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An Introduction to Indian Diasporic Literature

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Abstract:

The term 'Diaspora' has manifold implications. It was basically used for the Jews who were forcibly displaced from their homelands to be scattered in new lands. But gradually diaspora was referred universally to all those people who leave their home country either voluntarily or forcibly. The implication of the term diaspora expanded to other areas including literature. This research paper aims to trace the emergence of diasporic literature emphasizing on the contribution of Indian diasporic literature to get it canonical status.

Keywords: *Diaspora, displacement, home, Indian Diaspora.*

The literature of the Indian diaspora constitutes an important part of the growing field of postcolonial literature. Some of the better known authors in this archive include V. S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, M. G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Kiran Desai. The growing international visibility of these authors has gone hand in hand with the popularity of postcolonial criticism and theory in academe.

Diasporic literature basically revolves around the idea of a homeland from where displacement occurs. This displacement involves harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Diaspora means a minority community living in exile. The *Oxford English Dictionary: Second Edition* (1989) traces the etymology of the word "Diaspora" back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament as God's intentions for the people of Israel to be dispersed across the world. However, in the 1993 edition of *Shorter Oxford*, the term of diaspora has the first letter capital and it is defined as 'anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland'. Etymologically 'Diaspora' is drawn from a Greek word which means 'to disperse' and signifies a voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions. The dispersal signifies the displacement of people involving a complex set of negotiations, sense of nostalgia and the desire for the homeland, the making of a new home, adapting to the power, and the relationship between the minority and the majority.

The migration of Indians to new homelands away from their native land, traces its history back to the medieval period. It began with the Buddhist missionaries. The early Indian migrants migrated to Ceylon and South-East Asia. These migrants were basically labourers and craftsmen. These Buddhists and later on the Hindu Kings carried with them the Indian culture to South-East Asia in the second half of the first millennium. The migration of Indians to the East coast of Africa was facilitated by the Indian Ocean trading system. The Indian Ocean trading system declined during the Portuguese rule. Then in the nineteenth century, Gujarati traders migrated under the British dispensation in large numbers to Kenya and South Africa. The presence of Gujarati migrants in East Africa was so prominent that the banknotes in Kenya before the country acquired independence, had inscriptions in Gujarati.

Modern Indian diaspora dates from the third decade of the nineteenth century. In the 1830s slavery was abolished in the British Caribbean. It resulted in the shortage of labour for the plantation owners. As a result, it became expedient to import labour. A large number of Indians from the plains of Ganga and the present day Tamilnadu, were taken to various British colonies as indentured labour. These Indians were taken under conditions of savage exploitation to work on sugar, tea and rubber plantations. This system of indenture came to a close in 1917 but before that 1.5 million Indians had sold themselves into debt bondage. They were compelled to live in appalling conditions formerly inhabited by the slaves. These Indians are the great unsung heroes and heroines of diaspora.

With the passage of time many Indians migrated to Western continents voluntarily. In the twentieth century many Indian professional elites found their way to the United States, Australia and other nations of the West. After the Second World War, the poor labourers were recruited to build the shattered economies of Britain, Holland and Germany. Apart from these Western countries, a strand of working class also migrated to the Middle East. Today, the United States has the largest Indian diasporic population.

The early Indians, who either were taken as labourers or working class in many places of the world, lived under conditions of appalling poverty. But gradually remarkable transformations took place over two or three generations. These Indians through sheer perseverance, labour and thrift successfully gave their coming generations better economic future. They gradually prospered and captured the trade and commerce of their new homelands. This happened especially in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Trinidad, Mauritius and Burma. In Trinidad,

although the miniscule population of the Whites continues today to control the banks and financial services yet the Indians dominate in industry and entrepreneurial enterprises. Indians in Trinidad have done well in the economic domain but in the United States their affluence is even more pronounced in many other professions. In the United States, the population of Indians is less than 0.5%, but Indians account for well over 5% of the scientists, engineers, and the software specialists. Except the Whites, Japanese, and Jewish no other group has a higher per capita income than Indians.

Diaspora is an emerging word in literature. Diasporic literature expresses and explores the problems and experiences of migration and diasporic life. The diasporic writing is very popular among the lovers of literature throughout the globe. It has emerged into a distinct literary genre. Its emergence has produced a radical transformation or 'paradigm shift' in the literary and cultural studies. It is in the process of acquiring a canonical status. Diasporic writers give a voice to their past bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories. They express their past and also give expression to their experiences in the alien land. This combination of nostalgia and reaction to the alien land lead to a kind of hope for change of the alien land into a new homeland. Their background serves as the basis of their writings upon which it flourishes. This background can be studied into two phases. The first phase consists of their cultural, religious, educational and experimental experiences of the homeland. The second phase is concerned with their experiences in the new social environment which seems to be hostile and they feel themselves doubly marginalized. They are marginalized because they are immigrants and they are also minorities in racial, linguistic, and usually religious sense. The alienation because of being an immigrant, the bitter stings of racism, the hard realities of day to day life, and their native civilization and traditions; act as important factors in shaping and transforming their life, culture and art. Displacement whether forced or self-imposed is a calamity in many ways. The alien land's atmosphere acts as a stimulant for the excellence in the works of the diasporic writers. Generally, the term "exile" is used in negative sense but sometimes this word is being responded in ambivalence. The effect of exile on a writer and his writing is somewhat paradoxical. It is paradoxical in the sense that it is liberating as well as shocking. This paradox is a reflection of the tension that keeps the strings attached and taut between the writer's place of origin and exile. Where ever the writer may live, he is always oscillating between the two poles that pull in opposite directions. The only way to relieve oneself from this tension is the artistic expressions. But this relief is only temporary because no artistic work can negate the effect of history makers. If any writer tries to portray one end of this string, there appears a longing for the other end. Here lies the fascination of exile literature. Prominent exile literature consists of the work of the writers who fled from their native lands and the work of such writers hold the verve of their restlessness. In fact, colonialism has made most of the people alienated in their own country through linguistic displacement. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao who established Indian-English literature, were all subjects to the British rule in India. Even after the independence of many colonized countries, many writers suffered alienation in their own country because of dictatorship, racial persecution, ethnic cleansing, or because they chose to migrate.

Many prominent Indian-English writers like Raja Rao, became expatriates even before India got freedom from the British. G. V. Desai was born in Kenya and never came to India. He chose London and America to be his home. Kamala Markandaya married an Englishman and lived in Britain. Nirad Chaudhary preferred the English shores because his views were not readily accepted in India.

The Indian-English literature has crossed the barriers and has become a part of the mainstream English literature. Indian writers like Naipaul and Rushdie live as citizens of the world than the citizens of a particular country. The non-resident Indian writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Hari Kunzru have depicted the sense of displacement as their perennial theme. They have focused on the socio-cultural sense of displacement along with the geographical aspect of displacement.

The Indian diasporic writers have attained popularity since the last decade because of the theoretical formulation generated by their works. These writers present a blend of culture of their native homeland and the culture of the host land. However, if we look at diasporic literature in a broader way, it seems that diasporic literature helps in understanding various cultures. Diasporic literature helps in bridging the gaps among different countries, globalizing the global and even in maintaining universal peace. Thus, diasporic writing plays a significant role among countries and cultures.

Thus, diasporic writers of Indian origin have played significant role in enriching the diasporic literature globally. They have given vent to their emotions through their writings and also have presented India on global platform.

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