

DEVELOPMENT OF INDIAN DIASPORA WRITING IN ENGLISH

K. Maragathavel and M. P. Devika

Right from its inception Indian writing in English has been a thwarted soul thriving on imitation, translation, borrowing, and compromise and sometimes encounter. The present scenario is not altogether different and Indian Diaspora fiction in English, that forms the major volume of Indian English Writing, is not an exception. While talking of Indian Diaspora Fiction in English, so many questions prop up in our mind, for instance - Does it have its independent identity? Does it possess some unique characteristics that determined its separate status? Does it reflect 'Indianess' in the true sense? How do such writers rule over Indian English Writing? So on and so forth.

This paper examines the migration of people from India to various countries. It also reveals how exile in the form of migration has been the cause of emergence of a large number of writers who have given direction to the progress of English Literature. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, who are accepted as world citizens – a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian – English writers like Anitha Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunzru have established themselves as fine writers in the tradition of Indian Diasporic writing.

Key words: Migration, Diaspora writing and Indian writers

Homi Bhaba points out in the '*Location of Culture*',

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness; where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature.

(Bhaba 12)

Right from its inception, Indian writing in English has been a thwarted soul thriving on imitation, translation, borrowing, and compromise and sometimes encountering problems in the process. The present scenario is not altogether different and Indian Diaspora fiction in English that forms the major volume of Indian English Writing is not an exception. While talking of Indian Diaspora Fiction in English, so many questions prop up in our mind, for instance, Does it have its independent identity? Does it possess some unique characteristics that determines its separate status? Does it reflect 'Indianess' in the true sense? How do such writers rule over Indian English Writing? So on and so forth.

Most of the Literature of and on the Indian Diaspora deals with the Indians who emigrated during the colonial period, especially from 1830s to 1930s. The

* Asst. Prof of English, SRM University, Kattankulathur, Kancheepuram (Dt) Tamil Nadu, India.

British Rule and its impact on the Indian peasantry, the famines and the consequent economic backwardness had resulted in mass unemployment. The institution of slavery was banned by the British in 1830s and this created an acute labour shortage in the sugar plantations of the British and European colonies. This situation gave birth to the movement of the people from one place to another.

The period also saw migration of people to West Asia, particularly to the Gulf region and there were the cases of Twice-born Migrants, like the Fiji Indians to Australia, Surinam Indians to Netherlands and the Ugandan Indians to the UK. There also arose the concept of thrice-born migrants too, like the Indians who migrated to Surinam initially, later to the Netherlands after Surinam's independence in 1975 and finally to the United States.

Exile appears both as a liberating as well as a shocking experience. The paradox is apparent because it is just a manifestation of the tension that keeps the strings attached and taut between the writers' place of origin and their place of exile. Whatever may have been the geographical location of the exiled writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever enmeshed among the strings attached to holes that pull in opposite directions. The only way the writer can rescue oneself from the tautness of emerging strings is by writing or by other forms of artistic expression. Prominent in exile literature are the works of writers who were made to flee their countries by oppressive regimes.

Many writers get out of their native land either because the weather or the society does not suit them or they just get out in their pursuit of the springs of the Hippocrene for their muse. Exile in the form of migration has been the cause of emergence of a large number of writers who have given direction to the progress of English Literature.

In fact, it was the colonial powers that made most people aliens in their own country – firstly, through linguistic displacement. It is in this colonial context that the native writers spawned the various sub-genres of English Literature. Writers like R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao who established Indian – English Literature, where all subjects of the British Rule in India.

Colonial and Post-Colonial India are divisions that are now more relevant to history than literature because Indian – English literature transcended the barriers of petty classifications and has become whole with its own place in the category of 191 Exile Literatures and the Diasporic Indian writers in mainstream English literature. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul, who live as world citizens – a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian – English writers such as Anitha Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunzru have all made established themselves as well-known writers while residing abroad.

Even after the colonized countries became independent, writers of many of these countries still faced a state of exile – either because of dictatorship in their countries, or because of racial persecution, or ethnic cleansing, or because they chose to migrate. The Indian-English writers, notably, Raja Rao became an expatriate writer even before the independence of the country; Kamala Markandaya married an English man and lived in Britain (Mehrotra 180, 186, 226).

GROWTH OF DIASPORIC NOVELS

Though poetry was the most popular genre for lovers of literature, gradually the Novel has come to occupy a dominant place among literary forms. Henry James points out in the Arts of Fiction,

“The Art of Fiction is lot reserved for a few initiates
The Modern World demands novels, just as it demands
films and television programmes” (cited in Iyengar 5)

When the novel reached India in the late 18th century, it was a strange event to educated Indians. It did not remain alien for long. During the late 19th century, it was absorbed into the Bengali tradition, which resulted in an output of novels in English. However, only those novels which have an Indian element in some particular and essential fashion can be considered as relevant to this study. Novels in Indian English writing are therefore considered and valued more for their content than their power as fiction.

The Indian Diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population created by migrations happening over a period of time unlike the Jewish Diaspora created by an exodus of population at a particular point in time. This sporadic migration traces a steady pattern if a telescopic view is taken over a period of time: from the indentured labourers of the past to the IT technocrats of the present day. Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala” divides the Indian Diaspora into two categories – the old and new. It is interesting to note that the history of Diasporic Indian Writing is as old as the diaspora itself. In fact the First Indian Writing in English is credited to Dean Mahomet. who was born in Patna, India, and after working for 15 years in the Bengal Army of the British East India Company, migrated to “eighteen century Ireland and then to England” (Kumar XX) in 1784. His book, *the Travels of Dean Mohamet* was published in 1794. It predates by about forty years the first English (192 Rupkatha Journal Vol. 1 No. 2) text written by an Indian residing in India, Kylas Chunder Dutt’s “*Imaginary History A Journal of Forty – Eight Hours of the year 1945* published in 1835 (Mehrotra 95).

The First Indian English novel Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife*, was to be published much later in 1864. It is an evident that the contribution of the Indian Diaspora to Indian Writing in English is not a recent fact. The old generation of diasporic Indian writers include Raja Rao, G.V. Desani, Santha Rama

Rao, Balachandra Rajan, Nirad Chaudhuri, and Veel Mehta. They looked back at their homeland and through their writing helped to define India.

In the essay, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism" Ramraj illustrates two key types of diasporas. One is traditionalist and the other is assimilationist (Ramraj 217). The former retains its separate identity, while the latter gradually mingles with the mainstream of the host country and, eventually, ceases to regard itself as a diaspora. These two positions are closely related to the host country's own attitude to the diaspora. Milton Israel, looking at Christopher Bagely's work, outlines the types of responses that mark the receiving society's response to South Asian immigrants: "1) Ethnocentric and opposed to their culture, values and lifestyle; 2) accommodating and understanding of the context of cultural transfer." He also notes two corresponding models of the South Asian immigrant response: "the effort to maintain ties with the motherland; and acculturation and adaptation to the host society (Ramraj 10-11). In the South Asian experience in Canada, we find both attitudes present through a complex layering. It is this complexity that I propose to map out, suggesting a broad attitudinal patterning for each of its layers.

In "Ganga in Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature" Uma Parmeswaran identifies four phases of the immigrant experience to Canada. The first one is the experience of encountering the "vastness and harshness of the Canadian landscape," which she believes the South Asians missed out on totally because they largely went directly to cities (Uma 83). The second one is "the struggle of the immigrants to establish themselves in their own esteem and in society" (Uma 83). Again, Parmeswaran believes that South Asians haven't achieved this totally because, despite being settled financially, they still feel unsettled (Uma 84). Thirdly second-generation Canadians of South Asian origin, "realize that home is here, not elsewhere" (Uma 85). 4) "the affirmation that home is here but 'here' is not exclusively English ... but a place where one can be oneself, assimilating if one is comfortable doing so, being different if one chooses to be so" (Uma 85). That is, one might think right as far as Punjabi, Gujarati or English populace are considered, yet almost no one has produced works set in Canada.

Uma Parmeswaran in a later essay, "Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada: An Overview," offers another chronological description of the South Asian diaspora in general and then applies that framework to Canada. She states that there were "two very distinct waves of emigration," one which happened during the colonial period, and the other after independence. The first wave had three phases: indentured labourers, traders, and educated people. The first phase of the first wave didn't apply to Canada where no indentured labourers came. Instead, it was the farmers from Punjab who hearing accounts of cheap, virgin land from Sikh soldiers passing through Canada, arrived in the first decade of the 20th century (Uma 7). However, further immigration was blocked after the infamous *Komagatu Maru* incident of 1914. The second wave, starting in the early 1950s, is also divided

into phases, each a decade long. The 1960s “may be called the gold rush period” (Uma 6); the 1970s are dubbed as the reactionary decade; the 1980s “brought into the open the racism that till then had been latent and covert” (Uma 7). While Parmeswaran doesn’t predict what the 1990s would be like, they might be called the decade of multiculturalism.

I find Parmeswaran’s work extremely useful, at the same time I think it is simpler to conceive of the South Asian diaspora in Canada in four different layers /levels, each with its own literature. The first layer consists of the 5000 immigrants that came to Canada from Russia during 1905-1908 and their descendents. The literature of this group was, until recently, mostly oral and unrecorded. The early texts of this group are not easily available.

The second group/layer consists of Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African immigrants. Their forefathers had left India as a part of the old, colonial diaspora of the 19th century and early 20th century. More recently, they moved farther North West to Canada. A good number of the well-known South Asian Canadian writers, including Neil Bissoondath, Cyril Dabydeen, Ramabai Espinet, Reshad Gool (Ved Devjee) Arnold Itwaru, Ismith Khan, Harold Sonny Ladoo, Farida Karodia, Sam Selvon, and M.G.Vassanji, belong to this group.

The third group consists of those who have come to Canada directly from the sub-continent after 1960. This group is made up mostly of highly educated, professional, upwardly mobile workers and professionals. Writers like Anita Rau Badami, Himani Bannerji, Rana Bose, Saros Cowasjee, Rienzi Cruz, Lakshmi Gill, Surjeet Kalsey, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parmeswaran, Balachandra Rajan, Ajmer Rode, Suwanda Sugunasiri, and others, belong to this group. What is interesting is that this group may be further subdivided into two categories by their choice of language. The dominant category includes those who write in English, the language of international power and prosperity. But the recent years have seen a growing body of rich literature mainly in Punjabi, but in other Indian languages as well. There is, thus, a new *vernacular* tradition in diasporic literature that demands our attention.

Finally, there is a fourth group which includes the descendants of those who may belong to any of the three mentioned above. These are writers born and brought up in Canada. Their links with India are at best tenuous and tentative. Yet, culturally, they form a distinct voice within the multicultural Canadian mosaic.

What kind of generalizations might possibly be made about these four distinct layers or groups within the South Asian diaspora? One way would be to club the groups by the setting of most of their writings. For instance, the second group consisting of Indo-Caribbean and Indo-African Writers depict what we could call an “in-Canada” experience. This group would be “West Indian Writing in Canada,” as Ramraj observes which, “is largely *immigrant writing*, preoccupied with the complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences associated with leaving one society

and adjusting to another” (Ramraj 102). In the Canadian context, this is usually the experience of the hostility and racism encountered by the immigrant and of the transition from the older diasporic homeland to the new, Northern home in Canada. These writers may take either a traditionalist or an assimilationist stance, or a retreatist vs. integrationist stance, but I would still consider their work as moving away from the homeland *towards* Canada. The fourth group, too, writes mostly about the Canadian experience; in fact, their stance is not only *towards* Canada, but *within* Canada. There is no other homeland for them to compare their present location with; Canada is the only homeland they know. Yet, their heritage distinguishes them from “unmarked” or default Canadians. Their texts attempt to explore the special challenges and problems of their Canadian, albeit hyphenated identities.

The third layer or group of South Asian immigrants, however, writes mostly about India or the subcontinent. In her highly perceptive essay, “Ganga in the Assiniboine”: Uma Parmeswaran citing Suwanda Sugunasiri’s survey of South Asian Canadian writers observes: “Surjeet Kalsey, of Vancouver, has compiled the Panjabi section of the study. She lists approximately 75 poets, 30 short-story writers, and a few novelists and playwrights. However, except for rare pieces, like a drama on the *Komagata Maru* episode, produced in 1979, these writers seem to have altogether eschewed the Canadian setting.

References

- Bhaba, Homi. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Mehrotra, Arvind Krishna (2003). Ed. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. New Delhi: Permanent Block.
- Iyengar, K.R. (1978). *Srinivasa. Indian Writing in English*. Asia Publishing House. Bombay.
- Ramraji, Victor (1996). “Diasporas and Multiculturalism.” In *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*. Bruce Kind, ed. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 214-229.
- Parmeswaran, Uma (1985). “Ganga in the Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature.” In *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*. M.G. Vassanji Ed. Toronto: TSAR Publications.
- Parameshwaran, Uma. “Literature of the Indian Diaspora In Canada: An Overview”, *South Asian Canadian*, eds. Jameela Begum and Maya Dutt, Madras: Anu Chitra publications, 199, 23. Print.