



## **A STUDY OF INDIAN WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES OF CROSS- CULTURAL DIASPORA**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The present paper focuses on woman’s experience of Indian Diaspora. When we talk about Diaspora and diasporic literary writing, we at once recall what has come to be established as a canon in this area. Writers like Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Ashish Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Kamala Markandaya, Bharti Mukherjee, Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parmeswaran, Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, and a host of other writers come to our mind. Unique writer like Salman Rushdie, for instance, is almost considered a paradigmatic figure for an understanding of diasporic experience. Home as a symbol of metaphor dominates all the diasporic imagination and hence has been theorized upon sufficiently. It is more directly and complicatedly involved in the emotional need to retain the security of a family but resist the reenactment of the dominant patterns of patriarchal subjugation. Home therefore directly linked to issues of marriage, motherhood, child-rearing and parenting, all of which acquire specific nuances when sited in diasporic locations. The immigrant women’s struggle to negotiate a new territory, culture, and milieu are often wrought with pain, fragmentation and psychic alienation. Writers of Indian Diaspora have been fairly center stage in the last decade primarily because of the theoretical formulations which are now being generated by the critiquing of their work and the growing interest in their studies. Language and culture are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. Diasporic writings raise questions regarding the definitions of ‘Home’ and ‘Nation’. Nostalgia is often the preoccupation of these writers as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. The present paper focuses on all these points in deep.

**KEYWORDS:** *Diaspora, Alienation, Migration, Immigration, Home, Homelessness.*

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The shift from migration studies to Diaspora theories occurred and it marks an important moment in our understanding of the phenomenon of cross- cultural and cross- continental journey and settlements. Diaspora as a conceptual tool highlights the multiple standpoints borne of migration and exile. Identities cannot be straightaway preserved or lost in processes of acculturation, assimilation, pluralism, and multiculturalism. However, cultural hybridity and heterogeneity forged by diasporic constructions do not automatically assume anti- essentialist positions and perceptions in terms of gender, class, language or sexuality. Diaspora emphasizes on location and strengthens power of connections, affiliations and associations rather than being inflexible about racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity.

Writers of Indian Diaspora have been fairly center stage in the last decade primarily because of the theoretical formulations which are now being generated by the critiquing of their work and the growing interest in their studies. Language and culture are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. Diasporic writings raise questions regarding the definitions of 'Home' and 'Nation'. Nostalgia is often the preoccupation of these writers as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. It becomes important to question the nature of their relationship with the work of writers and literatures of the country of their origin and to examine the different strategies they adopt in order to negotiate the cultural space of the countries of their adoption. Nowadays, many persons use expatriation and immigration as synonyms. However, it is important to draw a line of demarcation between the two; though that line is a thin one. As the term implies expatriation focuses in the native land that has been left behind, while immigration denotes the country into which one has ventured as an immigrant. In more clear terms, the expatriate lives on his 'ex' status while the immigrant celebrates his present in the new country. In the modern era, postcolonial writings deal with the expatriate sensibility as a legitimate literary term. The impulse to take the literary journey home, towards 'history', towards 'memory', towards 'past' is the result of the expatriate's long journey from home. Irving Howe has identified nostalgia "as the real reason for the expatriate's need to evolve ethnic origin" (174).

The present paper focuses on woman's experience of Indian Diaspora. When we talk about Diaspora and diasporic literary writing, we at once recall what has come to be established as a canon in this area. Writers like Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Ashish Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, Kamala Markandaya, Bharti Mukherjee, Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parmeswaran, Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, and a host of other writers come to our mind. Unique writer like Salman Rushdie, for instance, is almost considered a paradigmatic figure for an understanding of diasporic experience.

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location and strengthens power of connections, affiliations and associations rather than being inflexible about racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. Homi Bhabha's theory of Cultural Hybridity (1994) recognizes all cultural relations as ambivalent, transgressive and hybrid. To Bhabha, hybrid is not a thing but a process. Hybridity as explained by Bhabha has indeed been serving as a very useful tool for further understanding of varied experiences of Diaspora. Contemporary Diaspora theory recognizes the importance of non- traditional motilities, hybrid identities, challenge dominant paradigms of earlier formulations and celebrate diasporic identities. The 'overlapping territory' occupied by the diasporas and the new visions are celebrated by theorists like Edward Said (1993). These theoretical developments, which valorize exilic positions, have of course been necessary interventions in contemporary culture studies.

The modern era of the twentieth century marks another important shift in Diaspora movements and this shift is strongly monitored by the process of information technology revolution and the process of globalization as well. Since these revolutions have transformed the world we live in, bringing in new promises, rewards, hazards, dislocations and a sense of trans nationality, these are part of what Arjun Appadurai calls "The global cultural flows" (100). This movement is dominated, at least for the Indian Diaspora, by predominantly economic considerations creating large group of young professionals creating not so much a cosmopolitan of multi- cultural space but one marked by cultural identity. It is against this background that we can identify three generations of Indian women writers who wrote from locations outside their homelands. The first generation includes Santha Rama Rau, Attia Hussain and Kamala Markandaya who migrated during Forties and Fifties. Santha Rama Rao's *Remember the House* (1956) is a charming story about young Indira's growing up to issues of location and dislocation. She is in her search of her true image torn between the traditional values that she has absorbed from her childhood and the new values that education has bestowed upon her. The novel ends with the resolution of her dilemma through a definite act of will. Attia Hussain moved to England with her family immediately after Partition and her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is a classic account of the protagonist Laila's perception of Partition and its aftermath. The novel consists of four parts and covers a period of twenty years in the life of Laila, the narrator- heroine. Kamala Markandaya's *Nowhere Man* (1972) is one of the earliest fictional representations of immigrant experience. Here, Markandaya forges home as the center metaphor and weaves a tale of an immigrant's search for home in an alien land around that metaphor. These writers do not fit neatly into any of the theoretical categories but their work is important in historicizing postcolonial diasporas.

The next generation of writers includes writers like Bharti Mukherjee, Suniiti Namjoshi, Indira Ganesan, Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, Meena Alexander and these writers describe multiple patterns of diasporic movement motivated by different factors- inter racial marriages or preference for alternative sexualities. Each one of them etches out her own trajectory of dislocation and relocation particularly highlighting problems peculiar to female migration. These tales do not confirm to the popular diasporic subjectivities that are in wide circulation. But, their work is extremely important since they use gender and sexuality as sites of diasporic negotiation in interrogating racist, nationalist and traditional discourses enclosing them.

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There is yet another generation of writers called post- immigration writers. These are second generation Indian Americans like Jhumpa Lahiri, Atima Srivastava, Sujata Massey, Amulya Malladi, etc. who are engaged in negotiating passages between cultures and histories defining their own identities in fictions and poems which deal with both grand visions and everyday life. The question of belonging is obviously central to all diasporic writing. Women are born into expatriate state and they are expatriated in partia hence their writing of the Diaspora is different from that of their male counterparts. Sheila Rowbotham's context of women's perpetual elsewhereeness is worth quoting here: "But always we are split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. . . we were never altogether in one place, we are always in transit, immigrants into an alien country" (31).

Women writers project a new vision of elsewhereeness and develop what may be called discourses of double displacement on reading writers as different as Bharti Mukherjee and Suniti Namjoshi, Kamala Markandaya and Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhat, one may single out three recurring tropes in their work- home and family, ethnicity and identity, body and sexuality- through which they articulate a perspective of women's experience of exile in particular and women's alienation in general. Home as a symbol of metaphor dominates all the diasporic imagination and hence has been theorized upon sufficiently. It is more directly and complicatedly involved in the emotional need to retain the security of a family but resist the reenactment of the dominant patterns of patriarchal subjugation. Home therefore directly linked to issues of marriage, motherhood, child- rearing and parenting, all of which acquire specific nuances when sited in diasporic locations. The immigrant women's struggle to negotiate a new territory, culture, and milieu are often wrought with pain, fragmentation and psychic alienation. Dimple Das Gupta of Bharti Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) is a classic example of this category. The opening of the novel focuses on the position of Dimple in a subsidiary position within the patriarchal systems, "Dimple Das Gupta had set her heart on marrying a neuro surgeon, but her father was looking for engineers in matrimonial ads" (3). Marriage, she hopes, will bring her freedom. But she soon realizes that it simply means a shift from one cage to another. As a young bride living in a cramped Calcutta flat in a joint family, she longs for escape and immigration to the US or Canada becomes her dream way to freedom. As an immigrant in the US, she finds herself trapped among gadgets with little human interaction. Loneliness, frustration and loss of identity wreck her mentally. She suffers from insomnia, depression and phobias of different kinds. Dimple's estrangement finally culminates in a violent act of self-assertion when she kills her husband. Dimple's story is symptomatic of high incidence of insanity among immigrant women, particularly among those confined to homes.

Going home to India is not an easy solution available to immigrant women. In situations where women do make a journey back home, they rarely find what they have lost. Tara in Bharti Mukherjee's *Tiger's Daughter* (1972), Feroza in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (1993) are only a few examples of this category. Uma Parmeswaran uses the mythical king Trisahnku as the symbol of immigrant location. Trishanku who desires to reach heaven in his corporal form manages the ascent with the help of Sage Vishwamitra. But he is refused admission to heaven and remains

suspended between heaven and earth, an aerial surveyor looking at two worlds and belonging to neither. To stay back and struggle for a place in the new world often becomes the ethnic of immigrant existence. In more recent writings, we find changing meanings of home in Diaspora and complicated rehoming processes. To rehome is not to go to home, but to undergo a constructive process in which different cultural passages are transformed to produce a new sense of dwelling around the axis of mobility, co- belonging concept like Rohinton Mistry's philosophy of extended family dialogue in what we find today.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* (2004) focuses on the problems of child- rearing in an alien culture. Lying in labour in an American hospital, Ashima, a Bengali girl transported to Cambridge, Massachusetts, after her marriage to a doctoral student in MIT, feels that nothing is normal with her child- bearing, "It's not so much the pain, which she knows somehow, she will survive. It's the consequences: motherhood in a foreign land. . . . But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to none, where she knows little, where life seems to tentative and spare" (6). When their son Gogol is born, the task of naming proves quite challenging as they struggle to balance their respect for old ways with their need to find a place in the new world. When we watch Gogol stumble along the first generation path with conflicting loyalties, comic detours and several love affairs, we grow aware of the fluctuating and conflicting loyalties that make diasporic identities. Lahiri explores the expectations on children by their parents and the means by which the former come to define who they are.

In the story of mother and daughter relationship, often they represent two generations of immigrants with a major divide in their subject positions. Mothers want to keep their daughter within the traditional models of femininity they have in mind and the daughters resisting it is a recurring theme we see in women's writings. Amulya Malladi's *Serving with Curry* (2004) records the experiences of three generations of immigrant women with an insight that comes of inwardness to the experience being depicted. Rakhi, a young artist and divorced mother living in Berkeley, California, is struggling to keep her footing with her family and with a world in alarming transition. As Rakhi attempts to define her identity, absorbing her mother's Indian past and thus rediscovering her own roots, her life is shaken by new horrors. In the wake of September 11, 2001, she and her friends are faced with dark new complexities about their acculturation. Rakhi's experience like that of her other Asian friends demonstrates the fragility of an immigrant's situation in the adopted land.

Ethnicity becomes an important concern as one shifts one's location and becomes a member of a minority community in an alien environment. A shift in location and a change in locational status make one conscious of their ethnic identity. Meena Alexander articulates her own experience of othering when she says, "In India no one asked me if I were Asian American or Asian. Here we are part of a minority and the vision of being unserved comes into our consciousness" (26). An immigrant woman is at once made conscious of her difference in terms of colour, race and gender. Diasporic writing has developed its own theoretical position privileging a double vision. But these theoretical explorations work in different ways and throw up questions which affect both personal and social concerns. Issues of motherhood and bringing up children in the so called hybrid space occupy the concerns of women writers considerably. Adjustments, assertion, assimilation, survival-

all these may be handed through a range of coping strategies by adults. Mother- daughter relation assumes a special significance in the context of Diaspora discovering several spaces within the Diaspora. Uma Parmeswaran made an interesting and valid statement, “Of the Indian Diaspora- have been successful in our careers and have found our individual relevance from our early education” (30). Theories of Diaspora deal with a special sensitivity and actual lived experience.

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