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THE EVOLUTION OF THE AESTHETICS OF MIGRATION LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL MAPPING

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ABSTRACT

The genre of migration literature has undergone many paradigm shifts over the past two decades. Migration literature has entered a distinct phase in the globalization era which has witnessed rapid increase in domestic and international migration. The trait of migration literature as works portraying the pangs of adaptation and alienation has more or less gone and many works have begun to narrate transnational experience as an avenue of celebration. The works which portray culture, lifestyle and worldview of different countries and continents have begun to receive wider critical acclaim these days. Many consider that the works by Indian writers who are leading transnational lives more effectively communicate the shifting sensibilities of Indians in the transnational era. The themes and plots of the novels written during the transnational era in many languages by writers who do not have overseas experience also tend to contain characters having such experience or background. The evolving trends and patterns of migration literature is analysed in the article along with the historical perspective of the genre.

Key words: New world literature, transnational literature, trans-territorial literature, weltliteratur, globalization, historical fiction.

Migrating to distant lands in search of better prospects in life has been the characteristic of many communities and sections of people during various phases of human civilization. Several sects and individuals moved away from native lands owing to lack of lucrative employment opportunities, forced displacement, colonization, slave trade, hostile environmental and geographical factors, political and religious conflicts. The trans-Atlantic slave trade which resulted in the displacement of millions of Africans is considered the largest forced migration in world history. Many caste and community outfits emerged of late in India with the strengthening of identity politics have raised claims about their migration from overseas

countries. Though the authenticity of such arguments have not often been established such claims of migration from distant lands are often made as part of the attempts to establish a glorious descent. Debates about migration of Arya-Dravida sects had reverberated in Indian historical studies for long-time. Such divergent thoughts that have existed in the arenas of historical and anthropological studies attain significance in literary studies also with the inter-disciplinary approaches evolved recently in cultural studies. However, with globalization international migration has entered a new phase and many traditional concepts of migration have been consigned to oblivion in the new world order of frequent cross-cultural contacts

physically and virtually. The concepts like global citizen, hybrid identity, transnational subjectivity, cosmopolitan perspective, hyphenated-identity all these attain significance in light of various branches of cultural studies concerning migration and cross cultural interactions in the contemporary era of globalisation.

The history of migration goes back to the rudimentary stages of civilization. Migration existed from during the hunter gatherer era of wandering tribal groups when there were no permanent settlements. People moved across geographically distinct terrains when there were bare minimum transportation facilities. There was not even a sense of world, nations, states or boundaries when many groups of people crossed mountains, rivers and forests to settle down in many locales congenial to them climatically or politically. Many were compelled to leave native lands those days due to hostile environment and clashes among clans. Tamil Sangam literature says about people changing occupations and moving to other quarters which were divided on basis of groups of people engaged in specific occupations.

After the industrial revolution there was mass migration from rural to urban areas in many parts of the world, especially in European countries. The migration of Jews and the trans-Atlantic slave trade were some of the incidents that resulted in displacement of millions from their birth lands. Partition of India and later Pakistan resulted in large scale migration and the families of many were torn apart in three countries. Migration to the US through Mexican border often attained wide media attention. Millions of migrants from Syria sought refuge in 2015 in various European countries following the Syrian crisis. India has Tibetan settlements where many followers of Dalai Lama have settled down for many decades.

There has been mass migration of labour force from South Asian countries to West Asian countries during the past several decades. Similarly, India has witnessed domestic migration of manual labourers as well as professionally qualified graduates. The survey conducted by Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation of Kerala government in 2014 revealed that in a small state Kerala there were

about 2.5 million labourers who had migrated from other Indian states. The changes in the political and economic scenario and the revolutions in the information and communication technology have alleviated the traditional concepts of time and space. IT boom has led to the migration of many technocrats from various parts of the country and the world to a few cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Gurgaon, Silicon Valley and the like which have developed as IT hubs. Internet and cable satellite channels have virtually eliminated the significance of national boundaries and many nowadays prefer to live and settle in new places and locales. Cosmopolitanism gained strength with increased number of people seeking education and employment in overseas countries and relaxed visa norms in many countries. The UN statistics of 2015 revealed that there were about 244 million migrants in the world. Khalid Khoser in his work *International Migration* states that "one in every 35 people in the world today is an international migrant." (4) Along with the international migration domestic migration is also in the rise. Many metropolitan cities have settlements of people from various countries and even markets and places of worship catering to specific populations. As society has become more cosmopolitan the concepts of migration have also undergone paradigm shifts. International Organisation for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant "as any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is." (<http://www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>)

Migration experiences have always inspired creative writers and the resultant diverse works reflecting distinct realms of culture, lifestyles and emotions have enriched the literary scene of all languages. Moving on to other countries and continents was quite familiar for many writers in European countries in earlier centuries too. The Grand Tour, an expedition through sites of cultural and historic significance, has been a part of European tradition and culture. Visiting many countries was viewed essential to expand the mind

and the knowledge horizon. E. M. Forster's novel *A Room with a View* which is set in Italy and England was considered a result of Grand Tour. Poet Byron was also much influenced by the Grand Tour. When millions of people migrate to different countries and continents only a few turn to creative discourses like literature. Among such literary endeavors only those expressions which are in English language and which are fortunate to get translation in English or European languages often get wide reach, recognition and acclaim. Hence it would be a Herculean task even to document the true picture of the migrant literature in its entirety.

The better financial status and political hegemony helped many European writers to freely move across the continent for travel, education and profession from olden days onwards. Geographic mobility existed among many European nationals centuries ago. Robert Frost who lived in England and America, T S Eliot who was born in America and later obtained British citizenship, Rudyard Kipling who spent life between India and Britain, American-Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov, Stephen Crane who spent life between America and Germany, Hermann Hesse, whose parents lived in India, spent life in Germany and Switzerland, Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad, Henry Roth who lived between Ukraine and America, James Joyce who lived in Ireland, France, Switzerland and Italy are some of the prominent writers who were fortunate enough to experience life in different geographical and cultural ambience. The exposure to unknown lands, customs and cultures would obviously have enriched the literary sensibilities of those writers. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exposed various aspects of colonialism. The readers of such novels could experience the pleasure of savouring travelers' narrative with insights on unknown realms of human nature. Indian philosophy figured prominently in Hesse's work *Sidhartha* and it showed the influence of Eastern philosophy which the writer seemed to have inherited from parents who spent years of migrant life in India.

Since the second half of the 20th century transnational life has become possible in the case of many Asian-African writers who are financially sound or highly educated. Among the famous trio of

Indian English novel Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand had immigrant experience. Raja Rao's novel *The Serpent and the Rope* dealt with the issues of migration. The novel *Kanthapura* was written while he was living in France. Several writers who live between many countries and continents, many who have hyphenated identities, have evolved of late. American writer of Indian origin Bharathi Mukharjee, Arun Joshi who lived in India and America, Indo-British writer Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai and daughter Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri who was born to Indian couple in London and later migrated to America and now writing in English and Italian, Vikram Chandra who lives between India and America, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Rohinton Mistry who live in India and Canada, Amit Chaudhuri who live between India and Britain, Indian-American poet Agha Shahid Ali who made Kashmir conflict as background of his poems are some of the Indian writers in English who have dealt with varying issues of migration in their novels.

M G Vassanji whose identity spans three continents of Asia, Africa and America, Somalian novelist Nuruddin Farah who lived part of his life in India, V S Naipaul born to Indo-Nepali couple and later migrated to Britain, Australian writer Patrick White who was born in London, P K Page who was born in England and later moved to Canada, the list of writers who live and write in different countries, continents and cultures goes endless as international migration has increased manifold over the past several decades. Vassanji has given vivid expressions to the issues of migration and hybridized identity in his works. Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North*, Korean-American novelist Chang-Rae Lee's first novel *Native Speaker* (1995) that tells the story of a man named Henry Park who tries to assimilate into American society, *The Emigrants* (1996), a novel by W G Sebald, a German writer who later lived in UK, which tells the story of four Germans in exile, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972), Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Namesake* (2003), Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) are some of the notable works in the genre. Literary nationality has become a complex issue in the case of many writers and their works as

they become truly transnational. In fact the transnational life of writers has extended the scope and range of many works and their global reach.

Along with the realm of creative writing the migrant writers have marked their presence in the arenas of literary, philosophical and cultural philosophies and theories. Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayathri Spivak Chakaravarty, Ngugiwa Thiongo, Arjun Appadurai and others have made their presence felt in areas traditionally dominated by Euro-American writers. Their ideas and views are nowadays considered vital in the appreciation and evaluation of many post-colonial and postmodern literary works.

The literary works belonging to the genre of migration literature include those which are written by migrants themselves or by writers who remain in their native lands but write with regular and intense observation of migrant lives or life in distant lands. In Kerala which has a sizeable number of migrant population migration literature has certainly made inroads by writers who are domestic migrants, those who have worked in overseas countries and those who remain in the state itself. M Mukundan who was an employee of French Embassy in Delhi could make north India, the locale of many of his works like *Delhi, Adithyanum Radhayum Mattu Chilarum, Delhi Gadhakal* and the like. Mukundan's novel *Pravasam (Diasporic Life)* (2008) tells of the dreams of Malayali non-residents in various parts of the world. N S Madhavan who served as an IAS officer in north Indian villages also made north India, the locale of many of his works. *Adujeevitham (Goat Days)* (2008) by Benyamin which has narrated the slave like existence of an Indian migrant worker in Saudi Arabia remains the best seller in Malayalam for the past several years. The book has got almost 70 reprints during a decade. Malayalam short story *Biryani* (2016) by Santosh Echikkanam which narrated the story of Gopal Yadav, a migrant labour who reached Kerala from Jharkhand, received wide critical acclaim. Writer Vilasini who spent a considerable part of his life in Singapore provided vivid description about the life of Malayali migrants in Singapore in novels like *Niramulla Nizhalukal (Colourful Shadows)* (1965). Kerala has a long history of migration from central and south parts to

Malabar and Mar Sebastian Valloppilly's autobiography, *'Daivam Nammodukoode' (God is with Us)* portrays the picture of Malabar migration of the middle of the 20th century. S K Pottekkatt's famous novel *Vishakanyaka (Poisonous Maiden)* tells the story of migration of farmers from Travancore to Malabar. Migration has been a theme in many Indian languages. *Chander Pahar* (1937) is a Bengali adventure novel written by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay which narrates the adventures of a Bengali youth through African forests. Hindi writer Nirmal Varma's first novel *Ve Din* published in 1964 was set in Prague.

The themes of migration literature have always been shifting. The writings of African immigrants to America, including Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes, brought to light the deep-rooted sufferings owing to racism and related issues they had to undergo in America. Early Indian writers who have migrated to Western countries also echoes the pangs of survival and cultural clashes. A section of other migrant novels like *Call it Sleep* by Henry Roth reflect the coming of age of many characters who have migrated to European-American countries and set up life there. A considerable section of new works of migrant literature reflect the fragmented subjectivity of writers who are torn between cultures. The migrants' struggle for survival, marginalization of migrants and other crises formed part of migration literature earlier but it is almost absent in the works of contemporary Indian immigrants. New generation Indian immigrant writers belong to a well-to-do class and their works with immigrant background often do not go beyond telling stories of their own personal experience. Moreover, they frequently shift their locations and remain in constant touch with the native lands. Many of them are floating migrants as they would return to India after some years or so. Hence their plots shift between the two locations. Some among them build up plots with the themes derived from fabricated history and fantasy of India and hesitate to ponder over the burning issues of the nation. Even strong elements of foreign gaze or colonial gaze could be traced in their works.

Migration in olden days was characterized by emotions associated with moving onto territories unknown geographically, culturally and politically. The sorrows and pangs of adjusting to the new culture and harsh attempts of survival echoed many such works in those days. The issues of cultural shock many felt in host countries and the difficulties of those who had foreign experience to readjust with native cultures formed the plot of many literary works of earlier days. The works of German-born American author Ruth Praver Jhabvala who lived many years in India portray cultural clashes and spiritual issues of refugees. *The Buddha of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi tells the story of Karim, a hybrid of Asian and English blood who is torn between white supremacists and alienated immigrants in 1970s London when immigrants were considered intruders. Many contemporary works of migrant writers on the contrary celebrate the avenues and opportunities of cross-ethnic, cross-cultural lifestyles. Many works, including *An American Brat* (1993) by Pakistani-American writer Bapsi Sidhwa elaborates the celebrations of new found freedom and libertarian life in host countries. *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* by Gary Shteyngart portrays the adventurous life of immigrants. Immigrant experience is considered nowadays as a fertile ground for creative writers. Literary works with the plots set in a region alone also tend to contain characters who have transnational experience. The works which move between countries and continents have begun to receive wider appeal.

Though the sentiments of nation and nationalism are almost absent in contemporary immigrant writing, the native region or country, its memories and present, remain a strong element of creative inspiration. The novels like *The Scent of Pepper* (1996) by Kaveri Nambisan who was born in Coorg but spent life in Bangalore, Liverpool and Lonavala, and *Tiger Hills* (2010) by Sarita Mandanna who live between New York and Toronto, reveal that the native lands remains a strong creative inspiration for those who spend life in many countries and continents.

Transnational literature, trans-territorial literature and new world literature are the terms in

current use to denote the new era of migration literature. The plot, concerns and themes of this genre have also undergone paradigmatic changes during the phase of transnationalism. The feelings of nostalgia, rootlessness and displacement are not altogether absent in contemporary writings of migrants but the intensity of expressing such emotions has been minimized and focal points have been diversified. A novel like Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* at once becomes a reflection of the pangs of old generation migrants and at the same time it reflects the celebration of new generation migrants, whereas Vikram Chandra's novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* elaborates the new trend of celebration of migrant life. However, virtually no works are produced in transnational era which can be called an epitome of internationalism. Few works go beyond the concerns of identity and subjectivity. Even amidst narrating transnational lives the traits of strong ethnic and caste sentiments remain in many works.

In a world of shifting views and ideas the native and the host countries serve as bi-focal moorings for many to narrate stories. As a sense of uncertainty and the fear that everything, all beliefs and ideology, they have so closely been holding so far are fast becoming obsolete, have gripped the present-day world, writers tend to look at the past and hence history becomes an important thematic element in many contemporary writings by immigrants. They turn to history in search of a stable mooring but there too they wobble. They prefer to alter history and engage in fantasy. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra all these writers have made profuse use of history in their works. History they use in fiction, however, has remarkable difference from that of traditional historical fiction writers. Unlike the historical fiction pioneered by Walter Scott and popularized by others, the postmodern immigrant writers prefer to use history by mixing excessive elements of fantasy and by adding new figures, distorting locations, established facts and ages. They have invoked many techniques to mix the past and the present. Sometimes they try to find parallels to the contemporary age of transnationalism in the colonial era as Vikram Chandra did in *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*.

Immigrant writers do not attach any significance to 'established' historical facts but tend to consider history as a realm for immense imagination. The narrative of Thomas Pynchon's historic novel *Against the Day* (2006) takes place between the 1893 Chicago World Fair and the time immediately following the World War I and features several characters spread across America, Europe, Central Asia and the two places not mentioned on the map. Fantasy and imagination figure prominently in their re-reading of history as Salman Rushdie did in *Midnight's Children* and Amitav Ghosh did in works like *Shadow Lines*. Rushdie's characters are from different countries like India, Pakistan and England and history, social and political realities of these countries appear in his novels to a large extent imaginary. These imaginary homelands could capture the essence of reality as seen through the eyes of characters who undergo the challenge of straddling two cultures. Rushdie explains this in *Imaginary Homelands*:

"It may be that writers in my position, exiles, or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutilated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must do in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost, that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind," (10)

With e-reading and the growth of publication industry literary works in English and English translation produced in any country nowadays enjoy wide readership from many parts of the world. In such a scenario many works of migrant writers, the plots of which do not specifically restricted to one location or nation gets wider readership. The migrant writers generally tend to create works on larger canvass inculcating life and incidents belonging to comparatively longer periods. Such works obviously attain a wider outlook. They move backward and forward in time freely. Scottish writer

William Dalrymple who has been residing in Delhi for longtime is a migrant writer with much peculiarities. He writes stationary travelogues on Indian cities like *City of Djinns* and his works feature the tradition and customs of India. A tinge of Western gaze could be found in his works. When Suketu Mehta who lives between Mumbai and New York writes a travelogue on Mumbai it reveals an Indian writer's attempts to give modern charms to an Indian city which is absent in Dalrymple's work.

Globalisation, IT and the mushrooming of activities of multinational corporates foster the proliferation of literary works in all genres in English globally. At the same time many writers having immigrant exposure also show the tendencies to strengthen regional languages. Kenyan writer NgugiwaThiango remains the strongest embodiment of this trend. Arundati Roy has attempted to demystify the 'standard English' through various techniques, like retaining many Malayalam words without translating into English in *The God of Small Things*.

The works of migrant writers and those with a transnational setting have become more significant and vibrant today as they echo the sensibilities of the globalized world more profoundly. The proliferation of transnational or trans-territorial literature has necessitated new yardsticks, theoretical and philosophical perspectives for analysis as they reflect issues and concerns far beyond the region and the nation. Hence there is an increasing tendency today to consider and study migration literature as 'new world literature'. It has also been observed that the Goethe's concept of 'weltliteratur' (world literature) has been virtually realized in the transnational era. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* has precisely observed it:

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'. Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees - these

border and frontier conditions – may be the terrains of world literature. (17)

The world view of a migrant who has experienced multiculturalism in several ways is considered potentially beneficial in creative writing. However, with constant observation, learning and imagination the authors who do not move out of their native lands also write trans-local works or they largely tend to include characters who experience transnational life in their literary works. Chetan Bhagat, one of the most popular Indian writers in English, could create an exemplary novel on transnational experience realized by information technology in *One Night@ the Cell Center* (2005). Nowadays, a literary work portraying immigrant experience, socio-cultural conflicts of transnational characters or new avenues of trans-local ambience is often considered as an unmistakable sign of a writer's intellectual and imaginative caliber in aesthetically recreating contemporary world and its structures of feeling.

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