss* the themes like, sense of loss, multiculturalism, economic inequality, postcolonial chaos, nationhood, interconnected world, identity-crisis, love, dislocation, third world countries, American dream, and loneliness. The novel is made up of very few vital characters who share common historical past of British colonialism. Kiran Desai has brilliantly presented her characters in a society, which is plagued with crises of its own identities, to cast away its history and emerge unshackled from the trappings of the past. The protagonists

are the retired judge in the British and then Indian civil service named Jemubhai Patel, Sai, (his grand-daughter), Gyan (Sai's Math Tutor), their cook, and Biju, (the son of the cook). The opening chapter finds Sai, who is a sixteen-year-old orphaned teenager, waiting at her home for her Mathematics tutor, Gyan in the eastern Himalayan Mountains of Cho Oyu, in the vicinity of Kalimpong.

Sai stays with her grandfather, Jemubhai Patel in his house who has a dominating and proud personality and always tries to keep himself away from communication with the people. He has only one friend, named Bose who is his lonely companionship in chess without a dual player reminds and signifies the white British Empire and his only muse in life is his dog Mutt. While the main story centers on Sai and her budding relationship with Gyan, and the consequences of his enchantment with the growing Gorkha Independence Movement that affects Sai's life as she becomes lonelier and alienated thereafter. The third member in the house is the cook, who is faithful and dwells on the letters of his son, Biju. The cook fashions a dream world for his son and wants him to be a greater cook in America. Biju is in New York working as a cook and he is in search of finding an identity of his own which later ends up in his vain attempt to get a Green Card 'this was the absurdity' and he struggles as an illegal immigrant in New York (Desai 99). Periodically, the retired judge's memory is sparked and we travel discursively into his time as a student in Britain or his extremely troubled return to India. In the novel the characters are alienated and each is observed to be grasping at some sense of self-identity. Sai's and Gyan's distress in the absence of each other and the stone-hearted Judge's weeping for his lost dog Mutt arouses sympathy and sadness but the running of the Cook and Biju into each other's arms leaves the reader with a smile in the end.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* skillfully investigates the intricacies of the diasporic thoughts of strangeness, Identity crises, cultural confusion, the struggles of adjustment and the intervening ties between generations. Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully showcases the diasporic emotions when her character encounters a distortion in cultural and ethnic identity in a foreign land further

she also throws light on their personal identity indicated by their name also becomes powerless to change. The characters are often found in the quest for their identity, which fails to merge Indian identity with their American identity. In the novel the constant struggle is portrayed in the life of the first generation immigrants and their children struggle to find their places in American society.

In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri tries to explore the importance of a namesake and identity language in India through the life of Gogol, who suffers for the uniqueness of his name. The novel brings to us the Bengali Ganguli parents Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly, who are observed to be struggling with adapting to a different culture than they are, used to. Their children Gogol (Nikhil) and Sonia (Sonali) also struggles with trying to respect their roots while adapting to American society. It is a common practice in Bengal, where the parents give their children two names: one that is a pet a name, used only by family and close friends, and one that is good name, used by the rest of the society. Jhumpa Lahiri rightly points out the tradition of Bengali's as: In Bengali families '...individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are meant to be inherited or shared'(28).

Ashoke Ganguli named his son Gogol especially due to the conditions of his survival of a train wreck during which he was reading the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. The rescuers found him lying injured in the rubble of the wreck due to the piece of page from Nikolai Gogol" s book which he was still holding in his hand. Ashoke considers the name of Gogol as a name which signifies a beginning, a survival and everything that followed that terrible night of train crash in India. The son was fond of being called as Gogol only. When the parents admitted Gogol in kindergarten, his parents told him that he is to be called Nikhil, a good name, the real name to be called by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his good name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family which proves his first attempt to reject a dual identity. Gogol's parent's decision made on the very first day of his admission to Kindergarten with his good name as Nikhil causes him years of agony. Like all other Bengali's, the Ganguli's also aspire to raise Gogol and his sister Sonia with Bengali culture and values but the fact was

much different as Gogol and Sonia grow up involving mostly to their friends and adjoining culture in the United States of America. Both the brother and sister face the diasporic crisis of dual identity because of their Bengali tradition of having two names and further they also fail to merge their cultural milieu with American ethnicity.

In Yale University, Gogol learns about his namesake, Nikolai Gogol, and that he was a mentally unstable pariah and starts to hate his own name Gogol and so he changes it to Nikhil in order to detach himself from all the bindings of his family and shun all their expectations. Gogol is a name that is neither Indian nor American nor even really gets a first name at all. Gogol fails to understand the emotional significance of his name and it is no more giving him comfort in America as it signifies all his anguish to fit into two different cultures. Gogol feels alienated in his American setup and strives for his identity between both the nations. Both Gogol and Sonia (Sonali) are frustration of being different from most of the kids they know, in spite of born in USA as some children scoff at their names, some damage their mailbox with offensive terms and some just find them funny. So he is very happy for years when he is away from home in college to live his life as Nikhil, which also detaches him from his Bengali roots in America.

Further we see Gogol gets attached to a white American girl, Ruth but they soon gets separated and thereafter he has affair with Maxine, an Anglo-Saxon American ethnicity and a member of a liberal and very wealthy Manhattan family. Although they love each other, they ultimately split up with a heated argument when Gogol returns after performing all the Bengali rituals on his father's death. Gogol's mother Ashima wants Gogol to marry Moushumi Mazoomdar, who grew up in England and is a childhood friend of Gogol from another Bengali family, who in turn shares same cultural background. Ashima becomes successful in convincing Gogol to marry Moushumi but soon their marriage breaks up when Moushumi starts having a sexual affair with her old love Dimitri. Towards the end of the novel, we see Gogol back with his family spending Christmas together and thinking of his family's history right from his father's accident in a train crash to his

unsuccessful marriage. Gogol gains realization that can't look down on any of the culture but he has to interconnect with both the Indian and American cultures together. Gogol feels privileged of being made up of both the names and it strengthens his identity, which enables Gogol to feel as a free bird to do and has freedom to exercise his mind without any botheration from his family or the demands of American society. The novel ends with Gogol's assimilation in American culture and Indian heritage which is identical when he feels proud of his name Nikhil Gogol Ganguly .

To Conclude, Salman Rushdie rightly presents the life of a migrant in his novel *Shame* as he points out "the longing for the homeland is countered by the desire to belong to the new home, so the migrant remains a creature of the edge, 'the peripheral man'(283) further he elaborates in "Imaginary Homelands": 'Exiles or migrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back even at the risk of being mutilated into pillars of salt' (10).

WORKS CITED

Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Tiger's Daughters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1972, p.37.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989, p. 148.

Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Penguin, 1991. Print.

Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006. Print.

Lahiri, Jhumpa .*The Namesake* .New York: Mariner Books, 2003. Print.

Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*, Calcutta Rupa, 1983, p.283. Print.

Rushdie, Salman, (1991). 'Imaginary Homelands' in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1881-1991*.Granta. p. 10.