

## **Diasporic Literature in Indian English Writing: A Perspective**

**Reena Garg**

Head, Department of English, St. Xavier's School, Rohini, Delhi-110042

[reenagarg\\_222@yahoo.com](mailto:reenagarg_222@yahoo.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

A home away from home: a lone wish in Diaspora Literature? With reference to this question, the paper attempts to understand the term diaspora by studying the characteristic features and significance of expatriate writings. It also shares an exhaustive contribution of the Diaspora to Indian writing in English. The literature empirically seeks an answer to the question of identity by diving deep into Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. It is also an earnest quest to examine and understand the conflicting ideologies between first-generation vs second-generation settlers and the characters' journey of the self by means of dialectical thinking. After critically analyzing the writers of this genre, it concludes in striking a balance between the two cultures and their countries, since there is no possibility of reconciliation between the twain.

### **KEYWORDS**

Indian diasporic writings; Loss of identity; Ideological differences; cultural preservation.

### **Introduction:**

Diaspora is an expedition that mediates between physical disengagement from, and a psychological engagement towards homeland. It is commonly addressed as home away from home, migration, dispersion, scattering, movement, dislocation, and has its roots buried deep in the past which can be traced in the annals of history. The expulsion of Jews from Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> C, the African and Indian pre-independence slave trade and many more such records find narrative in expatriate literature which not only unveils the historical significance and nation's history but also brings forth untold tales of woes and suffering. However, the term is also associated with the influx of immigrants from a dominant land to assimilate the territory and mass-scale displacement due to industrialization and commerce. As we delve deeper into

mythology dislocation can also be traced in the great epic, the *Ramayana*. Today it is seen as a conscious choice of physical detachment yet linking psychologically with the homeland. Thus, diaspora is the dispersion of seeds which will bear fruits in terms of self-definition, self-recognition, self-realization, and self-knowledge. Since the 1980s there have been many debates and discussions about cultural hybridism and multiculturalism which has led to an increasing interest in the new genre of writing called Diaspora Literature which explores the lives of the migrants. As Andreas Huyssen says,

Self is remembered in a variety of recent texts, fictional, non-fictional, memory that does not lie dormant in the past, awaiting resurrection but collaborates between past and present, negotiating between remembering and forgetting,

between destruction and creation of the self (Huyssen, 2003).

Literature has emerged as one of the powerful mediums to record immigrant experiences across generations. It serves as an imminent tool to link past with the future insights thus building transnational identities. It is an umbrella term taking into its campus all the writers who immigrated due to social, economic, political, and personal constraints in search of greener pastures and remained connected with their native country unravelling the trials and tribulations, the pains and gains up the hill in their adapted country. William Safran has observed that:

...they continue to relate personally or vicariously to the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran, 2011).

Expatriate writers navigate into the unknown waters sharing multi-cultural ethos and, a deep understanding of economic realities. Their profound writings aid in shedding their psychosis and creating cultural identities. It is a tale of location, dislocation and relocation. The desire to regain and relive the lost home leads to the creation of a different version of home. As Salman Rushdie observes:

...one physical alienation from India at almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of redeeming precisely the thing that was lost, that will, in short, create fictions not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indians of mind (Rushdie, 1991).

### **Indian Diasporic Writings:**

Indian Diasporic writers could not agree more with this since they have been living by this stance for centuries. Even though technological advancements and liberalization have unquestionably

brought the world closer and made the earth seem smaller, it is not enough of a cure for these homesick writers. Miles away from where they belong these writers have expressed their experiences through diasporic writings which are as old as the diaspora itself.

Novelists like V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander, Salman Rushdie, Benyamin, Deepak Unnikrishnan and many more have successfully carved a niche for themselves in the domain of diasporic writing. The literature is characterized by its perpetual quest to return to their homeland. *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Mimic Men* by V.S Naipaul faithfully portrayed nostalgia and the desire of dislocated people to return to their homeland, while Salman Rushdie used the technique of magic realism for the metaphor of migration and mythologize its history in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. Mistry aspires to rejuvenate and reinvigorate his agonizing soul by revisiting India whereas it harkens childhood memories of Bharati Mukherjee. Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* have effectively delineated the racial bias against Indians, and their consequent isolation. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh exhibits rootlessness experienced by characters born and brought up in adopted land. Amit Chaudhuri depicts the life of students in Oxford in his novel *Afternoon Raag*. The tussle between first- and second-generation immigrants, multiculturalism, diasporic sensibility and attrition of ethical values are faithfully depicted by the second-generation diasporic Indian writers like Meera Syal, Shashi Tharoor, Hari Kunzru, Sunetra Gupta, Jhumpa Lahiri. They have been instrumental in penning down the tales of being deracinated, displaced, abandoned and sincere pursuit to bloom in modified settings retaining the eternal bonds of love with their homeland. Though they seek to

redesign and refashion themselves in a changed scenario, the bond with the placenta cord is not snapped. It is a never-ending tale of fond memories cooked with glorious history and spiced with rich cultural inheritance. The immigrants try to retain cultural practices and social traditions while making conscious attempts to amalgamate, assimilate and adapt to the society of the host country. First-generation immigrants try and uphold the socio-cultural baggage of religion, customs traditions, cuisines, dress, and language. This earnest quest to recreate a new identity in an altered background while maintaining a rich inheritance consigns a fractured identity and they discover themselves in a sandwiched state. The discrimination based on religion, and cultural narrow-mindedness gives impetus to feelings of rootlessness, alienation, confusion, nostalgia, dislocation, and suffering. However, with time these identity markers are no longer witnessed with the second generation expatriate as they try to assimilate in the new environment.

The literature revolves around the themes of identity crisis, isolation, social deprivation, rootlessness, assimilation, and acculturation. With the elimination of time and space due to scientific advancements and the world having been shrunk to a global village, Indian diasporic themes have now become more tolerant and magnanimous. The works of V.S. Naipaul, Rushdie, Mistry, Vikram Seth, Mukherjee, and Vassanji have helped in purging the pent-up emotions and ventilating the accumulated grievances. It does not cogitate the maladies and the bitter experiences. This aspect is brought out beautifully by Bhiku Parekh who states: The diasporic Indian is

like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from

being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he increasingly comes to feel at home in the world (Bhikhu, 1994).

Expatriate writing also known as the 'theory of migrancy' aids in generating new hybrid cultural and aesthetic constructs. Indian expatriate literature has not just left its imprint in the academic world but has also been adapted in the cultural sector in terms of films and documentaries.

Indian Immigrant writings hold the utmost magnitude for India and its culture. It is a strong web connecting across the globe, a road map to link the rest of the world with India and promote their artistic, creative, and practical talents. The contributions made in the fields of Medicine, Math, Science, Physics, and Astronomy have been made known to the world through the success stories crafted by the diasporic writers. Expatriate writings have been a major key player in strengthening historical cultural, social, traditional, and economic ties across the globe. American travelogue states "India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend and great grandmother of tradition" (Mark Twain). Diasporic literature has been the window to not just reinventing incredible India's cadences, rhythms and complexities of mythology, legends, culture, and civilizations propagated by peaceful ideologies of Vedas and Buddhist preaching but also regenerating rich cultural heritage, tradition, rites, rituals, customs, languages, dress, and food. It has emerged as an ambassador of Indian values and virtues and combating against green wars, wars with gas and wars with fire. It breaks free the psychic barriers and abuse of human rights. In the wake of globalization, significant footprints on the sands of literature have been witnessed where hybrid cultural values are channelized, and strong networks are created across the globe for the restoration

of world peace. The novel image and the positive aura have helped India emerge as a major world leader.

### **Diasporic Elements in *The Namesake*:**

*The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri is a quintessential immigrant novel, written with a great deal of sensitivity for both the parent and children's generation. The conflicting ideologies between first-generation settlers v/s second-generation and the characters' journey of the self have been pragmatically portrayed through the lives of a Bengali family living in Massachusetts, United States. The element of nostalgia and longing for 'home' comes to the fore from the very beginning where Ashima is missing the enthusiastic advices of the eager relatives during her first delivery. She is upset that her child will be a "stranger to the tradition and hence to her" (Lahiri, 2006) and will be raised in an isolated environment. This literature delves into the immigrants' quest for identity.

It depicts the struggle of Ashima and her son Gogol with his hyphenated identity. The straddling journey of Gogol since his birth has been an earnest endeavour to seek his identity. Ashima nurtures her son Gogol's upbringing with an Indian mentality and an American outlook. She acquaints him with Tagore and rich Bengali culture and, at the same time is mindful to help him learn English which will enable him to integrate with the adopted land. The quest for individuality, diverse cultural traditions and implacable differences are brought to the limelight through the use of the metaphor of food:

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl (Lahiri, 2006).

The combination of Indian street snacks with Planter's Peanut and Rice Krispies is

symbolic of the cultural fusion, as Amartya Sen opines:

Modern Indians see themselves as global citizens, and they aspire to make use of the 'best of both worlds.' While they retain a sense of affiliation and companionship with India and Indians, they find no contradiction in being loyal citizens of the country they have emigrated (Sen, 2006).

The talk about family dynamics showcases the traits of typical Diasporic literature. It closely inspects the parents' expectations and the contumacious conduct of children against the traditions. The spatial remoteness and the coldness of the conventional Bengali practices are aptly depicted through the inner and outer tussle experienced by Gogol. He rejects everything that his father represents and belongs to. The Bengali rice ceremony of choosing a ballpoint, a dollar bill or soil, symbolically representing a scholar, a businessman and an owner of the land, portrays the juxtaposition between Indian culture of emphasising the future of the child versus the American mentality of taking things as they come thus signifying a marked departure from the Indian intelligence quotient. Gogol's rebellion in the rice ceremony has been postulated by G. S Chanda as typical ABCD (American Born Confused Desi). Gogol is alienated from his Indian relatives and feels he's 'not Indian enough'. He justifies his stand to the aunt of his American girlfriend by consciously stating "We get sick all the time. We have to get shots before we go. My parents devote the better part of the suitcase to the medicines" (Lahiri, 2006) during their visits to India. His infrequent visits and keeping away from his parents are symbolic of Gogol's detachment from 'Indianness', the Bengali ways and earnest desire to embody the Americanness and culture characterized by Maxine and her family. We witness a similar assignation of

love in *Jasmine*, the famous novel by Bharati Mukherjee. Jasmine confides her emotions of love with Taylor and says, "I fell in love with his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption" (Mukherjee, 1989).

The collective tension, strain, and antagonism between older and younger generations is inevitable. G.S. Chanda justifies this by saying, "the host country and children born in it pull in one direction and the nostalgia for the original homes pull in the other" (Chanda, 2008). Thus, the first-generation expatriates are estranged not just from their homeland but also from the host country and also, their offsprings, though they make an earnest attempt to adapt to the new land and its culture, but it is "like anti-climbing paint, it repels their grip" (Randhawa, 2018), whereas due to lack of direct affiliation, the second or succeeding generation find it hard to correlate with their parent's homeland. V. S Naipaul addresses India as just 'a word' (Naipaul, 1972) which they visit as a mere tourist. But the parents who are the first-generation settlers struggle to keep the threads of their past strong and alive. The Ganguli family in *The Namesake* keep themselves publicly passive and mix with only Bengali families and just celebrate American festivals for their children. Name change is yet another consequential hallmark of diasporic literature. The dishevelment of being named after a Russian author Nikolai 'Gogol', despite his Indo-American background and the adversarial connotations makes him switch over to Nikhil as Rani becomes Rosalind (Randhawa, 2018). Jasmine-Jane (Mukherjee, 1989). Name change is expressive of the troupe of hyphenated identity change and identification with the American lifestyle. Gogol represents Bengali while Nikhil is American. Name change is an easy way out of defining oneself with the new culture, though it also speaks out of dual identity.

Autobiographical echoes are common features of expatriate writings as Naipaul quotes, "no writer, however individual his vision, could be separated from this society" (Naipaul, 1972). Jhumpa Lahiri is a second-generation diasporic writer who shuffles with Indian and American identities of Nilanjana and Jhumpa. She equates herself with Gogol in his struggle for identity and feels that she has inherited a 'sense of exile' from her parents. Her Indo-American background makes it a complex situation because she feels that it is much harder to write about as the topic is much closer to her. Naipaul also reverberates the same thought process and admits that immigrant status and association with India have impeded him as a writer. The wide gulf between the two cultures lends no scope of appeasement which is asserted by Naipaul in his essays as "there is no true return" (Naipaul, 1972). Salman Rushdie also claims that he and expatriate writers like himself can only make 'India's of the mind' (Rushdie, 1991) and find it impossible to retrieve "precisely the thing that was lost" (Rushdie, 1991).

Later in the novel, we witness Ashima gain confidence as an independent woman, by picking up a job in the library while retaining her traditions and deciding to keep her stay divided between the US and India, six months each. This decision shows that she desires to go back to India nevertheless she could not fully enroot herself from what was her 'new home' which isn't new anymore. Thus as G.S. Chanda says:

significance of past is reiterated and new does not arise, phoenix like, from the ashes of the old but rather, old is the guiding arrow that allows one to renegotiate and yet not lose one's bearings (Chanda, 2008).

Gogol through the whole process of redefining himself it is 'within his own skin' finally finds comfort. The family learns to fend for itself, reconcile and accept things

as they are and manage life with its complexities. The novel concludes in an open-ended manner without a concrete resolution.

**Conclusion:**

*"Oh, east is east, and west is west,  
And never the twain shall meet."*

*(The Ballad of East & West by Rudyard  
Kipling)*

After critically analyzing the writers of this genre, we can deduce in striking a balance between the two cultures and their countries, since there is no possibility of reconciliation between the twain. I conclude with the assertion of Ayub Khan

in one of his interviews, "You must find a balance. When you decide to move to a country, you've to understand that your children are going to be influenced by the culture of that country" (Olden, 1999). The final analysis drawn herewith is that the diasporic writings do not lend an explicit remedy to the dilemma faced by the non-native settlers. The new surroundings, climate, milieu, and cultural environs exert an inevitable influence on one's physical, mental, or moral development we need to search for our own solace amidst the bedlam and draw a skilful equipoise between the two.

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**Reena Garg** is a passionate educator and visionary leader. She embodies excellence in teaching and curriculum development. With a Master's in English and extensive administrative experience, she fosters critical thinking and human values in education. Her extensive experience includes leadership roles at prestigious institutions in India and the USA. Recognized with national awards, she's a published author and motivational speaker, dedicated to nurturing young minds globally.