



WOMEN AND THEIR ROLES IN DIASPORA: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of diaspora has gained unprecedented prominence and proliferation in the contemporary literary, cultural, political and sociological disciplines. Based on the diaspora discourse, diasporic literature has emerged as a seminal part in the corpus of world literature. The studies of diaspora now encompass multifarious disciplines like sociology, economy, geography, political science, cultural study and film study. It has also been recognized as a distinct field of academic interest in the domain of literature like post-colonial and Third World Literature.

It is generally acknowledged that the term 'diaspora' is originated from the Greek words: *speiro*= to sow, and *dia*= over. Hence, etymologically, it denotes dispersion, scattering and dissemination of people across the countries. In Hebrew, diaspora was termed as *Golah* or *Galut* meaning "Exile". Earlier, the term 'diaspora', as it is widely known, was particularized in the history of the Jews exiles, as mentioned in the *Bible*. It is however unanimously conceded by scholars that the Jews diaspora is at the core of the diasporic conceptualization.

Diaspora study has been an almost worldwide movement and has featured prominently in a usually wide range of academic disciplines. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to bring in some definitions of diaspora in order to have a coherent meaning. So in order to define and theorize conceptualization of terminology of 'diaspora', this introductory part focuses on some prominent critical standpoints provided by a constellation of noted theorists and critics like William Safran, Robin Cohen, Benedict Anderson, Avtar Brah, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi K Bhabha and Iain Chambers. William Safran in his article "Diasporas in Modern societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991) perceives diaspora as "different categories of people – "expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court" scattered across different countries and corporeal territory (83).

Following the aforementioned definitions conceptualized by the aforesaid thinkers, diaspora can critically be defined as a

seamless network of socio-cultural-political and psychical manifestations spurred by a circuitous movement which accompanies the immigrants, expatriates, refugees and exiles with their sense of solitude along with their urge for return to the native land, temporarily connected with each other by their collective memory and their reinvention and reproduction of the cultural identities which seems to be an ever-evolving process.

Iain Chambers perceives diaspora in terms of mutability and uncertain departure from the homeland and arrival in the homeland simultaneously. He observes in his book *Migrancy, Culture and Identity* (1994) that "Diasporas are encapsulated within the unfixed language, histories and identities. In diasporic condition, a stranger is burdened by the new challenged identity, dispersed 'historical inheritance' and the heterogeneous present" (4-7). He adds additional meaning to the word diaspora by adding the concept of 'here', 'there', 'inside and outside' when he states:

To come from elsewhere, from 'there' and not 'here', and hence to be simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' the situation at hand, is to live at the intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation into new, more extensive, arrangements along emerging routes.(6)

James Clifford, an anthropologist, labels 'diasporic consciousnesses' an awareness that has arisen among the contemporary transnational communities. Dual or paradoxical in nature diaspora is allied with the negative and positive experiences like discrimination and exclusion, and identification with historical heritage which significantly marks the particularity of diaspora. Nevertheless, diasporic consciousness, as he poses, is a centre where elements of loss, exclusion, marginality and exile are juxtaposed with 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' and 'stubborn vision of renewal'. Hence, he figures out this consciousness as a tool for loss and hope. In addition to this, he enunciates diaspora as a transnational network which blurs the dichotomy between 'minority communities' and 'majority societies. Another scholar Khachig



Tololyan has observed 'diaspora' as a larger realm of immigrants, expatriates, refugees, guest-workers, exile community and ethnic community.

UNDERSTANDING DIASPORA THROUGH THE STANDPOINT OF CREATIVE WRITERS

Apart from the scrutiny made by the aforementioned critics and theorists to theorize the concept of diaspora, a host of diasporic creative writers have argued over diaspora or diasporic consciousness through creative lens. The noted diasporic writer V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) captures the old Indian diaspora where India is constructed in the minds of diaspora through forms (transference/transformation) of spatial mobility. Bharati Mukherjee has located diasporic identities, as 'illicit identities' as images of homeland, is recreated through electronic mediums like cassettes. Indian-British diaspora writer Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children* (1981) has mapped out how the notion of diaspora is intertwined with cultural hybridity, impure identity and fragmentation of identities along with the history of nation-states.

In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Amitav Ghosh has consolidated the fragile concept of national territory, fluid identity, memory, erasure of border lines, proximity of faraway countries through imagination, etc. Along with these, issues of partition and communal violence with significance of religious and cultural identity, blurring of the real and imaginary home and certainly the narrator's voyage of quest for the root have also been highlighted by him. The critic Brinda Bose has observed Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) in her research paper entitled "Footnoting History: The Diasporic Imagination of Amitav Ghosh" (2002) from critical angle: "In Ghosh's fiction, the diasporic entity continuously negotiates between two lands, separated by both time and space – history and geography – and attempts to redefine the present through a nuanced understanding of the past" (239). Through a critical lens the noted diasporic writer Bharati Mukherjee has made an attempt to locate the idea of diaspora as an exercise of gain rather than loss and displacement accompanied by termination of indigenous culture.

GENESIS OF THE OLD INDIAN DIASPORA

After Cohen's categorization of several types of diasporas, the present study unfolds the tracing back to the genesis and development of Old Indian Diaspora, presumed as Indentured Labour Diaspora. After the abolition of slavery system in 1834, laborers from poverty stricken countries like India were lured by the middlemen working under the influence by the British government. Those illiterate and downtrodden migrants were transported to Fiji, Malaysia to be coercively employed in tea, rubber or sugarcane plantations. They were called 'indentured labourers' as they signed bond for five years. This however is termed as a 'new form of slavery'.

The idea of the 'girmit' is also embedded in the Indian indentured diasporas as they shared the same ship during their voyage. Mahatma Gandhi considered himself as 'Pehla Girmitiyas' (first Girmitia). The indentured Indians carried the great Indian epics namely the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the *Gita* had a great influence on the psyche of those poor indentured Indians.

Indian immigrants were very often labeled as 'coolies' by the British, to categorize Indians within a detestable creature. The derivation of the term 'coolie' from Gujrati 'kuli' encompasses the kuli tribes of thieves, plunderers and degenerated people which also characterized indentured labourers (Anand Mulloo, 2007:174). Even poor women were also victims of such colonial dispersion. Noted social and political reformers like Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Dr. S. Ramgoolam and others revolted against 'Coolitude' to retrieve dignity and identity of poor Indian immigrants. In 1930, the abusive term 'coolie' was banned among the poor Indian workers.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN CONSTRUCTING 'GLOBAL INDIANNESS'

In the formation of Indian diaspora, Indian immigrant women's contribution to the 'global Indianness' indicates women's proneness in holding nationalistic values beyond physical territory. Smitha Radhakrishnan views 'global Indianness' as a production of "the bodied and representations of iconised global Indian women" (Radhakrishnan, 2008:11) Since the 1990s, the ubiquitousness of globalization policy has permeated most of the countries by connecting network among the countries for facilitation. The involvement of Indian women in the construction of global Indianness ensures their superior position in public sphere. In the last two decades, increasing ratio of women has engaged themselves in the IT industry which triggers them to be promoted in the USA. Indian immigrant women, in spite of their residing in USA, anchor to the natal traditional values. Scholars like Sathi Dasgupta and Aparna Sircar in their research article "Work Roles, Gender and Asian Indian Immigrant Women in the United States" (2000), have mentioned the 'behavioral duality' of the Asian Indian immigrant women in both the realms of private/domestic.

EXPERIENCES OF THE INDIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Women play an instrumental role in domestic as well as public spheres in foreign countries. Scholars like Aparna Rayaprol and Anannya Bhattacharjee considers woman as a significant representative of the pure 'nation'. Indian immigrant women in the foreign countries like America perform active role to sustain the tradition of homeland instead of relinquishing the heritage. Aparna Rayaprol has cited an instance of Sri Venkateswara temple in Pittsburgh which emerges as an emblematic of women's active involvement and empowerment in the public



arena beyond domestic sphere. Indian immigrant women's involvements with SV temple of Pittsburgh along with the committee Mahila Sangham (Women's group) exemplify participations of immigrant women (Rayaprol 1997).

With expansion of the Western feminist movement in the 1970s, the famous slogan 'the personal is political' dilutes public/private dichotomy. In the alien countries, the immigrants form diaspora community to construct cultural identities or the ethnic identities. Scholar like Keya Ganguly's analytical view of the Indian immigrants in New Jersey, has unearthed the dichotomy between private and public realms. From her stand point, Indian immigrant women usually encounter alienation and isolation outside the domestic sphere. She not only valorizes the dichotomy, but favours constriction of immigrant women in domestic domain. Nevertheless, Ganguly has examined over women's feeling at ease in domestic realm rather than the outer world which creates 'acute alienation' for them.

The different studies of the Indian immigrants in the foreign country have illuminated on the different situations as experienced by the immigrant women. Rayaprol on the one hand, has exposed empowerment of the immigrant Indian women in the USA and, on the other, highlights the marginalization of men's authoritative power over immigrant Indian women in the developed country like Canada.

The South Asian immigrant women act as conduit to carry and retain the cultural and traditional baggage of the ancestral land. Necessarily, immigrant women are considered to be the transmitters of homeland culture among the posterior generation. Dwelling in diasporic circle, Indian immigrant women usually preserve the ethnic cuisine, language, religion and cultural festival through the invocation of nostalgia in this unknown atmosphere. Hence, their endeavor to acculturate with the adopted country clashes with their reproduction of the past culture which turns into 'deculturation' replacing acculturation.

WOMEN AND THE DIASPORA DOMAIN

In the context of the private and public domains, the immigrant Indian women seem to occupy the acclaimed position for the activity of the public and domestic spheres as well. Like other academicians, Yasmin Hussain has observed immigrant South Asian women's laudable participation in social, cultural and economic arenas. She perceives the immigrant Indian women as conducive for sustaining individualism in the western culture as well as allegiances to the ancestral culture (Hussain 2005). Their involvement in the political and monetary organizations in the public sphere is hardly visible even in the foreign country as these organizations are controlled by masculine power. This discrimination critiques Rayaprol's positive observation of immigrant women's equal participation in public realm. Academicians like Helen Ralston remarks that the empowerment of the immigrant Indian women in the USA is hardly noticeable in Canada where most of the organizations in the public sphere are controlled by immigrant men instead of the immigrant women.

The immigrant Indian women, who are doubly burdened by the white culture and masculine folks in general, are generally attached with both the spheres, public and private in the developed countries like the USA. Their engagement to perform for both these spheres has made the immigrant women to be more responsible and laborious. While the involvement of the immigrant men with only outer sphere or public sphere makes their work easy. Thus the immigrant Indian women are doubly marginalized by the white America. They are oppressed, on one hand, by racism and on the other by the rules and norms of the patriarchal society as pointed out by some academicians. Eminent critic Donna Gabaccia has touched upon the immigrant women as 'marginal figures'. According to her, immigrant women are studied within the women's studies unlike men. Hence, Gabaccia's opinion about women's marginality extends further analyzation of the immigrant women: "... not greater visibility but great marginality" (Gabaccia, 1991: 62). The eclipse of the immigrant women along with the racial minorities' history has been explored in the essay of Gabaccia.

THE RISE OF WOMEN DIASPORIC WRITERS

Since 1950 the literary penchant of the male Indian diasporic writers have proliferated and enriched diasporic literature. In the 1960 onwards immigrant creative women writers have also contributed in the realm of diasporic literature. In its inception, dominance of the male writers has overshadowed female diasporic writers. Later on, it reaches to its pinnacle with the prolific writings of a host of female writers. In the history of diaspora literature, V.S. Naipaul as a writer of old Indian diaspora has dealt with the issues of immigration marked by slavery, rootlessness and preservation of homeland culture in the adopted land. In the arena of the South Asian diasporic literature, other eminent male writers such as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Agha Shahid Ali, M. G Vassanji, Amit Choudhury, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Hanif Kureishi, Michael Ondaatje and G.V Desani handle with issues of mobilization and transplantation of immigrants, their sense of disjuncture from native land, identity crisis, multiple or hybrid identities, fragmented and fissured identity, cultural tension, lack of assimilation or integrating with alien culture, lack of belongingness, reinvention of homeland through tropes of nostalgia and memory and many other immigration and expatriation aligned issues.

Apart from the contribution of male writers to the domain of diasporic literature, advent of the South Asian women diasporic writers since 1960s has embellished this specific trend to some extent and, later on 1990 onwards, female diasporic literature has reached to its pinnacle. Moreover, grandeur of their works in this field has stretched even to this twenty first century. The handling of diasporic issues in diasporic situation by the male Indian diasporic writers though thematically harmonizes with Indian women diasporic writers, but women writers deviate from the masculine writers in sense of presentation of women's experiences. The diasporic men writers



have presented the issues of the migration and dislocation or one's rupture from the indigenous land from masculine point of view. Hence, a gap in their way of presentation of theme, issues and technique is conspicuously observed in unearthing the diasporic women's outer experiences and psychological regions exposed by male diasporic writers.

Generally the works of male diasporic writers hardly project women in accordance with their experiences and positions. The effort by diasporic men writers

Seems to be insufficient to excavate the inner or psychological voyage of immigrant women along with their outer voyage. Hence, the diasporic women writers emerge to write down the experiences of women through female perception and perspectives. The women writers depict the characters and their experiences in foreign countries in such a way so that immigrant women feel identified with the women writers who articulate for them. Apart from this, several prestigious awards have pushed the immigrant creative women talents in the realm of writing creativity in the USA. A constellation of such luminary diasporic women writers namely Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni, Uma Parameswaran, Meera Syal, Sujata Massey, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Anjana Apachna, Indira Ganesan, Shani Mootoo, Farhana Sheikh, and several others have possessed their places centred on diasporic literature. Their endeavour aims to explore the women's role in resuscitation of their ethnic culture at the junction of homeland and host land cultures. The observation soaks their real or sometimes fictitious experiences in the foreign land, diasporic women writers portray the female characters who under the oppressive hegemony of patriarchy and white culture embark on the journey of articulation.

Though the diaspora women writers emerge in the mid-1960s still they gained prominence in the 1980s onwards. The advent of female diasporic writers in the developed countries like the USA, Canada and Britain can be classified in tripartite waves.

In the first wave, in the 1960 and 1970s, the upper class and elite class women have immigrated to the overseas country like America accepting educational fellowships and different kinds of awards. The Immigration Act of 1965 in the USA which is known as 'New Immigration' envisages the idea that liberal legislative policies introduced in America have made it easy for the immigrants to bridge the gap between the two countries (native India and America) in terms of cultural, educational, economical and political arenas. The pioneer writer of this phase is Ruth Praver Jhabvala, born in Germany of Polish-Jewish parents. Later she moved in India and stayed for twenty four years and later on she immigrated in America and got the right of citizenship there. Some of her notable novels are *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Householder* (1960) *Heat and Dust* (1975) etc. *Heat and Dust* (1975) has brought her Booker Prize in 1975. Anita Desai was born in India of German father and Indian mother. Her works include *Peacock* (1963), *Voices of the City*

(1965) dealing with women's inner realm and their identities. Her *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) depicts the relation between East and West. Bharati Mukherjee is deemed as a most scintillating female Indian-American diasporic writer in realm of diasporic literature. But she herself remarks "I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived in Ellis Island" (1988:650). After her expatriation in Canada she moved to America and employed as a teacher in university of California. The setting of her novels and short story collection is in Canada, the USA and India. In *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), she highlights on themes of immigration, dislocation, exile, return, and quest for identity – primarily through the experiences of women characters. The stories *Wife* (1975), *Darkness* (1985), delineate recent immigrants to America and Canada and their confrontation with racism, discrimination and humiliation. In *Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and *Jasmine* (1989), *Holder of the World* (1993) and *Leave It to Me* (1997), her characters are encapsulated within the commingling of the two different cultures. Her short story collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), has embellished her with the U.S. National Book Critics Circle Award in 1988. *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004) are the novels centred on woman protagonist's root search in India after her deracination from the native land to San Francisco.

In the second wave, another fertile Indo-American writer in the corpus of diaspora field, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, who transplanted in America for university from Calcutta. Her first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, won an American Book Award in 1996. *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) are some of her contributions on which her fame revolves. Anjana Appanchana's immigration in America has manipulated her to usher in the domain of creative writing in 1980s. Her first work *Incantations and Other Stories* (1991), and debut novel, *Listening Now* (1998), is also entirely based in India. Trained as a classical dancer of Madras, Padma Hejmadi has made her pace in literary realm of diaspora. Her achievement in creative writing centred on collection of stories in India in 1970s before moving to America, novel and autobiography. Her works include *Birthday Deathday* (1985) and her autobiography, *Room to Fly: A Transcultural Memoir* (1999), deals with the personal spaces of transformation that embedded in the storyline of times and places across Greece, Japan, the Bahamas and diverse parts of America and India. Acclaimed as a cosmopolitan poet, Meena Alexander has made an impeccable path in diasporic arena. Her fame spread on the basis of works that includes first volume of poetry, *The Bird's Bright Ring* (1975) and autobiography, *Fault Lines: A Memoir* (1993) which explores clashes of cultures, identity, race and languages.



Nevertheless, her poetry anthologies include *River Bridge* (1995) and *Illiterate Heart* (2002).

In the third wave a constellation of the veteran writers with their diverse genres like autobiography, 'chick lit' (for the women by the women of the women), etc (poetry, novel, short story, drama etc) has emerged in the USA moving far away from indigenous land (India). To enrich the realm of South Asian Canadian literature, Uma Parameswaran as a scintillating playwright has entered in this field of creative writing with her debut work *Sons Must Die* (1962), a play based on the Partition of 1947. Other plays consist of *Meera* (1971), *Sita's Promise* (1981), *Dear Deedi, My Sister* (1989) and *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* (1998). They were collected into *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* (1998) as a part of the South Asian Canadian Literature Series (SACLIT). Apart from her fertile contribution in the genre of play, Parameswaran's versatility revolves round the works including a volume of poetry, *Trishanku and Other Writings* (1987) and *What Was Always Hers* (1999), a collection of short stories that has bestowed on her Canadian Authors Association 2000 Jubilee Award for Best Short Stories. Anita Rau Badami, as modern diaspora writer of South Asian Diaspora has possessed literary applause in realm of literary writing in Canada. Among her contributions, her quadruple works include *Tamarind Mem* (1997), *The Hero's Walk* (2001), *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) and *Tell it to the Trees* (2011). Another lucent creative writer in the twenty first century, Kiran Desai, daughter of Anita Desai, author of her debut novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) has possessed Booker prize for her magnum opus *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Belonging to Indian parents in London, Jhumpa Lahiri's promising career has been commenced with her debut collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which has bestowed on her the 2000 Pulitzer Prize. In these stories, Lahiri reveals the dislocation of the Indians residing within an alien culture. Next, *The Namesake* (2003) captures Gogol's continuous journey to explore his identity between two cultures i.e., Indian/ American. The novel also highlights female protagonist's feeling of confinement within American culture. Her collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and the recent published novel *The Lowland* (2013) certainly secures her status in the diasporic literature. Apart from the aforementioned female writers in diasporic realm, other star-studded diasporic writers namely Padama Hejmadi, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Indira Ganesan, Bharti Kirchner Margaret, Sujata Massey, Tahira Naqvi, Kirin Narayan, Samina Ali, Amina Meer, Amulya Malladi are there too whose narratives are basically set in America, Canada and different South Asian parts like India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

CYBER SPACE AND DIASPORIC WOMEN

Technological space emerges as a new device for women to be articulate in public space in their immigrant situation. The diasporic groups' online identity formation along with economic and cultural globalization processes are significant parameters

through CMC (Computer mediated Communication) for empowerment of Third World women in technological spaces.

The discussion of significance of computer-mediated communication in this globalized era has highlighted internet, an epitome of virtual space which acts as an instrument to formulate the individual and collective opinions. In this virtual space, virtual online community has emerged beyond geographical boundaries of space or sphere. Mitra has scrutinized over utility of the internet basis for resuscitation of mute voices of peripheralized women and it is the medium through which women obtain opportunity to excoriate stereotypical patriarchal practices prevailing within communities. In electro-media era, women so long have been mute to codes and values of injustice patriarchal authority, have now been capable to give vent hidden voices through participation in online discussion in the public space which bestow on them a sense of individual identities as well as their cultural elevation.

In recent era, acceleration of women in the domains of software jobs especially in the IT sector in the formation of their identities is the manifestation of their economic and cultural elevation. But, women especially the privileged diasporic women ventilate their voices through this communicative technique.

CONCLUSION

To provide a probable definition of diaspora and its concerning issues, a brief and sketchy survey has been attempted here. Needless to say, diaspora's concerning areas include mobilization from one territory to another, deterritorialization, identity de/reconstruction, collision of cultures, nostalgia and remembrance, dream and longing etc. Unearthing of the past interlinked with present and future is focused to embrace the diasporic situation beyond the temporal and spatial territories. But these aforementioned issues are not sufficient to capture its vast range. Several views and opinions elucidated by the critics and academicians in the 'Introduction' have been challenged by the other critics and scholars. By highlighting all the observations that have been critically investigated by a host of critics and theorists namely William Safran, Robin Cohen, Benedict Anderson, Avtar Brah, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Homi K Bhabha and Iain Chambers in chapter one, it can be stated that diaspora works as a seamless network, a socio-political-cultural-psychological phenomenon, to capture the alienated condition of the immigrants, exiles and expatriates who may get solace from their reproduction of the homeland culture beyond time/space boundary.

Regarding the future of the Indian diasporic literature by the women writers, it can be stated that the presentation of the immigrant women characters in their literary works have made the readers feel identified with that of the characters. Recent arrival of many Indian women diasporic writers with their works in this field embodies their occupying a remarkable place against the male diasporic writers. Writers such as Jhumpa



Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Anita Rao Badami, Amulya Malladi etc have shown their potential in this concerning area in the present century.

This article focused on the to unravel the ‘motherhood’ issue through the voice of immigrant characters like Taralata, Ashima, and Ruma as portrayed in *Desirable Daughters*, *The Namesake* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Writing emerges as a literary realm of reflecting the characters’ inward journey which can be identified with the diasporic women who constantly struggle to reconstruct their identities. Lahiris’s projection of mother Ashima and her solitude over raising her son in the foreign country harmonizes with the immigrant Taralata as portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee. These diasporic writers have shown their subtlety in the use of language to present such tender issues like ‘motherhood’. Hence, writing emerges as a medium of expression for the women diasporic writers to make them ventilate to the readers.

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