

Reflections on Indian Diasporic Fiction: A Review with Reference to Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai

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Abstract

The word, 'diaspora' means 'to disperse' in its original Greek context. Ashcroft, Griffith's and Tiffin define it as the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions... Cohen describes diaspora as the communities of peoples living together in one country who acknowledge that the old country – a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. (K. Rupinder qtd. in CDL). The literature of diaspora refers to the works written by those who live outside their native land. There are various types and kinds of diaspora literatures-African, Australian, Arab diaspora, and so on. Among these, Indian diasporic literature has caught 'fancy of writers, literati, historians and sociologists. Since, foreign land offers many fold challenges in terms of adaptation and assimilation of various socio-cultural values, this paper, as such is an attempt to theorize some of the common issues reflected in the Indian diasporic fiction, annexed with a brief review of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's works.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indian diasporic fiction, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai

Introduction:

The Indian diasporic fiction which emerged out of several social, psychological and cultural backgrounds has achieved a unique and important place in the present day critical discourse. The fiction written by Indian writers who presently live in India or in other parts of the world have claimed global accolades for the handling of diverse subject matters, characterization, language and multiple thematic issues. The most important feature of this genre is that it is evolving day by day while extending the empire of Indian English fiction. From the very inception to simple experimentation, the Indian diasporic fiction is now globally recognized for the wide use of employed narrative techniques, hybrid language and undercurrents of contemporary issues. The widening gyre of diasporic writing has a phenomenal impact on the fast-changing global world. Understandably so, because by bridging cultural gaps between East-West global poles, it has

rendered an immense service in acculturating the uncommon zones of different cultures. The Indian diasporic fiction besides bringing the lure of late capitalism to the forefront has also pictured trauma and tragedies of displaced groups living in the distant lands. As such, when one surveys Indian diasporic Fiction, the human soul awakens to respond the calls of dispersed in the wilderness of postmodern civilization. It is this soul's awakening that Indian diasporic fiction is mostly remembered for. The new generation Indian diasporic fiction writers have touched all the possible spheres of human enterprise and as a result, the vast numbers of readers across the world, are tempted to experience the universe through the eyes of those who have beautifully observed it. In the recent years, Indian fiction writers have been widely recognized by the west. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have either won the prestigious literary prizes or they have been short listed for it.

The contemporary India is blessed with legendary diasporic novelists, who cross all the labels of nationality, race or ethnicity and voice their inner most feelings through the immortal pages of fiction. Their firsthand experience and vast scholarship brought a renaissance and second coming to the Indian English fiction. The fiction of Indian diasporic writers celebrates diversity of cultures, races and ethnicities. Their fictional diversity is akin to what India itself represents. The well-known names in the Indian diasporic fiction writers include but are not limited to Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Aravind Adiga, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai along with some others. They have refined the Indian English fiction, giving it new dimensions, heights and magnitude. They all belong to the post-colonial era and employ either 'magic Realism' or 'fragmented language' to reveal their inner self.

Discussion

Post-colonial literature has developed because of the dramatic shrinking of the world, due to the technology and transportation, and the increasing multicultural cast of our own country. The Post-colonial literature goes under various subheadings like Diasporic writing, Subaltern Studies, Cosmopolitan writing and so on. While assessing Indian diasporic fiction as a sub-genre of post-colonial literature, we observe that this field entitles the huge corpus of well recognized works widely read and rightly appreciated by global readers. The extraordinary representation of local-global, self-society and home-homelessness which form its core, inform us about the present-day futility of making geographical borders for confinement of the circulation of free ideas between civilized human races. The motif of the Indian diasporic fiction is not only to highlight the issues of nostalgia and alienation but also to eliminate manifest as well as latent boundaries, the geographical and well as mental. As the imaginary and well distributed concrete borders of nation, race and ethnicity, render an enormous disservice to the progressive world, the vanity of having them is questioned by diasporic fiction. The purpose of diasporic stance is simply to

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recognize and respect different socio-cultural values and lead the world towards the harmonious cultural, social, racial and religious synthesis. A more vital endeavor of it is to promote unbounded flow of new ideas for human progress rather than to survive on the colonial yoke and serve the devils purpose. This diasporic liberal stance has opened up new literary gates through which we can not only mirror our past but also can dream the distant dreams of future.

The word ‘diaspora’ as Somdatta Mandal observes, is derived from the Greek, meaning dispersal, distribution or spreading has been applied for many years to the worldwide scattering of the Jews; In more recent times, it has been applied to a number of ethnic and racial groups living distant from their traditional homelands; and it has been used with particular application to people from the former British India- a result of the colonization, though of late, one occasionally hears or reads of the African diaspora. When we speak of the Indian diaspora, writers generally refer to persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad. (In earlier times often as a result of induced emigration or indenture but in more recent decades usually by free choice and often for economic, artistic or social advantages) (M. Somdatta qtd. in CDL).

However, in present times, there are African, Australian, Arab diasporas and so on, besides well established, south Asian diasporic writers, making their name and fame in the literary arena. These diasporic voices emerging from margins have established a literary canon in their respective home-host country. They in addition to presenting the perennial issues of loss and longing have also defined new goals for fiction.

Sudesh Mishra makes a distinction between the old and new Indian diasporas. 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 on the other the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centres such as Australia, The United States, Canada and Britain. (M. Sudesh qtd. in IHILE)

While tracing the recurrent thematic trends dealt within the Indian English diasporic fiction, we notice a striking divergence between these two old and new groups of writers, especially marked variations are found in the treatment of their experiences on the foreign soil. The writers of the old diaspora are very keen to record the experiences of their initial encounters with the alien culture. While doing so, they generally express anger, frustration and estrangement. The new diasporic writers on the other hand, freely examine the cross-cultural perspectives in more positive and affirmative sense. To specify the points of conversion and diversion between these two, Sudesh Mishra, in the same article, categorizes old and new diasporic writers as:

The writers of old diaspora like V.S Naipaul(India- Trinidad) Harold Lado (Trinidad-Canada) Subramani(Fiji), K.S. Maniam (Malaysia) tend to express panic, nausea, hysteria,

estrangement, violence and nostalgia in their works, the writers of new diaspora such as Bharati Mukherjee (India- United States), Farrukh Dhondy (India-Britain), Agha Shahid Ali (India-United States), Rohinton Mistry (India-Canada), Sujata Bhatt (India-Germany) Kiran Desai (India-United States) and Jhumpa Lahiri (India-United States) are inclined to inhabit the liminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that defines the experience of migrancy.(M. Sudesh qtd. In IHILE)

Hence, when we examine Indian diasporic fiction as whole, it emerges that the themes of panic, nausea, hysteria, violence, nostalgia home, homeless, alienation, estrangement, identity, hybridity, cross-culturalism, local, global and longing belonging frequently recur in these writings. Apart from this, the self becomes a focal point in all major diasporic works to explore its various connotations with regard to the society. As the self as well as society is always in a continuous flux, the artistic representation as such portrays all these changes in an imaginative and creative manner. Since, woman are more prone and sensitive to subtle changes, happening around the self, and the surroundings, they present a very heart touching and exciting account of all these changes.

The two Indian-American women novelists-Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are the representative writers in the genre of new Indian diasporic fiction. Their works keenly observes the experience of immigrants in multiple ways. Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai belong to the innovative new generation of diasporic writers. They share a variety of common and contrary viewpoints. Both are deeply rooted in the diasporic discourse of duality and dilemma. They experience the plural identity between the home culture and host culture. Their characters are drawn from rural India and placed in the promising cities of America, where they experience both nostalgia as well as the rejection of inherent value system and cultural roots. Apart from this, they have their own way of narrating the events. Jhumpa Lahiri's language is more touching and natural than her counterpart. She gives a psychological treatment to her characters without philosophizing them too much. Kiran, on the other hand, looks towards every minute detail with great philosophizing nature. The fiction of both of these novelists explores how the earliest modern notions of centre and margin home and exile and familiar and strange are falling apart. The borders defined in terms of geography, culture and ethnicity are being replaced by configuration of power, community space and time. Lahiri with Kiran are represented as new, progressive and innovative South Asian writers. Both are seen as a successful decedent of Rushdie centric, global South Asian literary diaspora or in other words, one of his "midnight's Grandchildren"(A phrase which denotes writers of mainly Indian decedent who take a realist as opposite to magical realist turn in their fiction).

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In addition to personal interviews, there are also various research papers of academic scholars who have made an important contribution in the critical analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's fictional world. However, before revising the main research articles, I would first like to introduce few dissertation works written on the field, beginning with:

Amartya Sen's thesis "Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny" (London: Penguin; 2006). The crux of the Sen's thesis is that "our shared identity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions in the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification – in terms of religion, community, culture, nation or civilization". (S. Amartya: 2006)

While as Tamara Ayesha Bhalla in her thesis "Reading the Authentic South Asian Diasporic Literature" examines the Lahiri's Namesake as portray and representation of second generation of South Asian Subjectivity, whereby exploring the theme of identity crisis. (B. Tamara: 2011)

Besides these outstanding works, there are also a number of research papers of well-known literary scholars who have mainly focused on the diasporic experiences of these two writers. The list goes long, but I have chosen few to analyse the main trends.

The Research Paper- "The Treatment of Immigrant Experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's the Namesake" by D Ebina Cordelia, examines the novel 'Namesake' from Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin's view point of "diaspora" exploring the theme of alienation, loneliness, homelessness and quest for identity. (C.D Ebina: 2011)

Shirley de Souza in her research paper "Memory and Forgetting: An Analysis of 'Unaccustomed Earth' takes Nietzsche's concept that "forgetting is a positive power that enables a kind of relaxation of consciousness and allows the rise of the new". She analyses the characters of the short story collection from this perspective and demonstrates how the internal relations between recalling and forgetting operating in the text. (S. Shirley: 2010)

In the research paper, titled "The Loss of Identity and Cultural Predicaments" Dr. Ramesh Singh M. Chauhan discusses Kiran Desai's novel, "Inheritance of Loss" as a fiction, depicting the universal problems of class-distinction, cultural difference, loss of identity and superstitions in the Indian society. (S. Ramesh & M. Chauhan: 2013)

Meenakshi Goyal and Hemlata in their research paper "The themes of Alienation and Displacement", discuss the key issues of alienation, displacement, intra-national and international migration with respect to the Anita Desai and Kiran Desai's fictional world. (Meenakshi & Hemlata: 2013)

Conclusion

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Thus, in this review paper, an attempt was made to reflect some of the common themes frequently dealt, and recurrently taken by Indian diasporic fiction writers. The paper however, also carried an evolutionary history of Indian diasporic fiction, starting from the term diaspora itself with some appraisal of this genre. In the last section, few dissertations and selected articles were analysed to make a review how Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai's fiction has been dealt or explored through the post-colonial and cultural literary discourse.

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