



## **INDIAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE: A CRITICAL APPROACH**

**Maqsood P**

Assistant Professor

SS. College

&

**Shahal KK**

Faculty of English.

Exa, Centre for Education

### **Abstract**

Indian diasporic literature has now become a huge cultural force in the world. A short look into the achievements of these writers over the last three decades would allow us to appreciate their global reach in terms of their critical and artistic acclaim. Kiran Desai won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2006 for her novel *The Inheritors of Loss*. Indo-Trinidadian novelist brought credit to India by winning 1971 Booker Prize for his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Apart from that he also won the most prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in the year 2001. Indo-Anglian novelist, Salman Rushdie, one of the masters of the postmodern novels won Booker of Booker prize. Many works of several other writers like Jumpa Lahiri were shortlisted or long listed for Booker or Pulitzer Prize. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* won the commonwealth prize for the best first novel. Shahi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* won the prestigious Commonwealth Prize. And finally, the latest figure in the field, Jumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* also won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. The *Lowland*, by the same novelist was shortlisted for the 2014 Man Booker Prize. Time and again these writers have been making their own distinct mark in the great pantheon of literature. In the face of these developments, serious attempts have to be made to make a sense of this new wave in literature. The function of a literary critic is much more than a mere act of reading and aesthetic appreciation. In the context of the success story of this new wave in the contemporary literature, as critics, what should be our response to it? Let us ask, what exactly is this new trend in Indian English literature? What makes it so much appealing to the international reading public? And what should we do in response to new found global reach of this body of Indian English literature? Should we join the global celebration or should we critique it? Our function, in the





simplest sense, should be a critical celebration: the texts deserve to be celebrated for their global appeal. But, without shunning our critical faculty. These texts need to be critiqued along three lines, firstly, as a text of pure literary merit, secondly, as a cultural text and thirdly, as a product of larger culture/ western exotic industry This paper is a critique of this new cultural force: Indian Diaspora Literature.

**Key Words:** Diaspora, Third Space, Indian Diaspora, Diasporic Literature.

## Indian Diasporic Literature

The diasporic texts are the records of the life in the third space. It is an irony to note that a great deal of what is considered as Indian literature in English is not written by writers living inside the country. Instead, most of them are written by writers living outside India and these writers together produce Indian diasporic literature. Indian diasporic literature is now produced from every continent on the planet and these writers, by giving expression to their creative urge, have been bringing credit to their motherland. Their works have been critically acknowledged in the international stage, both in quantity and quality. A short look into the achievements of these writers over the last three decades would allow us to appreciate their global reach in terms of their critical and artistic acclaim. Kiran Desai won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2006 for her novel *The Inheritors of Loss*. Indo-Trinidadian novelist brought credit to India by winning 1971 Booker Prize for his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Apart from that he also won the most prestigious Nobel Prize for literature in the year 2001. Indo-Anglian novelist, Salman Rushdie, one of the masters of the postmodern novels won Booker of Booker prize. Many works of several other writers like Jumpa Lahiri were shortlisted or long listed for Booker or Pulitzer Prize. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* won the commonwealth prize for the best first novel. Shahi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* won the prestigious Commonwealth Prize. And finally, the latest figure in the field, Jumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* also won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. *The Lowland*, by the same novelist was shortlisted for the 2014 Man Booker Prize. Time and again these writers have been making their own distinct mark in the great pantheon of literature. In the face of these developments, serious attempts have to be made to make a sense of this new wave in literature.

## Indian Diasporic Literature: Beyond Its Success Story.

The function of a literary critic is much more than a mere act of reading and aesthetic appreciation. In the context of the success story of this new wave in the contemporary literature, as critics, what should be our response to it? Let us ask, what exactly is this new trend in Indian English literature? What makes it so much appealing





to the international reading public? And what should we do in response to new found global reach of this body of Indian English literature? Should we join the global celebration or should we critique it? Our function, in the simplest sense, should be a critical celebration: the texts deserve to be celebrated for their global appeal. But, without shunning our critical faculty. These texts need to be critiqued along three lines, firstly, as a text of pure literary merit, secondly, as a cultural text and thirdly, as a product of larger culture/western exotic industry.

Diasporic literature, as it is understood today, is of very recent origin. Diasporic literature, that is, writings by or to a lesser extend about, the migrants, have gained an ever-growing interest and attention within literary and cultural circles since 1960s. Sudden growth and maturing of migrant and diasporic literature since 1960s have been a response to the increased trans-national movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These include: migration of refugees owing to political unrest in several countries and more recent transnational flow of labor and service, largely from the third world countries to the first world countries. This genre of literature, in the simplest sense, is a fictional record of the life and experience of migrants, both forced migrants and voluntary migrants. It may focus on social and cultural contexts in the migrant's country of origin, the experience of migration itself, the mixed reception the migrants may receive in the country of arrival, the experience of racism and hostility, the sense of rootlessness and the search for identity which may result from the experience of displacement...etc The diasporic literature, for its preoccupation with such themes as displacement, emigrant versus immigrant perspectives, multiculturalism, hybridity, bilingualism and multilingualism, shares close affinity with post-colonial literature.

Indian diasporic literature is not a body of homogeneous works, on the other hand, it is as divergent and heterogeneous as the Indian diasporic community itself. For instance, Rau Badami talks about her having one foot in Canada and a couple of toes in India, Lahiri, in her works attempts to negotiate between her two cultural identities, Naipaul talks about India being his "magnificent obsession", still he feels that Indian "wounded civilization", as he called it, rapes him, Bharati Mukherjee, whose works portray the everyday battles of Indian immigrants in the US, still battles to see herself as an American writer: "I totally consider myself to be an American writer and that has been my biggest battle..", Rushdie who mourns that owing to his physical alienation from India, he "will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost"(India) still takes pleasure in portraying, the ugly side of Indian cities, cow dung and people defecating in the public spaces. This, indeed, is not a body of homogenous works.





Why do these writers, despite their common awareness of rootedness to India, demonstrate a high degree of ambivalence in their attitude towards it? First of all, the diaspora itself is not a homogeneous community. There are communities that have been diasporised multiple times, there are those who have voluntarily chosen to leave the homeland, and also there are those who have been forced out of their homeland. Most of Indian immigrants in Uganda, for example, who were evicted out of Uganda after its independence in 1962, did not make their way back to India, instead, most of them sailed to Britain where they gained citizenship after a long legal battle. This makes them twice diaspora. So was the case of many Indian indentured laborers in Surinam who would later move to Netherlands. The diasporic experience of these double diasporic communities can hardly be compared to the commonplace diasporic communities, in the way they imagine the homeland and in the way they experience the current country of settlement. This experience of double diasporisation can color their experience of both homeland and host land. Similarly, a German Jew and an Indian freedom fighter who fled their respective countries to escape the persecution, in the first case from the anti-Semitic persecution and anti-rebel persecution in the second, are far less likely to feel the same about their homelands. Similarly, a second or later generation Indian immigrant in USA, who is more of an American of Indian descent than of an Indian in America and thus far more Americanized and a first generation Indian immigrant in USA, who, on the other hand, is more of an Indian in America, are less likely to have overlapping experiences. For the former, India is a mere cultural baggage while for the other India is a land where he feels most at home. In short, diasporic lives, in the way they are lived and relived and diasporic consciousness and memory in the way they are imagined and cherished are through varying modalities; modalities of generation, class, gender, faith, and socio-political and economic background of the homeland as well as the host land. Inevitably, there are those who denounce their Indianness, there are those who proudly uphold their Indianness and there also those who grudgingly accept their Indianness. This heterogeneity of the diasporic communities account for the heterogeneous nature of the diasporic literature. Diasporic literature, after all, is a document of the life in the “third space”.

Despite the fact that the genre is too diverse and defies any strict sense of definition, still there are certain perceivable commonalities shared by most diasporic writings. Most of these works revolve around the postcolonial trope of individual's or community's detachment with the homeland and the urge to belong to the host land, as a result of which they reveal a hybrid existence. Lau describes the hybrid experience around which most diasporic works revolve as “they are people who are as multi-cultural





as they are multi-lingual. They do not regard themselves as fully belonging in either culture, and have practically evolved a sub-culture peculiar to themselves. They try to take the best from both worlds, but suffer the sense of hybridity and cultural entanglement” (Lau, 241).

Referring to the hybrid experience in diasporic literature Jasbir Jain calls the genre as a “split narrative”. Her mainstay is that what diasporic literature fictionalizes is the diasporic struggle to negotiate between their split selves, between split loyalties, one for what the diaspora considers as the homeland and the second, for the host land. She further discusses the past and the present of diasporic literature as being different—the past has a different history, tradition, regional and colonial memories and political equations and the present has different kinds of loneliness, isolation, social ghettoization, success, affluence and recognition. She writes, “even though they live in the present they co-exist in the past too” (2004,76). This is perhaps one of the most defining qualities of diasporic literature. The line between what is past and what is present is shadowy as memories of past are constantly evoked which in turn redefine and manipulate the present.

Closely linked with the theme of past and homeland is the theme of nostalgia and a sense of dislocation which Salman Rushdie explains as he states “exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars, of salt” (1981:76) Rushdie further mentions while discussing the diasporic group, “that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (1893: 76). In the diasporic setting, nostalgia thus emerges as a means by which diaspora attempt to restich and recreate their torn self.

Another common theme in the diasporic literature is the intricacies of the encounter of two cultures. These works often portray the perplexity and shock of the individual upon encountering a new culture thus making contrasts between the two cultures.

Multicultural experience and a sense of being an alien in the native society induces a search for identity in the lives of diaspora. The search for identity is all the more intensified in the second and later generations of immigrants. Although the second and later generations of the diasporic community consider the country in which they are born as the home country, the society still perceives them as outsiders and therefore they are caught in a hyphenated identity. For, were born or have grown up in the host land all their life. They are uncomfortable with the notion of a home elsewhere for they have no sense of exile. Their sole exile is the exile within their own home. This sense of exile, when





coupled with diasporic space's characterized by the co-existence of multiple cultures induces an intense search for identity. "Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature" (252).

Now, as a text of cultural dynamics, it has to be analyzed as a text that represents a community. For, the international reading public, in most cases take these texts as authentic representations of India, its culture, its ways, its politics and its literature. Its implications can be astounding, that as for the international reading public, the writings of a few Indian diasporic writers emerge as a more authentic literary representations of India than the "great trio" of Indian English literature (namely, Raja Rao, RK Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand) and other great Indian writers who write in both English and regional languages. There can be no dispute about the subtle treatment of the so-called Indianness in the writings of the writers born, raised and die India. Let us take the example of R K Narayan. R K Narayan could truthfully represent post-independent India in the process of transformation through the stories of a tiny provincial town named Malgudi, a figment of his own imagination that, as a microcosm of the whole country, most skillfully represents the country in transformation and regional flavor. Not to mention other Indian regional writers who with their acute critical faculty and lived experience of India represent and problematize India through their works. It is in this context that, we need to think about the authenticity of the Indian diasporic writers, for many of whom, India is more of a lost homeland that appear in the bed time stories, or in the romantic remembrances of their parents, or in some extreme cases a mere distend land that frequently appears in the grandma-tales or in the most promising cases a holiday destination that these writers, along with their family members, visit every summer vacation. The authenticity of these writers is, indeed, a question of deep implications. Let us take the case of Bharati Mukherjee, who with her works like Days and Nights in Calcutta and Jasmine, is often considered as the most authentic of the Indian diasporic writers. Bharati Mukherjee, despite her having been born and spent some of her prime years in India, still considers herself an American writer, not an Indian expatriate writer, who writes largely for her American readers. In a 1989 interview with Ameena Meer she says "I totally consider myself an American writer", further saying she even doubts if she ever was an Indian: "...and that has been my big battle to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers".

Now taking up the question of the politics of representation, let us discuss who represents, whom represents and for whom represents. The complex phenomenon that is India and Indianess, is represented before an international reading public through the





lens of a dozen of writers, who as noted earlier, surely lack a lived experience of India and its people. And these writers, with their towering visibility in the international stage outshout their Indian-born-and-raised counterparts who, apparently, could represent India with higher authenticity. Diasporic representation as evidenced in the writings of Naipaul, often fail to address the nuances and tend to be riding on the wings of generalization tend to reiterate and reinforce the old East-West dichotomy. Naipaul's Indian Trilogy, namely, *India, A Wounded Civilisation*, *An Area of Darkness*, and *India, A Million Mutinies Now*, is perhaps the most pessimistic travelogue ever written about India. In this respect, the writings of Naipaul seem to be more in one with the modern CNN or BBC representation of India. It is perhaps the fact that Naipaul most contentiously demonises India, his native Trinidad and Africa that has made him such a favorite with the west. No other non-white writer has ever been so much discussed by the western critics. Similar literary representations that motherland rapes you on return may be a product of the "brown sahib"-consciousness, characterized by an unfair attitude towards West versus East dichotomy that reinforces the old colonial outlook, of these writers.

Let us now take discussion on a totally different plain to discuss the economic aspects of the diasporic literature. After all in such times as ours, the "almighty" money is ubiquitous and therefore it is hard not to take a note of the underlying profit and economic interest of any industry. As for literature, publishing industry is a commercial affair, a thriving billion dollar business of our time. When it comes to diasporic literature such as that of Lahiri, profit interest becomes much more evident. To understand it, one only has to ask the question, to whom are these works addressed. Going through Lahiri's fiction, it is perceivable that the stories are so narrated, events and motives are so perfectly chosen, and cover pages are so designed that they keep the interest of the western audience and become a part of larger ethnic or culture industry that caters to the ever-growing western hunger for exotic. Beginning with the cover page of the *Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999 first edition of the collection published by Boston based Houghton Mifflin Harcourt carried the picture of a yellowish orange Sari with a design most easily identifiable as a traditional Indian woman's palm covered in a fairly common henna design, which the western audience easily identify as exotic and appealing. In this respect, of special interest is Jhumpa Lahiri's own short story, "The Interpreter of Maladies" that follows on the India-tour of the Das family settled in USA. The family, accompanied by the local guide named Mr.Kapsi, has come to visit the much fabled Sun Temple in Konark and Jain monasteries in Udayagiri and Khandagiri. The couple's exploration of the temple, their awe and curiosity forms a parallel to E M Forster's *A Passage to India*, a prime example for the exoticised literary representation of India. Much like Lahir's tale, Forster's





novel follows the curious exploration of Marabar Caves of Bihar by two British ladies, Miss Auela and Mrs Moors. In this way, feeding on the western hunger for the exotic, Indianness becomes more of a selling point for these writers.

Now, in the final few lines, we essay to answer the question of the identity politics for which diasporic literature is most criticised, especially by the post-colonial critics. Indeed, the question arises out of diasporic preoccupation with the phenomenon of hybridity. As noted earlier, in the diasporic creativity, hybridity of the characters becomes the central axis around which the story revolve. Torn between their simultaneous self-contradictory loyalties, one for India and the other of the country of settlement, these characters most acutely resemble the mythical king, Thrishanku, who sought to be a part of the heavenly world without losing his human quality and was cursed by the lord Indra for entering the heavenly world. Hence, the King had to satisfy himself by occupying the world in between the Earth and heaven, the “third space”. Just like the king Thrisanku, the characters in diasporic literature seem to occupy the in-between space, half Indian, half American or British and half eastern or half western, and half black and half white. Since the question of hybridity has always been a fertile ground for contentious debates among the post-colonial critics, the postcolonial preoccupation with the diasporic literature is understandable. Reading these, one is instantly reminded of all those Fanon, Said and Spivak stuffs and the general postcolonial anti-hybridity outcry. Fanon termed the phenomenon as an “alienation of the self”, Spivak derogatively called it “mimicry” and additionally, there are even many colloquial derogative terms like “coconut”(brown outside and white inside) and brown sahib to refer to the phenomenon of hybridity. Well, in a deeper analysis of the whole human history, it is understandable that hybridization and assimilation have always been a part of the human history and progress. Hybridisation, as it is understood today, is not a product of the last few centuries and hence it cannot be taken only as a part of the larger global mono-aculturating agenda. Instead, hybridization has to be taken as an ever-present by-product of cultural exchanges inevitable for human progress. In his essay Location of Culture, Baba seem to agree with this idea. He believes that to keep the momentum of the identity dynamics going we need to maintain the cultural exchanges or even the conflicts in the ‘in-between’ space of our communities, because precisely in this region “the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition (or representation) of cultural difference”. Hawthorne puts this idea most simply when he writes:

“Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long







a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil.  
My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far  
as their fortunes may be within my control, shall  
strike their roots into an unaccustomed earth.”  
(Hawthorne ,15)

### **Bibliography**

- Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, Print
- Bhabha, Homi, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi, ed., *Nation and Narration* ,New York: Routledge, 1990, Print.
- Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print
- Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington ,New York: Grove Press, 1968. Print.
- Jain Jasbir, *Dislocation and Multiculturalism: Essays in Homage to Professor RK. Kaul*, Jaipur, Rawat Publications. 2004. Print.
- Mukherjee, Bharati, “Literature Interview”, Meer Ameena, *Daily Quarterly Archive*, 1989.
- Hall, Stuart, and Paul du Gay, eds, *Questions of Cultural Identity* London: Sage, 1996. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi.. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. 1993. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Step Across this Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002*. New York: Random House. 2002.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *The Scarlet Letter*, Boston, Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1850. Print.

