



POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN DIASPORA FICTION IN ENGLISH: CERTAIN KEY ISSUES AND CONTROVERSIES

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ABSTRACT

In the recent years, scholars and critics are stressing the need for the reconfiguration of Postcolonial studies through a serious scrutiny of issues of representation and authenticity in the cultural productions emerging from the colonized countries. The debates become much stronger in case of the literary output of the diaspora of the colonized countries. On the one hand, the diaspora writing, more specifically the diaspora fiction produced by the writers of the colonized countries settled across the globe are analyzed for their exploration of "diasporic experiences". On the other hand, contemporary diaspora narratives are analyzed in terms of their massive production, circulation and consumption and the influence of market economy on them. In the background of such debates, the present paper tries to map certain discussions taking place in the field of postcolonial Indian diaspora fiction. Based on this exploration, a few questions are raised about perceiving this supposedly young genre.

Key Words: *Postcolonial, Indian Diaspora Fiction, Market economy, Representation.*

Introduction

'Novel' as a genre entered India via colonialism and within a few years of its arrival, it attained phenomenal success in the subcontinent. Many scholars have discussed in detail the arrival of this alien form on the Indian literary scene and the process of 'Indiansiation' that 'novel' underwent so that it can be made suitable to depict Indian themes and reality of Indian society. Some scholars have also debated upon the way this genre called 'novel' narrates the nation and represents national consciousness. With the rise of Indian Novels in English and their popularity, new discussions were triggered regarding the very usage of colonizer's language in place of regional languages and issues of authentic representations of Indian society in an alien language. These are some familiar debates within literary circles and literature departments in Indian Universities.

In the backdrop of such debates, what is interesting is the enormous production, circulation and consumption of English novels by Indian writers – both settled in India and abroad. The primary concern of this paper, however, is to map certain discussions around contemporary fiction in English produced by the Indian writers from diaspora. Based on this exploration, a few questions are raised about perceiving this supposedly young genre.

Certain Key Issues and Controversies

Since the turn of the century, Postcolonial Indian diaspora writing in English, more specifically the genre of fiction, has gained much focus amidst academic world and enthusiastic readers. In fact, the emergence of Indian diaspora fiction has been celebrated as a welcome sign. Ever since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) made its arrival on the literary scene, the world's eye is wide open towards the literary output emerging from postcolonial countries like India. Rushdie's text not only won the prestigious Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers, but it also heralded a bright future for Indian writers in English. Years later, Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga went on to win the Booker Prize in 1997 and 2008 respectively and with this, a well-established space for Indian fiction in English got carved in the global literary landscape. Such spectacular rise of Indian writers in English has also created lot of interest about

writers from Indian diaspora spread across continents. Today, Indian diaspora writing, especially novels are being taught exclusively as a distinct genre within the umbrella term, Indian English fiction in academia both in and out of India. The genre has attracted serious academic engagements and extensive research, film adaptations and reading public.

When we look at the reactions of the critics and scholarly responses towards the fiction produced by Indian diaspora, certain strands of discussions can be noticed. Many scholars discuss the themes that diaspora writers negotiate with. For instance, according to Prof. Bijay Kumar Das, the “emigrant writers work, in spite of their living in a different country... mostly about their former homeland and its culture” (Das6). He quotes the examples of A. K Ramanujan, and R. Parthasarathy who wrote more about India than what they had done while they were in India. Some scholars talk about, to use Vijay Mishra’s classification, the “old diaspora” and the “new diaspora” while scholars like Makarand Paranjape discuss the two phases to which the South Asian diaspora falls into – one being the “settler” diaspora that include all the forced migrations caused by slavery and indentured labour etc. and the “visitor” diaspora that include voluntary migration of businessmen and professionals (Paranjape 242). Though Paranjape focuses on the South Asian diaspora settled in Australia, his observations can be applied to Indian diaspora in general. He explores the attitude of South Asian Australian diaspora writers towards their host land by analyzing two texts by South Asian women diaspora writers settled in Australia. The first text, *The Time of the Peacock* (1965) represents the first phase of diaspora as per Paranjape’s classification and this text is discussed to show the ambivalent attitudes towards homeland and Australia, issues of assimilation, complexities of diasporic existence to name a few. He also takes up the study of the contemporary writer Chandani Lokuge’s text *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) that depicts the alienation that her female protagonist undergoes while negotiating between her home land, Sri Lanka and her host land, Australia. With these analysis, Paranjape tries to draw our attention to the fact that both the texts “represent the complexities of diasporic experiences” (248).

However, in the recent years, the latest studies within the domains of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies have begun to question the issues of diasporic experiences, representation of colonized countries and their culture as well as the authenticity of such representations in the contemporary cultural productions including art, literature and novels. These studies argue that, in the contemporary cultural productions emerging from the colonized countries including the ones from the diaspora are producing art and literature more for Western consumption than for representing their culture. Graham Huggan, for instance, expresses his doubt regarding the capitalist mode of production in the recent years. He argues that in the recent years, terms like ‘marginality’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘resistance’ are getting circulated as commodities under the “Postcolonial exotic”. He claims that “post-colonial literatures” and “postcolonialism itself” has become “a cultural commodity” (Preface vii). Scholars like Graham Huggan have not only identified the limitations of Postcolonial studies, but have also explored the interconnections between Postcolonial creative and literary productions, Western academia and publication influences.

Similar explorations have also been taking place in case of Indian English novels too. Especially the fiction of Indian diaspora writers emerging from across the globe is getting different kind of scrutiny. Much discussion is taking place to explore the connections among issues like Western consumption, increased production of exotic novels by the Indian diaspora, market pressures and publication politics in bringing Indian English writers into limelight. The recently edited volume, *Indian Writing in English and Global Literary Market* (2014), for

instance, argues that market pressure and publication influences are the major reasons for the commodification of the creative works, more specifically the novels produced by both Indian and Indian diaspora writers. In this sense, Indian Writing in English (IWE) itself is a “celebratory genre” as argued by Pramod K. Nayar. He traces the factors contributing to the making of what he calls “celebrification process” of IWE. According to him, such a status is the result of a “convergence culture”, that “brings together the public sphere, media, festival culture, literary production, academic discourses and author – centred discourse to produce an amplification of the genre itself” (Nayar 33). With this, Nayar argues that various factors of “cultural production” converge together to make IWE a “celebrity genre”. Therefore, it is natural that the novels produced in English whether by the Indian writers settled in India or abroad to gain much attention. However, a few scholars argue that the works of Indian diaspora writers build up an image of India in the West. For instance, Vrinda Nayar observes that the diaspora writers from India are received by the West as “India’s spokespeople”. She states that the most of the first world thinks of ‘Indian literature’ as synonymous with the literature of the diaspora (16). She makes an analysis of the celebrated Indian diaspora woman writer Chitra Divakaruni’s works to show the manner in which Indian diaspora writers “have frequently manipulated details to present what is really marketable, contrasting the sanitized ethos of their brave new world with the darker realities of ‘Indian life’”. She also argues that diaspora writers have “commonly looked at the past, not the rapidly changing India of the present” and as a result they are more prone to become “judgmental” (25).

The portrayal of Indian immigrant life and the implication of such portrayals are also getting critical examination as is evident in the discussions by Dorothy M. Figueira. Through her analysis of popular Indian diaspora women novelists Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni, Figueira claims that these writers “portray an America that speaks to the fears and longings of both Americans and Indian Americans. They depict Indian culture as quaint, slightly exotic and non – threatening to the American culture”. She shows how the Indian diaspora writers make America responsible for the loss of values and diasporic experience of the Indian characters in their fiction. Further, the characters in these fiction, though they are immigrants staying in America by choice, are still depicted as suffering, feeling uprootedness and sense of alienation. Despite all this, they never go home (58). Figueira also recounts her personal experience while teaching such Indian diaspora texts to her students who keep asking her the reason for the description of loneliness in Indian diaspora narratives. Figueira argues that such depiction of characters and “tailor - made” (59) themes has more to do with the “function of this literature than with any reflection on reality” (59). So she strongly argues that Indian diaspora texts fosters a kind of “immigrant *imaginaire*” (59). She also speaks about the effects of such depictions. On the one hand, for the Americans it provides “portrait of exotic Indians... bit more colorful and successful, but not at all threatening” and on the other hand, they enhance the “self – image” of the Indian diaspora community in America, by “championing myths about Indian diaspora identity that may have nothing to do with actual Indian culture” (59) and attains “tremendous economic success in America” (59). She argues that the works of writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni’s are “removed from Indian experience” and evoke Indian values as “exotic tropes” (59) which gives no understanding of India to the readers at all.

What is central to these discussions is the serious engagement of the scholars with this genre of postcolonial Indian diaspora writing, and the issues of representation in such writing. Even though it is not possible here to sketch all the claims and arguments taking place regarding



Indian diaspora novels, efforts are being made to present a few such debates to capture the nuances of these arguments. In this backdrop, certain questions can be raised – As already noted, novels produced by Indian diaspora is being taught in many Universities and undergraduate courses. As teachers how do we perceive this genre and teach it to the students in the background of the discussion explored above? What is meant by authenticity of representation? Is it fair enough to say that these writers are marketing the exotic in the name of narrating homeland? How do we account for those writers who say that they depict their own experiences? How do we understand the phenomenal growth of diaspora fiction of Indian writers? In short, the question is, how to make sense of the Indian diaspora novels and the discussions that surround them. Such questions need to be researched and explored to get a better understanding of this genre.

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