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Transformation of Diaspora Studies: From Discrimination to Identity Formation

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Abstract

Diaspora studies is a recently developed concept. The term 'diaspora' was associated only to the Jewish diaspora till 1970's. With the publication of an essay on Black Diaspora, for the first time 'diaspora' was associated with some other community than Jewish. Since then, all the displaced communities which shared certain common features are identified as diaspora community. Literary works which are produced by and on diaspora are considered as diaspora literature, which focuses upon the life of the diaspora community. This paper tries to look at the thematic transformation of diaspora literature from discrimination faced by the diaspora community to

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identity formation of the diaspora community by analyzing some of the novels of Indian women writers.

Key Words: Diaspora, Diaspora Studies, Discrimination, Identity formation

“When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move... It had been possible once, it would be possible again.” (Kapur, Manju: 330)

In the contemporary world shifting one's root becomes a normal happening. By based on it several studies have emerged and one among them is diaspora studies. In general the term 'diaspora' implies displacement of people from their homeland to a settle land. Yet it cannot be homogenized. As Avtar Brah states, diaspora experiences varies by based on 'why, how and when' the movement has happened. Diaspora studies is an off shoot of the lives of the diaspora community. Diaspora studies too heterogeneous in nature. Some of the reasons for it heterogeneous nature is:

- All diaspora works do not discuss diasporic experiences.
- First and later generation writers concentrate on various themes
- Some prefer to portray their home country to the settle land people.
- Some writers use their works to criticize the home country.
- Works based on the diaspora experiences portray the positive as well as the negative sides of the settle land.

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In order to reduce the disparities and to make it simple Toloyan in “Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora studies” (2007), divides diaspora studies into two categories. They are

- Emic study- about the diasporas who talk about themselves
- Etic study- about the diaspora by non-diasporas.

Even though the movement of diaspora happens from time immemorial, from the late twentieth century only diaspora literature began to proliferate. Most of the early immigrants were illiterate who moved for their basic needs and in the case of literate, they could not have time/interest to register their lives. It leads to poor number of works by the diaspora community. But the immigrants of the late 20th century were/are educated. These people with their knowledge to read and write started to register their experiences mostly in autobiographical form. Presently diaspora studies has enormous number of books and most of them are based on real life experiences.

In spite of more number of books available on diaspora life experiences, one can find six basic themes found in these works. They are:

1. Dislocation- It is one of the first feelings that haunt a diasporic community. There are several factors which are responsible for the dislocation of a community from their home country to a foreign land. These can be broadly divided into two such as voluntary and non-voluntary movements.

2. Nostalgia- When diasporic people find themselves dislocated from the home society, they are upset mentally and strive to remember and locate themselves in a nostalgic past.

Through nostalgia they try to escape from the reality of life in the settled land. A sense of alienation, loneliness and feeling of loss are inextricable for the diasporic people.

3. Discrimination- The settled country considers the practice of a different culture by the diaspora community as a threat to its own culture. It provokes the settled society to show its discrimination on the diasporic community. When the settled society finds a mixing of diasporic communities' culture with its own, it feels a danger of fragmentation of its cultural identity. As pointed out by Wieviorka, "Under such circumstances the national majority considers migrants to be the root of its difficulties, and draws on racial definitions that combine the idea of natural race and the idea of culture in order to make them scapegoats." (71). Hence the diasporic communities are greatly discriminated. Not only the settled government but also the people of the country take law into their hands and discriminate the diasporic community.

4. Survival – Immigrants especially illiterate face survival problem in the settled land

5. Cultural Change- Cultural change is yet another major problem faced by the diasporic community especially for the first generation people. When they try to settle in a new place, they find several changes in the new society. It shocks them and they try to cling to their homeland culture by following it strictly. Even after a long period of settlement they cannot break away from their culture.

6. Identity formation- Stuart Hall's comment on identity, "Identities are never unified and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, other intersections and antagonistic, discourse, practices and positions" (4) portrays the condition of diasporic people. When a diasporic community moves away from their home country they tend to carry their home culture with them. In some cases the

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diasporic community happily accepts the practices of the settled land and assimilates with it. Some prefer to follow certain practices from both culture and some others live in isolation by following their home culture. Accordingly their identity formations can be broadly divided into three types such as homeland identity, settled land identity and hyphenated identity. Presently diasporic writers concentrate on this theme.

Almost all the first and some later generation diaspora writers use the theme of dislocation and nostalgia. In order to concentrate on the thematic shift of diaspora studies, the paper uses five novels written by Indian women writers. In order to do it effectively, the five novels are critically examined in chronological order. The selected novels are Anita Desai's *Bye Bye Blackbird* (1971), Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1972), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2009)

The first two novels *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *The Nowhere man* are written almost the same period and as well located in London. Historical information of London and the live of immigrants help to understand the novel better. During colonization and after colonization many people from the colonized country preferred to settle in U.K. Initially the immigrants lived a comfortable life except the discomfort of alienation. But from 1960 onwards the economical depression of U.K changed the perception of the British people about the immigrants. They considered the immigrants as a sole reason for the unemployment problem and showed their hatred towards the immigrants through discrimination. As the above mentioned two novels take place in the same historical period, theme of discrimination dominates other features of diasporic fiction.

The novel *Bye Bye Blackbird* centers on the first generation of immigrants, characteristics transformation and their difficulty in assimilation with the settled land. Adit and Dev, the two protagonists of the novel move to U.K for the betterment of life. Adit marries Sarah, a white and feels happy to live as a British with the intention to settle there permanently. Ironically he strictly follows Indian tradition and practices. Desai's characterization of Adit indicated his desire to exhibit himself as a British. It is proven when Adit asks Dev to behave like the British, he says, "Come on, *yar*, be a man, an Englishman, take a deep breath, put on your tweeds and get your riding crop out" (124), he equates man as British man. He looks at London as a place of opportunity and wealth. Slowly due to cultural clash and discrimination he disapproves of London with a decision to return to India. Dev on the other hand comes to London for his higher education with the desire to return home after it. During his initial stay in London days never passed without remembering his home country. However he slowly changes his glass of looking at London from a settled land to a desired land.

Throughout the novel several incidences prove white's aversion towards the immigrants. The existence of three kinds of lavatories for Ladies, Gents and Asiatic proves the dislike white had for the immigrants. Indians are stated as strange and throughout the novel the white addressed them as 'you people' and not as one among them. Millers, Adit and Sarah's former landlord, disapprove of Adit due to his skin color indicates discrimination. Mrs.Miller wishes "to reject the fact of Adit having lived in their house for three years" (81). Sarah, even though she is a white, faces insults because of her husband Adit. While going for job she cannot escape from the children's comment; "Hurry, hurry, Mrs.Curry" (34). Even her mother cannot accept Sarah marrying an Indian. It leads her to feel ashamed to discuss about her marriage with others. Such experiences leave Adit as extorted with a decision to leave for India. He feels that his stay in

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London is “like a stranger arrived at a hotel in a strange city” (179). On the other hand, Dev is carried away by England’s beauty and its opportunity. He decides to stay in London while Adit returns to India.

In *The Nowhere Man* novel Kamala Markandaya portrays Srinivas’s diasporic experiences in London. Srinivas migrated to London during the period of colonization and looks at London as a place of better opening. He looks at England with hope and desires to live as a British by mimicking/becoming them. He tells, “I am becoming more English than the English ... and felt almost as if he could enter their skins” (74). Everyone looked at England as a place which welcomed immigrants. Srinivas lived in London for thirty years with his wife and two sons. He feels himself as a Londoner and not much bothered to maintain his homeland identity. Once he says, “My country... I feel at home in it more so than I would in my own” (63). His wife Vasantha, unlike her husband, clings to her identity by talking in her mother tongue, preparing Indian food and practicing Indian culture. Their children preferred to follow the British culture.

His younger son’s death which was followed by Vasantha’s shatters him. Later Mrs. Pickering’s, a white widow’s, friendship helps him to regain his interest in life. It does not continue for long. The economical depression of 1970’s in London forced the British people to change their perspective upon the immigrants in negative. Fred, an occupant of Ashcroft Avenue, where Srinivas lives, considers immigrant as a cause for the economical depression. “The blacks were responsible. They came in hordes, occupied all the houses, filled up the hospital beds and their offspring took all the places in schools” (176). When he had an opportunity to meet Srinivas, he conveyed his hatred through his words: “You got no right to be living in this

country” (177). Then on Srinivas has started to face harassments and humiliations on account of racial discriminations. Consequently it leads to a sense of isolation. He says, “One does not realize... when one leaves one’s country, how much is chopped off and left behind too. The inconsiderable, which one does not even think of at the time, which are in fact important” (72). Gradually he was made to feel detached in the place, which he considered as his country. It leads him to feel as, “a nowhere man looking for a nowhere city” (179). Throughout the novel incidents of discrimination and ideas of white’s hatred towards the immigrants are portrayed elaborately. Finally due to Fred Fletcher’s racial attack Srinivas dies as nowhere man in London.

Jasmine is the story about a girl from Punjab, her secondary position in the male dominant Indian society, her voluntary movement to the U.S., her experiences of double discrimination in the new land, and finally the transformation of her behavior and identity. Transformation of the protagonist from Jothi to Jase and her struggle for the identity formation is the central theme of the novel. The initial part of the novel elaborates women’s position in India, Jothi’s marriage with Prakash, a radical thinker, transforms Jothi to Jasmine in India. Jothi says,

“He wanted to break down the Jyoti I’d been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine...Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.” (Mukherjee, 1991: 70)

When Prakash dies in a riot, Jasmine moves to America, where she and her husband desired to move, by opposing her patriarchal society. Her first day in America collapses her impression of that nation. Her sexual exploitation by the Half-face and her revenge of killing him for rape and humiliations indicate her strength and determination to create an identity in a new land. Ruppel states “instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would

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define her solely as a victim, she decides instead to kill her attacker” (1995: 186). She decides to fit into the life style and culture of America. She does not want to carry the baggage of Indian with her instead she desires to create her own identity. As a result she stops continuing her work at the Professor’s house because they created their imagined India in their house and lived an isolated life from the society. After facing many discriminations and sacrificing several things she tries to create her own identity in the end. She says, “I wanted to become a person they thought they saw humorous, intelligent, refined and affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful” (171). Her changing of names from Jothi to Jasmine and finally from Jane to Jase shows her formation of identities. As Yadav points:

“Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane, Jase, each of her different identities, took place in a different space, i.e. India, Florida, and New York, Iowa. Such a character who embraces wanderings is attempting to destroy traditional ways of conceiving female identity. She is marginalized by both gender and race and changes herself according to her surroundings which are characterized by an ever-changing uncertainty just as Jasmine herself is. Her continuous movement and vagueness in which nothing was rooted anymore and everything was in motion, makes her a diasporic individual” (2011: 4).

The Namesake novel contains autobiographical incidents from the life of the author Lahiri. It depicts the life of first and second generation of the diaspora community. Ashima and Ashok, first generation diaspora community, live away from the white community area. They prefer to mingle with the Bengalis more than with the whites. At the same time for the sake of their children they celebrate Bengali as well as Western festivals. But they fail to reduce the gaps of culture. Through Gogol’s eye the cultural differences between his parents and the settled

community is portrayed. He oscillates between the American and the Indian culture and often feels that he is different from the white. When he stays with his parents as Gogol, by following India culture at home, he finds something obstructs him from assimilating with the white community. When he changes his name as Nikhil and lives separately in a room, he finds himself to be an entirely different person “He didn’t want to go to home on the weekends, to go with them for pujas and Bengali parties, to remain unquestioned in their world” (126). Throughout his adolescence age he finds that he is in between two cultures and this result in his rational interaction with the society. After his father’s death he feels guilty for not contacting him. When his marriage with an Indian break up, it upsets him mentally and he realizes that his yearning is more than that of his parents. The open ending of the novel gives hope for Gogol’s acceptance of his hyphenated identity. Sonia, Ashima’s daughter, tries to assimilate into the western culture and practices. Being born and brought up in the US, assimilation is not difficult for her and she prefers settled land’s identity.

The Immigrant novel’s author Manju Kapur is an Indian. Even though she is not a diaspora writer, as her novel talks of diasporic experiences it can be seen as ‘etic study’ of diaspora. The novel is located in 1970’s Canada. The protagonist Nina moves to Canada as she marries Ananda, a recent immigrant to Canada. After losing his parents in an accident, Ananda comes to Canada to pursue his education in Dental course. His stay with his uncle’s family and his initial stay in Canada teach him the life of independence. Initially he feels frustrated about the Canadian way of living, but gradually making himself accustomed to it. “You had to learn fast in the West, it was sink or swim, and Ananda was trying out his strokes.” (24). He decides to marry a girl from India and to bring her as his companion to Canada. This results in Nina’s move to Canada. Nina comes to Canada by leaving her widowed mother in India with the hope of

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bringing her to Canada when she gets pregnant. But Ananda's sexual problem postpones her pregnancy that results in her decision to go for higher studies in Library studies. Her husband's extra marital affair and her sexual union with Anton, later her mother's sudden death leave her collapsed. This leads to frustration and Nina decides to live alone for some time at the University of New Brunswick. "The continent was full of people escaping unhappy pasts. She too was heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the Western world" (330). Her encounters in the new land and its freedom encourage her to live with the settled land's identity.

From the above reading one could find a drastic transformation of themes in the diaspora fiction. In the first two novels *Bye Bye Blackbird* and *The Nowhere Man*, the writers focused much on the theme of discrimination. The protagonist of both the novels even though integrated with others in the settled nation during their initial stages, slowly isolated themselves. Discriminations they faced cultivated a sense of in betweenness within themselves. As a result they lived as nowhere man in the settled land. In the next novel *Jasmine* one could find emerging of thematic transformation. Mukherjee concentrated on the theme of discrimination as well as identity formation. Whereas in the above mentioned two novels the protagonist never bothered to create their identity. In *Jasmine* Jane is portrayed as a strong woman who takes discriminations as motivation to the formation of her identity. Later in Lahari's *The Namesake*, description of discrimination is almost not mentioned and the whole novel focuses upon the identity formation of Gogol. The last novel *The Immigrant* too centers around the theme of identity. Why such thematic transformation has occurred in diaspora fiction? When trying to derive an answer temporal difference comes to our mind. Effects of globalization enable people to move around

the world easily. Unlike the past, at present most of the immigrants are educated and leave their country for job opportunities. As the power of media is high, discriminations faced by the immigrants catch the attention of the world. The tightened law and wide spread knowledge of human rights too reduces discriminations. Moreover presently migrants pay importance to their identity formation in the settled land. As literature is a mirror to reflect the societal practices, diaspora literature too has shifted its focus from the theme of discrimination to identity formation. Yet this reading does not come to the conclusion that discriminations are completely stopped but it has reduced to a maximum level.

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