

## **Nostalgic Feelings and Adherence to National Identity in Diasporic Writers**

**Dr. S. R. Bhargava**

Associate Professor of English  
Government Girls College, Jhunjhunu

### **ABSTRACT**

The present research paper explores the concept of 'Diaspora' regarding the nostalgia or the feelings of homesickness while living abroad. The concept of 'Diaspora' emerged in 1990 and it is as old as post-colonial Theory. It has been prevalent since the 3rd century B.C. and was first used in Hebrew Scriptures in Alexandria to describe the Jews away from their homeland. Thus, diaspora had a purely religious connotation. Later in the 16th century A.D., the term was applied to the Africans who were exported to new lands in order to populate as well to serve as bonded labourers. Analysing the word 'Diaspora', there comes two morphemes – 'Dias' which means 'cross' and 'pora' which means to sow seeds. The definition of a true diaspora as 'One who, for a long period of time, has been separated from his home land (Birth place) to his karm bhumi (work place) which is not his chitt bhumi (place of mind). Now the question arises, who is a diaspora? Diasporic are people who have a land but no home. In the works of diasporic writers, we look for pains of separation, the karun rasa when one hankers for one's home but there is a helplessness of coming back. The research paper proposes to establish how the diasporic writers have to adhere to their national identity. This has clearly been illustrated and supported from Sujata Bhatt's poem 'Going to Ahmedabad', Rohinton Mistry's 'Family Matters' and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'.

### **KEYWORDS**

Post-colonial Theory; Diaspora; Nostalgia; Identity.

### **Introduction**

Etymologically, the term 'diaspora' is drawn from Greek meaning 'to disperse' and signifies a voluntary or forcible movement of the people from their homeland into a new region. A typical example of diaspora is given by the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of English Language as "the dispersed Jews after the Babylonian captivity". However, the term diaspora and diasporic communities are increasingly being used as metaphoric definition for expatriates, expellees, refugees, alien residents,

immigrants, displaced communities and ethnic minorities.

Hence diasporic writing paves the way for understanding the concept of 'displacement' and narrates a harsh journey undertaken on economic compulsion. Displacement and relocation is a part of human life. It can bring a lot of changes in one's life. Significant movement of population takes place as a result of economic deprivation and political upheavals in their land of birth. Migration is a customary and acknowledged activity not only of animals and birds but also of human beings. It has been taking place

since the historical past because it is a necessary and inevitable part of the development process. Hence the term 'diaspora' is synonymous to the term 'migration'. 'Migration' – the human face of globalization attempts to show the relationship between culture and development. Traditions may undergo a change due to the change of social environment. Though migrants had enriched their social and economic status due to migration, it accentuates inequalities and the migrants lose their own identity in a hostile environment. The process of migration leads to the mingling of cultures and it gives a set of perspectives about the relations between ideas and practices of different people and their culture.

There are several fields where research on diaspora is being done such as sociology, anthropology, human geography, international migration, post-colonialism, political economy and communication. Basically diaspora is a minority community living in exile. However, at present, it refers to the people living outside their traditional homeland and describes the social, cultural and political formation that result from this displacement. Diasporic writers generally depict the cultural dilemmas, the generational differences, and transformation of their identities during displacement. Their living in-between condition is very painful and they stand bewildered and confused. These writers are deeply attached to their centrifugal homeland and they are caught physically between two worlds and this double marginalization negates their belonging to either location. We may trace some common themes in the diasporic writings. They or their ancestors have been dispersed from a special original centre. The displacement leads to mingling of cultures which influence the beliefs and attitudes of individuals as well as those of the community. Traditions may undergo a

change due to the change of social environment. They acquire the citizenship of the foreign countries and play a significant role in the lives and societies of the country of their adoption as well as the country of their origin. They have an international audience and an international mindset.

Some of the famous Indian diasporic writers are Bharathi Mukerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, and V.S. Naipaul who have chosen literature as a channel to pour out their passions and emotions. They express their longing for their motherland as well as portray an objective picture of Indian society. Though they migrated to different countries in search of better economic prospects, they consider 'India' as 'Home' a safe place, where there is no need to justify themselves to others. But, as a member of diaspora they ought to redefine their own identity in the hostile environment. They are caught between two cultures and one can experience the conflict between the Indian ethos and the forces of marginal existence in the adoptive country. The diasporic discourse gives an insight into the ethnic pluralism of different countries. It offers a fresh outlook and expands its vocabulary in order to accommodate the diversity of multicultural reality.

The well-known writer V. S. Naipaul, a third generation Indian from Trinidad and Tobago and a Nobel Prize laureate, is a person who belongs to the world and usually not classified under IWE. Naipaul evokes ideas of homeland, rootlessness and his own personal feelings towards India in many of his books. In a foreword to an edition of 'A House For Mr Biswas', Naipaul has said, of all his books, this novel is the one which is closest to him and the most personal novel which he has written. It is a novel which he created out of what he saw and felt as a child. In his famous novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V. S. Naipaul depicts the desperate struggle of Mr. Biswas to acquire a house of his own

which is symbolic of an individual's need to develop an authentic identity. Though Mr Biswas ultimately manages to acquire, yet his premature death has a tragedy about it. V. S. Naipaul satirizes the social classes realistically, such as the vivid, candid and straightforward presentation of the adherence to the level of low life. The Tulsi family and Hanuman House represent the old Hindu culture now coming under the influence of the alien western culture. The life story of Mr. Biswas shows a self-respecting individual's rebellion against tyranny, the account of Tulsi family shows the interaction of two cultures, the old Hindu culture as represented by the Tulsi family and the alien western culture as represented by the Port of Spain and by such individuals as Dorothy, the Christian girl whom Shekhar marries, and Dorothy's cousin whom Owad marries. The interaction between these two cultures is designed to show that old Hindu culture which the Indian Hindus had taken with them to Trinidad cannot long withstand the influence of the alien western culture. Of course, the old Hindu culture is not completely absorbed by the western culture, but it is certainly weakened and undermined. In short, Hanuman House is a microcosm of the old Hindu culture. The Tulsi family is very orthodox, but its orthodoxy begins to crumble with the onset of western influences. Mrs. Tulsi, in ruling over her family, is helped in her task by Seth, her dead husband's brother. Seth and his wife Padma also live in Hanuman House where they enjoy a status as high as that of Mrs. Tulsi herself. In course of time, however, a rift takes place between Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who decided to leave the Hanuman House to live separately. Mr. Biswas heaves a sigh of relief when he has a house of his own and because he has finally been liberated from stranglehold of Mrs. Tulsi.

*An Area of Darkness* (1964), is a record of Naipaul's travels in India. He wanted to settle in the country of his origin

but he could not find the situations favourable for him. Subsequently, he settled in England. Lost among the chaotic millions of this country, he searched for his ancestral roots but failed in his search. The novel contains his deep despair and his sense of utter futility which he reaped as a result of his travels in this country.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer prize winner from the U.S., is a writer uncomfortable under the label of IWE. Jhumpa Lahiri, a recent entrant into the world of Indian writers, tackles the much-debated topic of cultural identity of Indians in a far off land. Lahiri took the literary world by storm when her debut book, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2000. *The Namesake*, her first novel, is an ambitious attempt to chart the lives of a family of immigrants through the eyes of a young boy. Both her books have received brickbats as well as accolades but she deserves a mention for tackling a subject long ignored by other Indian writers. Jhumpa Lahiri is an excellent writer who deals with the major theme of the problem of immigrants which she felt in her own life. She is an Indian but lived in America so she faced the problem of immigrants which she tries to show in her work. In the novel *The Namesake* she used two names Gogole/Nikhil to show her own experience of life. In her life too she has two names that are Nilanjana/Sudeshana. *The Namesake* is the perfect combination of the life of Indian people living in America. Named for a Russian writer by his Indian parents in memory of catastrophe years before, Gogol Ganguli knows only that he suffers the burden of his heritage as well as his odd, antic name. Jhumpa brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents, but also the means by

which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves. A major international best-seller, *The Namesake* is the debut novel from Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of *Interpreter of Maladies* that bagged the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. *The Namesake* is the cross-cultural, multigenerational story of a Hindu Bengali family's journey to self-acceptance in Boston. Jhumpa masterfully explores the themes of the complexities of the immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation, the conflicts of assimilation, the tangled ties between generations and paints a portrait of an Indian family torn between the pull of respecting family traditions, and the American way of life. It's a tale of love, solitude and emotional upheavals with an amazing eye for detail and ironic observation. *The Namesake* takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. It is 1967. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. An engineer by training, Ashoke adapts far less warily than his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him betrays the vexed results of bringing old ways to the new world.

Among the later writers, the most notable is Salman Rushdie, born in India, now living in the United Kingdom. Rushdie with his famous work *Midnight's Children* (Booker Prize 1981, Booker of Bookers 1992, and Best of the Bookers 2008) ushered in a new trend of writing. He used a hybrid language – English generously peppered with Indian terms – to convey a theme that could be seen as representing the vast canvas of India. The renaissance was spearheaded by Salman Rushdie with his path breaking novel *Midnight's Children* in 1980. Ever since his success, there has been a glut of Indian authors writing in English. These contemporary writers are

not confined to people living in India, but like Rushdie, a large number of them are part of the Indian diaspora. Earlier writers like Nirad C. Choudhuri, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand or Raja Rao used English in its classical form. However, Rushdie, with his Pidgin English, signalled a new trend in writing as well as giving voice to multicultural concerns. Although his *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *Fury*, and *Shalimar the Clown* received critical acclaim for their themes as well as his use of magic realism, the book that generated the most controversy was *The Satanic Verses*. He was accused of blasphemy by many Muslims because of certain allegedly irreverent references to Islam's Prophet Mohammad. A fatwa was issued by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 calling for the execution of the author. Many countries banned the book including India. Rushdie had to go into hiding in U.K. Till date, Rushdie remains a hunted man with a price on his head.

In the essay 'Imaginary Homelands' Rushdie is searching for his identity. In the first paragraph, looking at the photograph of the house in which he was born, he writes, "It reminds me that it is my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, although a lost home in a lost city in the midst of lost time". In the essay, he writes that when he revisited Bombay after a long time, he felt that the city has not lost him and he has not lost the city. He also writes his works by living in London and he writes, "What I was actually doing was a novel of memory and about memory, so that India was that: 'my India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions". In both his works *Midnight Children* and *Imaginary Homelands* we find that Rushdie is searching for his identity both as a person whose roots are in India and as a writer who wants to establish himself among the British English writers. It is this complexity of situation which encourages him to do his work with such maturity as

well as innovation in treating the matters of contemporary Indian society. As he himself mentions that he uses both his memory and imagination in his writings. He says that an Indian writer living in the British society has to everyday face the problems of definition. The writers like him who are living abroad discuss the need for change in themselves and their community without seeming to play into the hands of their racial enemies. On the other hand, they have to preserve their culture. They have to face the dilemma of embracing the ideas and practices of western world without turning away the ones that came with them.

*Family Matters* is the third novel by the critically acclaimed Indian-born author Rohinton Mistry. It was first published by McClelland and Stewart in 2002. *Family Matters* was also short-listed for the 2002 Booker Prize. *Family Matters* is a work of enormous emotional power. The novel is set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up, and tells the story of a middle class Parsi family living through a domestic crisis. Through one family, Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among India's Parsis, Persian-descended Zoroastrians, to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism. Mistry writes in a simple language, using a lot of dialogues. Rohinton Mistry's enthralling novel is at once a domestic drama and an intently observed portrait of present-day Bombay in all its vitality and corruption. At the age of seventy-nine, Nariman Vakeel, already suffering from Parkinson, breaks an ankle and finds himself wholly dependent on his family. His step-children, Coomy and Jal, have a spacious apartment, but are too squeamish and resentful to tend to his physical needs. Nariman must now turn to his younger daughter, Roxana, her husband, Yezad, and their two sons, who share a small, crowded home. This decision will test not only their material resources but, in surprising ways, all their tolerance, compassion, integrity, and faith.

The title describes not only the duties and responsibilities, the matters of a family's workings, but also of how much we finally realize our family does matter to us. *Family Matters* may focus more narrowly than *A Fine Balance*, but the grace and truth of Rohinton Mistry's writings still haunt and touch his readers. The subplot of the book, which involves Yezad hatching a plan to dethrone his employer, is a huge slap on the faces of the corrupt people. This subplot acts as the turning point in the main story. The book contains many details of the Parsis' practices, rituals, intolerances, and the concerns of native Parsis. In the epilogue, the youngest of all characters, Jehangir, becomes the narrator, describing the metamorphosis that religion, age, death, and wealth bring to his family.

Sujata Bhatt is an Indian poet, a native speaker of Gujarati. Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, and brought up in Pune until 1968, when she immigrated to the United States with her family. She has an MFA from the University of Iowa, and for a time was writer-in-residence at the University of Victoria, Canada. She received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize (Asia) and the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award for her first collection *Brunizem*. She has translated Gujarati poetry into English for the Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets. Combining both Gujarati and English, Bhatt writes "Indian-English rather than Anglo-Indian poetry." Her poems have appeared in various journals in the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, and Canada, and have been widely anthologized, as well as being broadcasted on British, German, and Dutch radios. Many of Bhatt's poems have themes of love and violence. She explores issues such as racism and the interaction between Asian, European, and North American culture. Michael Schmidt observed that her "free verse is fast-moving, urgent with narratives, softly spoken. Her cadence is natural, her diction undecorated." Bhatt

has been recognized as a distinctive voice in contemporary poetry. She is, the *New Statesman* declared, "One of the finest poets alive". Bhatt now lives in Bremen, Germany with her husband, German writer Michael Augustin, and daughter.

### **Conclusion**

In literature different writers have been influenced by different aspects and provide common basis for valid generalization. Diasporic literature has

made a significant contribution to Indo-English literature by its rich exposure to multiculturalism. Though the sense of displacement may be an essential condition of diasporic literature, it is not experienced precisely with the same identity by all; it differs according to time and place. The spirit of exile and alienation enriches the diasporic writers to seek rehabilitation in their writings and establish a permanent place in the minds of readers.

### **WORKS CITED**

- Bharucha, Nilufer, E. "Rohinton Mistry's Fiction as Diasporic Discourse". *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 1995.
- Chambers, Lain. *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Dhawan, R.K. Ed. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Sharma, Kavita. A. et al. *Interpreting Indian Diasporic Experience*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2004.