

Spreading Wings, Diminishing Roots: A Study of Diasporic Narratives

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Abstract

Migrations have become common nowadays. Most Indians migrate to U.S to get a better life and to provide a better lifestyle to their families. But Diaspora brings with itself its own disasters. This paper talks about the soaring dreams and diminishing roots of people who leave their homeland to settle abroad. It takes into consideration select works by two authors- Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri and explains the diasporic pain and struggle as depicted in their narratives. It depicts the loss of identity and painful assimilation of characters and their attempt to form a synthesis between the two worlds. It also draws a line of difference between the experiences of first and second generation immigrants and their journey from being displaced to misplaced without be re- placed satisfactorily. It also throws light on the concept of home, homelessness and ‘unhomeliness’.

Keywords: Diaspora, assimilation, identity crisis, cultural gap, unhomeliness

“Where did the time stop?
At the crossing of borders, I presume
Was it when I stuck
The yellow colour on my three bags
Filled with memories”

(“The Borders Where Time Stopped” by Hasheemah Afaneh)

Migrations from one country to another have become common nowadays. Today, when people have ambitions as well as resources, exploring jobs worldwide have become easier. It has become a status symbol, a way to prove that one is better than the lot. Unlike past when migrations were forced or people moved as refugees, today’s diaspora is more of a self-willed or self- imposed exile for a better life. But this migration and settling abroad brings with itself myriads of problems. While the immigrants try to spread their wings, they lose their roots in the process. Many writers have taken into consideration the dilemma of immigrants and

diasporic population and brought into centre the problems they face because of being uprooted from their homeland.

Bharati Mukherjee belongs to the first generation diasporic writers and she has beautifully and aptly described the problem that a first generation immigrant faces while settling into a new country. She brings into focus identity crisis and cultural gap that the characters witness. Her protagonists are essentially women who stand alone to deal with their problems of dislocation and painful assimilation. Cultural shock is one of the main motifs of her novels. T.S. Eliot apart from being a wonderful poet has contributed a lot to the study and understanding of culture. He sees it as a way of life, as one which affects us and is affected in turn, by our activities. N.A. Nikam says that culture is the quest for good and this quest should be supported with the free choice. Culture is, however, different from civilization. While civilization is the society's or a country's collective approach towards life or situations/ things, culture is personal, subjective or one's own way of life but it is indeed affected by society. Civilization is essentially advancing in nature but culture can be advancing as well as regressive. Eliot in his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* says that "the person who contributes to culture, however important his contribution may be, is not always a cultured person" (23). And hence a "wholly cultured individual is a phantasm" (23). He further strikes a close relationship between culture and religion and says, "No culture has appeared or developed except together with religion... culture will appear to be the product of religion, or the religion the product of the culture (15). According to him religion is one of the basic ingredients that make an individual culturally different from the other. Religion forms a way of life and this way of life in turn forms culture.

In the novel *Wife*, Mukherjee draws into attention the character of Dimple Dasgupta whose aim in life was to get married because for her it would bring joy, freedom and a better

lifestyle. But of all Mukherjee's characters, Dimple faces the most disillusionment: not only with the reality of America but also with the reality of marriage (perhaps because her expectations were too high). Being an Indian wife, she feels crushed by the heaped expectations and patriarchal mindset of her husband Amit. Her every attempt to mingle up with the adopted society fails every time because of the cultural baggage she carries with herself. Asnani in "Identity Crisis in Nowhere Man and Wife" asserts that Dimple is caught between "a feminist desire to be assertive and independent and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing" (*The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Critical Perspective* 54). She is traumatised by the rift between the life she had dreamt of and the life she was offered. Her killing of her husband is more an act of liberation than of violence. She is trapped not only between Indian and American world but also between real and virtual. She wants to expand, to breathe like Ina Mullick but finds herself alone into a land which offers too much freedom for an Indian 'wife'.

Mukherjee lays bare the reality of Indian immigrants and the kind of life they lead. Jasmine (another character from her novel *Jasmine*) finds Professor Vadhera who came to America in search of a respectable job ending up not to being an actual professor but a sorter of human hair. She realizes that America doesn't offer what it promises in most of the cases. In an attempt to be accepted, immigrants often leave behind their own customs and culture and in the process they lose grip of their roots. Dimple is disillusioned to find the way Indians live in U.S in small dingy apartments with lost dreams. She realizes that Indians restrain from melting into Western culture and same is expected from her. In the illusion of keeping the native culture alive, they were actually living a life of seclusion and hatred for foreign values. Dimple's attempt to assimilate with the values of host land is viewed with disgust resulting in her alienation from people around her. She realizes that being Sita is both difficult and

pointless and takes the drastic step towards her freedom. The novel brings into light an important issue by K.S.Narayan Rao. He poses the question, “ ...was the Indian wife happier in India with her limited freedom and greater docility, or does she achieve happiness in her painful search for more individual freedom and in the process of maturing?” (“Review of Wife” 12). Undoubtedly, Dimple’s violent streak got multiplied after moving to U.S where the frequent mention of murder and assault intensified her fear and dissatisfaction with her present life and lost dreams. Lost between two worlds, she moves to the third world of violence.

Therefore this novel wonderfully captures the cultural shock a person faces after being forced between the two worlds. It narrates the displacement, alienation and disillusionment of Indian immigrants and the extent to which it can affect the psychology of an individual. The frequent mention of assaults bring into picture the fact that Indians will always be seen not only as an outsider but also as an intruder into the culture of the hostland and therefore will be a target of hatred and violence. Moreover, this text essentially focuses on the diasporic experience of an Indian woman and her disillusionment with both the worlds. Though Mukherjee has been criticized for depicting a cold- blooded murder as a reaction to cultural shock, Mukherjee nowhere justifies the action of her protagonist. Dimple’s act and psychology is open to readers for interpretation.

Another novelist Jhumpa Lahiri writes on the same issue but follows a different narrative style. She is a second generation diasporic writer and hence her experiences are quite different from that of Bharati Mukherjee. Mukherjee witnessed extreme subjugation of women at the hands of patriarchy and hence her works often discuss the physical violence meted towards Indian women. Lahiri’s women, on the other hand, do not face physical violence, rather the discrimination and atrocities get more subtle, sometimes difficult to

realize. Her collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* describe the life of first and second generation immigrants in U.S, their metaphysical void, the rift between their real self and social self and the loss of identity in order to realize dreams. Being the child of immigrants, Lahiri experienced this difference in disposition in her real life and hence she lends a particular flavour to her second generation immigrant characters. While the first generation immigrants are nostalgic about their past, the second generation are rebellious towards their present. The second generation immigrants, like Shoba, Shukumar and Mrs. Das, (characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*) feel an emotional void and an urge to find meaning in their so called meaningless existence. Living as an alien in the land they are born in makes them rebellious, uncaring and prone to outbursts. Their failed marriage is a proof to the fact that relationships do not survive between people who are so emotionally alone. The first story in the collection is titled ‘A Temporary Matter’ which draws to attention the temporary relationship between Shoba and Shukumar. The notice for one hour darkness (the power cut for repair of electricity which in turn becomes a chance to repair their relationship) in the beginning of the story symbolized the darkness engulfing the relationship of the husband and wife. Shoba’s embrace of her Western life is quite evident from the aura of detachment she carries though the reason is revealed later. They both try to avoid each other by purposely planning their schedule in a way where they get to see the least of each other, as the story suggests, “...how he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible” (4). Shobha’s stillborn child changed their equation forever because she did not find Shukumar around her when she needed him the most. Shoba and Shukumar seem alienated as characters. Both being the second generation immigrants, seem more Western, especially Shoba whose Western lifestyle seems a refuge from the unhappy relationship they share. During the five

day power cut, in the darkness of night they find the courage to speak the things they had avoided in the light of day and the shimmer of night lights- to speak out about their maladies. The lack of communication is quite evident throughout which kept on increasing their problem in married life. Starting with the small secrets, they move on to the final secret where Shukumar reveals that he had seen their dead baby, had held him in his arms and he was a boy. The story ends with both crying into each other's arms at the secrets both now knew. Though it seems that their relationship would improve after the exchange of secrets, it does not happen so as their relationship is like the stillborn baby impossible to revive.

In the title story of the collection, 'The Interpreter of Maladies', the second generation immigrants Mr. and Mrs. Das seem more foreign than Indian to Mr. Kapasi, the tour guide. The summer heat and the worn out roads are intolerable to them, especially to Mrs. Das who seems the most secluded of all. Though Indian by origin, they seem to have seen the least of India and take interest in small peculiarities- like monkeys on road and man on bullock cart. The attempt of Mr. Das to capture India in his camera shows his attempt to capture a part of his unknown life through the lens. While Mr. Kapasi presuming them to be an Indian couple folded his hands as a welcoming gesture, Mr. Das 'squeezed hands like an American'.(44) Even the tour book which described India was published abroad. So they were not like an Indian family visiting India but were an American family exploring the place. Living in U.S, they were more comfortable with Western language and Western clothes. But the level to which the loneliness affects the second generation immigrants can be seen through the predicament of Mrs. Das. Her secluded life in America, her complete dependence on her husband, her separation from her parents who had shifted to India after her marriage made her more and more lonely. Living in a country where she never belonged, her frustration of living a monotonous life at home while her husband worked outside vented

into a physical union with Mr. Das's Punjabi friend. This act of rebellion resulted in the birth of Bobby about which no one had any idea. The guilt kept killing her and she wishes Mr. Kapasi could find a remedy for her malady. This somewhere shows that even though she was Western in disposition, she needed a native to vent her emotional outrage.

The lack of communication often aggravates the situation and one can find communication gap in almost all the short stories. Shoba and Shukumar never communicate, never discuss about their dead child until the very end which brings their relationship into pieces. Their relationship is like the dead child, impossible to revive. Mr. Kapasi does not interact with his wife nor does she understand him. He worked as an interpreter of other people's maladies but in his own house he could neither interpret the reason for drifting love nor explain himself to his wife. Even Mrs. Das doesn't feel like sharing her secret with her husband, which turns her moody and uncaring. She feels Mr. Kapasi would come to his rescue but the impossibility of any further communication between them (suggested by the careless losing of the address paper of Mr. Kapasi) shows the impossibility of merging with the native culture. Though the title of the story has the word interpreter in it, it is a story of failed communication. Nobody understands anyone- Mr. Kapasi's wife doesn't understand him resulting in their loveless marriage, Mr. Das doesn't understand the guilt of Mrs. Das, Mrs. Das doesn't understand the feelings of Mr. Kapasi, and Mr. Kapasi fails to provide a proper answer to her confession. Though the address slip could have brought communication between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das, even that possibility is snatched when the paper flew away from her purse. This communication gap is not only external, in fact the characters fail to interpret their condition themselves. The broken identity results in breakdown of communication, and a denial to see reality through bare eyes as Mr. Das sees India through

camera lens, and Mrs. Das through her sunglasses. Hence, the story is a saga of emotional displacement and alienation of its characters.

Rajini Srikanth in *The World Next-Door* asserts that the native Americans always look at Indians as an outsider irrespective of the fact that they try quite hard to fit into the new matrix; “regardless of the number of generations that their families have been in United States, their dedication to the U.S. Armed Forces, or the number of flags they fly from businesses and homes.”(53) Though people migrate to progress in their lives and give better life to their future generations, giving all that they have to the foreign country they face humiliation, subordination and unacceptance by the native people. Even the language gets lost with the passage of generations due to foreign influences. Lahiri has brought to forefront the issue of language in her works. Even Bharati Mukherjee shows the first generation immigrants’ preference of Bengali over English as a sign of identity assertion and culture preservation. Lahiri, on the other hand, takes it to the next level by showing the distaste of second generations towards the language of their homeland. Being born and brought up in U.S, having English friends and facing English speaking world, the children of immigrants try to melt into Western culture. In fact the foreign world and foreign language seem more comfortable to them; they feel it to be their own. On the contrary they find their Bengali or Indian values to be foreign and suffocating. Hence they seem to drift away from the customs, culture and friend circle of their parents- they tend to lose their roots when the new world gives them new wings to fly. They feel ‘unhomed’ in their new home; they feel they belong nowhere. Halloween and Christmas are preferred over Durga Puja, pizzas and hamburgers over fish and rice and English friends over Indian acquaintances.

Hence, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri have unveiled the truth of diaspora, its positive as well as negative impact. Undoubtedly America is the land of opportunity, of

freedom, of liberation and lifestyle. But it carries with itself its own disasters- unhomeliness, unhappiness, ‘unidentity’ and impossibility to return to the roots. With globalization the trauma of diaspora has decreased substantially, media (print and electronic) have made the world a smaller place. It’s easy to communicate with people sitting miles away and the world has come to one room. But technology can never replace the physical presence of a person. Though technology has reduced the distance between countries, there are some irrevocable losses that diaspora brings up and those leave indelible marks on the psyche of individual.

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