

Reconfiguring Home: The Agony Of Acceptance And Adaptability In Indian Diasporic Writings

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Abstract:

The current paper proposes to look into various integral problems experienced by different generations of the Indian diaspora with references to Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. The major idea is to see how the Indian diaspora constantly engage with the agonising idea of home, through the experiences of being the diaspora, they have attempted to give expression to their idea of home. A random survey would bring to light that the writings constitute a description of everyday life facts that are presented creatively. These literary creations encapsulate the varied experiences of the diaspora. Nevertheless, the paper argues that though the experiences are multifarious, the trauma these diaspora of two different generations have suffered during the times of assimilation is virtually the same irrespective of their approach to the idea of 'home'.

It is in this backdrop the paper takes a preliminary look at the works of the Indian diaspora. Further, an interpretive attempt shall be made to understand how the Indian diaspora is bewildered by the volatile nature of the concept of home. The works, in fact, reflect upon the ambiguity implicit in the concept of 'home' mainly owing to the constructedness of the notion of home.

Thus, the paper addresses the following critical riders:

1. How does the Indian diaspora understand the concept of home?
2. Is there a constant longing for 'home'?
3. How does nostalgia affect the second generation of the Indian diaspora?

Keywords: Immigration, Exile, Acculturation, Assimilation, Trauma and Alienation

Introduction

It is by now well acknowledged and accepted that the genre of diasporic writings is a legacy left behind by Indians who have contributed enormously to the cause of Indian writing in English. Several critical engagements have brought out the innumerable components of the writings by the diaspora that reflect upon their own histories. The writings testify to their experiences which vary from one another, and their objectives also vary. Nevertheless, the component of trauma remains unvaried across the range of writers. Diasporic literature does occupy a significant role in the literary field for the reason that it deals with major issues such as quest for identity, acculturation, which, in many ways, form the very crux of human existence, more so in the contemporary times where identities have become vulnerable to erosion, fluidity and hybridity.

The paper makes an attempt to focus on the multiplicity of reasons operating behind the differences in the expressions of the Indian diaspora of two generations. Though the emphasis is on expression of one's creativity, the readers are invariably led to the pathos implicit in their histories. Thus, it can be seen that the writings ignite in readers a desire to not only know the histories, but also probe into the experiential endeavours which have transformed from being mere creative expressions to serious academic texts.

Being a diaspora inevitably posits numerous integral glitches. These glitches at one or the other stage are intensely experienced by all segments of the population of the diaspora. The diasporic Indians, therefore, offer to engage themselves with the venture of giving expression and verbalize their trauma. There are generations of writers who have penned down their traumatic experiences and also about the infinite angst of being the diaspora.

Since the concept of diaspora is inextricably linked with the postcolonial experience and has been seen as an off-shoot and of postcolonial theory, the paper adopts the conceptual framework of the postcolonial theory and engages with the various theories of diaspora. The writers in focus shall be examined against the backdrop of certain concepts from postcolonial theory such as race and stereotyping. In addition, the diasporic texts are also going to be viewed through various postcolonial concepts such as nostalgia, alienation, marginalisation etc.

In this regard, Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1981) comprehensively delineates the concept of home. The concept of 'home' is theorised and politicised by Rushdie in the realm of certain significant socio-political events such as exile and migration. Rushdie describes the stance of a writer in exile in first person:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing which was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind. (10)

Trauma of Subjectivity

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) underlines the above mentioned concepts related to diaspora with reference to the concept of 'subjectivity'. In addition, he further explains the intensity of the experience of homelessness suffered by the diaspora thus:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up to you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James' Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'. (13)

Nick Mansfield's book *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*(2000), considers the concept of subjectivity as a significant concept in the realm of the literatures of diaspora. In the meantime a look at Mitchel Foucault's concept of 'subjectivity' implies that subjectivity is basically a social construct. Foucault's view of subjectivity implies that the society leads us in a specific manner to think about ourselves. Thus, the concept of subjectivity and the different ways in which it is

treated is of paramount importance in the works of the diasporic authors belonging to different generations.

Alienation and Displacement

The word 'Exile' literally indicates one's physical condition. Nevertheless, one's 'sense of exile' may not necessarily imply an instance of a completely dislocated existence. It needs to be observed that even in the case of geographical dislocation, the condition of exile in plenty of cases would only be psychological. In this sense a reference to the second generation of the Indian diaspora though has experienced a conspicuous physical displacement today's globalizing world does not regard them as completely alien. The writers like Jhumpa Lahiri of the second generation write that they have come to terms with the fact that they are part of the world where they are currently residing on their own. Therefore they have no reason to experience an acute sense of alienation like their predecessors who belong to the world of the first generation. As Anupama Kaushal has rightly observed:

Jhumpa Lahiri's writings are largely about the Bengali migrants who are settled in the USA. She belongs among such writers who have the awareness as to the multiple possibilities that cause alienation and issues of assimilation. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Work Interpreter of Maladies* is a magnum opus that deals with those diaspora who are in a state of trauma of integrating into a foreign society. (Kaushal, 2010:92)

Another significant feature of the second generation is that they have almost settled at a feeling that today's world is an all-inclusive global village. For them it constantly encourages in them the feeling of being at home no matter however multi-ethnic the metropolitan cities are. The difference between the second and the first generations in this sense lies in the ways they have treated the traumatic conditions of being displaced. That is, though the condition of exile is apparently a physical one, the trauma one suffers resides in one's psychology.

Writers like Bharati Mukherjee on the other hand refer to their immigration by ruminating over the loss of culture. In a comparatively speaking, the earlier generations were conspicuously preoccupied with the sense of alienation that was caused by the loss of their culture and the resultant phenomenon of acculturation. These writers have always shown a need to make attempts to become completely "Americanized". This attempt demands immersing oneself in the American culture and also try and hold on to their native culture as well. The phenomenon of American identity becomes part of the desire of the immigrants struggling to conform to the host society and treat it as their new home. The writers here place emphasis on this particular process of assimilation which results in abandoning their native traditions and all their beliefs.

Conclusion

If an immigrant suffers the loss of her/his culture or makes an honest attempt to embrace the host culture, the trauma one suffers here refers to her/his psychological condition. The psychology of the displaced person does reflect an acute sense of alienation due to the experience of hostility at the hands of the foreign culture. It needs to be noted that there could be differences in the sense of alienation experienced among different generations of the immigrants or the diaspora. However, the significant feature of Diasporic Sensibility, in this regard, is determined by an acute sense of alienation. Modern writer like Jhumpa Lahiri has delicately dealt with the sense of alienation and has also focused on exile in the native milieu. Analysis of these stories would reveal how this aspect of

alienation and displacement contributes in fostering diasporic sensibility of the first and second-generation Indian immigrants settled in U.S.A.

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