LITERATURE AND IDENTITY IN DIASPORA WRITINGS: With special reference to Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance

ABSTRACT

Literature is used to describe anything from creative writing to more technical or scientific works, but the term is most commonly used to refer to the works of the creative imagination, including works of poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction. It preserves the ideals of people. It is a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history. The self-defining activity of the community is conducted in the light of the works as its members have come to read them or concretize them. Diaspora literature means works written by authors who live outside their native land. Indian Diaspora writers not only concentrated on the migratory aspects, the processes of integration and adjustment in specific context but also focused more on the aspects of culture, identity formation and retention, means the cultural process dealt by Indian Diaspora is viewed in terms of either maintaining its culture of the home or integrating in due course with the host society in the long run. Indians diaspora felt the need of constructing and continuing certain traditional institutions of their motherland, in the place where the displacement occurs and recounts the narratives of painful journey, which was undertaken on account of economic, social and political compulsions by the diaspora community because of spatial or temporal dislocation. It seeks to recall and re-centre the lost and de-historicized human world, which due to imperial-colonial intervention stood uprooted and violated.

Key words: Displacement, Diaspora, Search for Identity, Longing for homeland.

The written or spoken form of material is called literature. Broadly speaking, “literature” is used to describe anything from creative writing to more technical or scientific works, but the term is most commonly used to refer to the works of the creative imagination, including works of poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction. According to Dame Rebecca West (literary critic of the twentieth century), "Literature must be an analysis of experience and a synthesis of the findings into a unity" (Rebecca West). It preserves the ideals of people. Tim Gillespie in one of his essays to ‘The English Journal’ rightly quoted that “Literature does offer-inexpensively-a vision of other lives and other vista. One of its potential benefits is to enlarge reader’s sense about the many possible ways to live (19th, Feb, 2010)”. Literature has power to reconstruct scene of the story around us, the characters and dilemma of the story or novel, have more impact on the reader than imagination. Literature can play an important role in the formation of various forms of social identity, including national, ethnic, and religious identities. It is a canon which consists of those works in language.
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Diaspora is a Greek word means scattering or the dispersion of people from their homeland. Diaspora literature means works written by authors who live outside their native land. The word get popularity in modern society as it is used broadly for any movement of population sharing common national and ethnic identity. The diaspora people tried to maintain cultural connections around the world from ages immemorial. If we peeped into the past we may find different causes behind the migration. Indians have been migrating across the globe for the last a few decades. Indian diaspora has been formed by scattering of population in the form of sporadic migration. Indian Diaspora writers not only concentrated on the migratory aspects, the processes of integration and adjustment in specific context but also focused more on the aspects of culture, identity formation and retention, means the cultural process dealt by Indian Diaspora is viewed in terms of either maintaining its culture of the home or integrating in due course with the host society in the long run. Indian Diaspora can be seen as one such constituent ethnic community in any of the receiving nation(s), which are multiethnic or multicultural. Overall we see great transformations in the cultures of the migratory populations. Though their physical or geographical position is de-localized, their social and cultural position is still to the old memories of the culture from which their living patterns have emerged.

Writers like Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Himani Banerjee through their literature have projected the dilemmas and the struggles of the South Asian Diaspora. The Indian Diasporic writers have been divided into two distinct groups- the first group comprises of those who have spent a part of their life and have carried the baggage of their native land off shore. In the words of Devika Khanna Narula: They are split into a complex space between two worlds and two cultures; they can neither forget the world/culture they have come out of and which would be different if they returned to it now; nor can they fully assimilate into and be acculturated by the world/culture they have adopted because they cannot subvert their own identities totally. (35: 2005) The other group comprises of those who have been bred since childhood outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an ‘exotic place of their origin’ and thus find themselves rootless. Rohinton Mistry, a diasporic parsi writer whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Muslims from Iran is a diaspora in India. In 1975 he went to Canada and has been living there, thus he experienced double displacement. Indian diaspora felt the need of constructing and continuing certain traditional institutions of their motherland, in the place where the displacement occurs and recounts the narratives of painful journey, which was undertaken on account of economic, social and political
compulsions by the diaspora community because of spatial or temporal dislocation. It seeks to recall and re-centre the lost and de-historicized human world, which due to imperial-colonial intervention stood uprooted and violated. A Manjit Inder Singh rightly stated that: “Diasporic writing necessitates one’s location in a new environment and both an identification with and alienation of the writer from his old and new homelands( 35: 2004).

Mistry brought the point into limelight in his novel *A Fine Balance* through the character Dukhi Mukhi, a tanner, who resolved to send his children Ishvar and Narayan to the nearby town as a revolt against caste hierarchy and wanted to see them as tailors with the help of Ashraff Chacha. This is the first displacement of Ishvar and Narayan in this novel. After a few years they decided to go to the city to have a bright future and earn money. They faced a lot of problems there. Initially they lived with Nawaz and his family, later on, they lived in jhopadpatti( hut). Eventually they were allowed to live in Dinadalal’s flat. They tried to change their attitudes, habits and tried to forget their origin and mingled with Dinadalal and Maneck. At the end of the novel they were turned into crippled beggars. They accepted it and embraced it with smiling face. Thus they faced double displacement and lost their identity.

Diaspora writers expressed the pain of leaving the homeland behind in his writings. They tried to convey the message that leaving the homeland is not preferable. Mistry brought this point into light through the character Dukhi Mukhi, who refused to leave his homeland though the atrocities of upper class people were not tolerable. When Ashraf advised him to migrate to the town nearby, Dukhi responded him in this way:

“And where would we stay? Here, at least we have a hut. Besides, that’s where my ancestors have always lived. How can I leave that earth? It’s not good to go far from your native village. Then you forget who you are (AFB: 108)”.

One of the main thematic concerns of the Diasporic Literature is to illuminate identity crisis in writings. Tragedy becomes ineluctable when characters are unable to extricate themselves from the conflict between who they are and who they are supposed to be. Rohinton Mistry brought this point into limelight through the character Manek, a student who left his home land for higher studies and stayed in the college hostel, he tried his level best to assimilate with the inmates of the hostel but failed to assimilate with them. This is the first displacement experienced by him. After completion of his studies he left for Dubai for lucrative job and worked for eight years there. He never felt happy though petroleum Diaspora offered him handsome salary. He remained isolated and searched for his identity there. This is his second displacement of Manek. After a long time he returned to his homeland to attend his father’s funeral and found everything get changed he could not get adjusted in his homeland. Eventually he threw himself in front of a running train. Therefore it is obvious that the writer tried to convey a
message that if an emigrant wanted to live a peaceful life he should assimilate in the adopted land and he should not have the thought of going back to his homeland.

The emigrant, however is always forward looking no matter how difficult adaptability to the changed situation is, he never thinks of returning into his past. Though they create imaginary spaces in their fiction they never wish to return to their homeland. It is proved by Mistry a Canadian diasporic writer as he said to Dylan Foley in one of his interviews that,

“There is no point in moving back. That would be a second migration and don’t have the energy for it. One migration is enough for a life time. Even if I had the courage to uproot myself and go back to Bombay, I would not feel at home there. Once I made the choice to leave I am forever suspended between the two cultures. I have no choice (2002: 2).”

Mistry therefore successfully evoked a sense of loss and nostalgia in the emigrant’s experience. He reflected the hope of a Diasporic person of merging into the culture of adopted land, and concealed desire to go back to the native land. His works adroitly a world view that is fragmented and fissured of the homeland left behind, of the doors that the diasporic people have shut behind them. Mistry voiced his opinion about the clash between the old culture of India and new culture of Canada in his interview with Linda Hutcheon, and said that, “If you have a cupboard with a certain amount of space in it, then you have to arrange your belongings in that cupboard the best way you can, given the space, but if you buy a new cupboard you have more space” (1990: 2).

Mistry set all his works in his homeland Bombay in order to bring back to life recollections close to him. Bombay becomes to Mistry what Dublin was to James Joyce, the famous writer of the twentieth century who spent his artistic career as expatriate, painstakingly portraying the place of his origin. His authentic description of Bombay is filled with affection and regretful yearning to his homeland. Bombay is the city that is home to Parsi. It is a peaceful and balanced bucolic paradise confined to the past. Nila Sha in her article, Re- Narration of History in Such A Long Journey and A Fine Balance stated that: “The ethnocentric nature of Mistry’s work discerns the assertion of difference and fragmentation of identity, creating its own space within the national and the diasporic context. The author’s own expatriate position makes him aware of the element of alienation (79: 2003).”

Conclusion:

It is obvious that Rohinton Mistry well depicted his deep attachment and nostalgia for his homeland. The socio and cultural nostalgia helped him to create a sense of loss. For the emigrant writer the concept of homelessness, separation, multiple migration, and identity are all provisional and vulnerable because they are related to the socio-cultural context and their content must always be constructed relative to the context.

References:


