

Diasporic Literature – A Different Branch Of Literature

Y. JAYANTHI, M.A., PGDTE, (Ph.D)

Asst. Professor in English
RBVRR Women's College
Narayanaguda, Hyderabad.
srija99@gmail.com

Abstract:

Diasporic literature is a different branch of literature that is emerged due to the displacement and migration of people to different corners of the world in seeks of opportunities. Migration and partition left the people behind a sense of loss and insecurity which leads to the confusion related to their identity and culture. Identity plays a crucial role in determining one's existence. Different dilemmas are portrayed in the Diasporic literature outpouring their inner turmoil related to their identity. Writers exhibited the sense of belongingness in their writings since whenever a person migrates to a new country or place. Diasporic literature deals with different themes related to their ongoing problems. Displacement of the second generation writers and their efforts to identify themselves with alien cultures add a new dimension to their fiction. Eminent writers like VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander and few others expressed their angst in the society related to existence in their writings. The paper aims to trace the emergence of diasporic literature emphasizing on the contribution of Indian diasporic literature. It deals with the sense of belongingness and identity crises in the writings of diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indo-American writer and how her characters handle the perennial problems related to their displacement, sense of loss, insecurity and isolation as they moved from their homeland to an alien land from her short story collections, Interpreter of Maladies.

Keywords

Diaspora, displacement, home, Indian Diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, Interpreter of Maladies, belongingness, immigrant, Nostalgia.

Introduction

Literature influences the modern society in an undisputable manner. It acts as a vehicle to communicate one's expressions through books which mirror the societal problems and allows the reader to comprehend the world. Literature is a powerful tool to portray different cultures, customs and traditions. It is a reflection of reality, a product of art, and a window to ideology. Indians contribution to fiction did not emerge at the initial stage in English. It had taken some time to start their writings in the vernacular language. "Fiction is a literary work whose content is produced by imagination and was not necessarily based on fact. Writing fiction is generally considered to be a combination of craft and talent." (Jagdish Batra, 2012:92)

Contributions of pre-independent and post-independent writers

Pre-independence writing was the outcome of cross fertilization of two cultures: Indian and English. They had made their voices heard around the world in their own country soil style artistically. They did not restrict their writings to one theme, dealt with all the spheres. The writers were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and few others. They dealt in their writings mainly of spiritual and philosophical subjects.

The writers of the next generation were the “Trio,” Mulk Raj Anand, RK Narayan and Raja Rao. The big three towering figures followed different routes of fictionalizing with distinct identity of their unique style. They depicted the social, economic and political issues in their writings. They had given a new life to Indian writing in English. After Indian Independence, the writers perceived post-independence in a different view. Focus shifted to deal with any theme, drew the attention of the creative writers.

Diasporic Literature

Post-independent writers witnessed ostensible changes and the writers had taken the task to be conscious of social norms, on their shoulders. The other fascinating feature of this period is: it had given birth to the Indian “Diaspora” with clusters unsuccessful aiming at identifying themselves with the native mode of administration, migration to another land which was once called the “white master’s.” Etymologically “Diaspora was used for the dispersal of the Jews, when they were forced into an exile to Babylonia. “The term Diaspora was used to describe people disposed, displaced, and dispersed generally, but not always, by force.” (Dawn Chatty, 2010:13)

Reasons

There are many reasons for the emergence of Diasporic literature. One of the most important reasons is the migration of people to another land due to partition and the world wars; first and second. The migration was an agonizing experience and it generated a sense of insecurity with the outcome of uprooting and marginality. As Castles and Miller write, “Migration is a process which affects every dimension of social existence, making research on migration intrinsically interdisciplinary.” (Dawn Chatty, 2010:11). As people migrated they were displaced and dispersed into different directions searching for their bread and butter leaving their past but living in nostalgia.

Diasporic Writers

After Indian independence the Indian Diasporic community had acquired a new identity due to the process of self-fashioning and increasing acceptance by the West. The Indian-English literature finally with grit and determination had crossed the barriers and had become a part of mainstream English literature. Indian writers like VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri. The Diasporic writers had brought various themes into limelight: identity crisis, isolation, displacedness, existential insecurity, nostalgia and pull of home.

Jhumpa Lahiri skillfully presented on how her characters handle the Diasporic sensibilities related to the memories of past, of the lost homeland, conflict and existence in her works.

Profile of Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967): Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri, is born in London to Bengali parents. Lahiri moved to the United States with her family at the age of three and persuaded her studies there. Lahiri was given the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and PEN / Hemingway Award. Jhumpa Lahiri makes a perceptive statement on her identity and sense of belonging:

“The essential dilemma of my life is between my deep desire to belong and my suspicion of belonging.” (<https://www.brainyquote.com>)

The oeuvre of Jhumpa Lahiri consists of the following:

- 1) Interpreter of Maladies (1999)
- 2) The Namesake (2003)
- 3) Unaccustomed Earth (2008)
- 4) The Lowland (2013)

Current study on Interpreter of Maladies: Diasporic dilemmas

The paper aims at presenting the Diasporic sensibilities in the first collection of Jhumpa Lahiri's work, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The problem of identity is one of the heartbreaking problems faced by the Diasporas and it agonized Lahiri and also experienced by every character created by her, though the intensity of its attack varies from one to the other.

Interpreter of Maladies consists of nine short stories reflecting different South Asian Communities; it interprets the emotional pain and affliction of those communities. In this collection of short stories, Lahiri argues that her narratives are largely celebrated not necessarily for their examination of diasporic anxieties, but for their exploration of human relations in general. Writing for Lahiri is a means of being at home, of finding a home as she explains in an interview: “I went to Calcutta as neither a tourist nor a former resident a valuable position. I think as a writer I learned to observe things as an outsider and yet I also know that as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, belonged in some fundamental way, I didn't seem to belong in the United States.” (Lavina Melwani, The Hindustan Times: 2011)

“A Temporary Matter,” is the first story Lahiri wrote as an adult. The interracial relationships between the couple Shoba and Shukumar, who are from two different backgrounds and meet at one place are excellently depicted by Lahiri. The conflict crops up between them due to the death of their premature child due to the weakened placenta; followed by events of misunderstandings which leads to the Shoba's maverick decision of walking out of a marriage. The final decision of Shoba's moving away from the life of Shukumar, shows that she thinks like an Indian. On the other hand, Shukumar thinks like an American and hopes to face the future to blossom and reap.

The second story “When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine,” is the second story centers on the partition. Lahiri significantly portrayed the displacement of family, culture, life style, customs and traditions. Pirzada's displacement to the United States is temporary to accomplish his research in Botany. He develops strong ties with the Indian Bengali family living in US and becomes a regular guest. Mr. Pirzada builds a strong affinity with them as they both yearn for Bengali life and Bengali culture. When he completes his research, he leaves for his homeland and settles happily with his family. Lahiri ends his temporary migration and depicts harmony and mutual understanding in the story with their home connections for each other.

The third story “Interpreter of Maladies,” presents on how most of the characters in this story perform in a deformed way and suffer from psychological problems. The story revolves around Mr. Das and Mrs. Das, a couple seek for someone's company to share their emotions. Mr. Kapasi is the interpreter, who listens to Mrs. Das's secret that one of child Bobby is clandestinely conceived. All the characters are defined by isolation from their families and their homes. In this isolation characters feel that they are missing something very important related to their identities.

“A Real Durwan,” is the shortest story set based on the theme of partition. In the partition the main character, Boori Ma, acts as a gate keeper, to an apartment building, lost everything when she is spatially displaced. But still her soul meanders in the past lavish life which she describes to the residents of that building: “Our bathwater was scented with petals...it was a luxury you cannot dream.” (Jhumpa Lahiri, 1999:83). One day somebody steals the newly fixed wash basin in the absence of Boori Ma. For which she is blamed and expelled from the building. The theme of loss due to displacement of her place is emphasized throughout the story.

“Sexy,” is the next story, focus on the collision of Indian and American culture between Miranda, an American and Dev, a married, an Indian fall in love with each other. Lahiri explores two world views and gives two different perspectives; the two worlds coincide as the East is able to give the West. A realization dawns to Miranda and takes a decision and separates permanently from Dev. A gamut of emotions; joy, sorrow, doubt and mystery are beautifully captured by Lahiri.

The story “Mrs. Sen’s,” is the ideal story of Diasporas and depicts immigrant experience, emotional exile, identity crisis and alienation. Nostalgia is present all the while in the story. Though she is married feels lonely and hopeless. To fill the vacuity she takes care of an eleven year old boy, Eliot. When Eliot’s mother intrigues about Mrs. Sen’s driving and other things, she replies back as: “Everything is there,” implying from the inception that nothing is “here” but in “India.” (Jhumpa Lahiri, 1999:117). While driving, she meets with an accident that leads to the eternal separation from Eliot. For Mrs. Sen, the experience of immigration is almost negative and distressing. She is confined to the four walls of the mind, borders she cannot cross.

“This blessed house,” is about a young couple between Sanjeev and Tanim (Twinkle), from different cultural backgrounds. Lahiri sketches the couple to be at loggerheads due to their contrastive temperaments and tastes. They find many Christian objects when they enter into their new house. Twinkle is excited, but Sanjeev is unhappy and quarrels with her to remove those things. Unlike Mrs. Sen, Twinkle audaciously declares that the house belongs to both of them. Sanjeev, a recent migrant compromises and pushes the boundary of his diasporic identity in order to live happily in this blessed house, amidst all the tokens of an alien faith and culture.

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” is the penultimate story in the book deals with a woman suffering from ailments, not given proper care by her cousin Haldar and his wife. Bibi is lucky enough to have a good neighbourhood to meet her needs. To recover from illness, she is taken to so many doctors. Finally one doctor after examining her with all the tests concludes that a “marriage could cure her” (Jhumpa Lahiri, 1999:163). It is surprising that one fine morning Bibi’s neighbours find her four months pregnant. Neighbour’s help her, not only she is cured from her sickness, but also becomes financially independent.

“The Third and Final Continent,” is the last story, an autobiographical aspect of Lahiri’s father. The narrator moves at three places and finally settles at one place with his wife Mala. Lahiri depicts the ties of the narrator to his homeland and he continues to pass on the tradition to his son who attends Harvard. The narrator is physically displaced but his soul dwells in his soil, India. Lahiri ends her last story with a happy of a complete family of a wife, husband and a son who lead a contented life.

Conclusion

Lahiri's compilation of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, makes reader aware of the importance of culture, customs and traditions to Indian people. Her stories are not just about malady of secrets between spouses, but also concern broader social issues. She adeptly portrays the Diasporas anguish for their homeland, living in a foreign land. Lahiri's own knowledge of Indian history and nature is of great significance in regard to the stories.

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