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Indian Women in Diaspora: A Preserver of Culture, Identity amidst Dislocation and Relocation

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora for women is when they move out of their homeland willingly or unwillingly is of no concern. Many a times they have to move away from their country to follow their husband abroad. It is assumed that they would like to settle in the new land and make a perfect home out of it.

Key words- diaspora, identity, culture, loss, adaptation

During life time people cross borders for one reason or another and their lives thereby unfolds in different ways. The diaspora context is therefore determined by the conditions of the host country and the circumstances under which an individual migrates. Unlike others, the Indian diaspora was a result of war, indentured labours during colonial times, also voluntary migration by people and as a result of getting married to an Indian male working abroad. There are certain situations where the diaspora acquires unique characteristics one of which is when the culture of those undergoing migration is lived through their traditions, history and past i.e. their homeland. Under these circumstances when the diaspora people interact with the host community, then their cultural practices undergo changes and these changes are also seen in their identity. According to T. Vinoda, "the paradigms of diaspora discourse kept pace with the changing cultural situation as a result of this interface, sharpening its perception and definition of the myriad different compositions of identity" (19).

A central question of the diaspora study is therefore how migration affects the diaspora subjects. The answer to this can be "as the

boundaries open up, the "diaspora" self is changing in character raising myriad complex questions about construction of identity, history and nation" (T. Vinoda 20). Indian diaspora therefore has become transnational in character for it has spread across the globe. But the necessity to preserve the local identity has made the Indian diaspora assertive. The various practices of the Hindu rituals of birth, death, marriage and festivals become a manifestation of the minority and an attempt to keep the community close knit and to strengthen their identity. As per the critic T. Vinoda:

The construction of temples of worship that surpass their Indian originals in grandeur, the establishment of Indian grocery stores, setting up of exclusive desi news groups, online journals, and self-help groups, the making of their own cross over films etc, are further evidence of a strong sense of community among the diaspora Indians. Problems of dislocation and identity no longer seem to beleague the diaspora ensconced in secure places of affluence and even of power. Infact global organisations have emerged to promote the ethnic identities and cultures and uniting India and Indian diaspora in a transnational context. (21)

Defining expatriation is therefore difficult for it is not just a geographical journey but- a thwack of ties with the mother country – a manifestation of sense of loss, dispossession, a feeling of remaining straddled in between the two cultures and an anxiety to belong either to one’s native culture or to the new environment, the entire notion of belonging and unbelonging along with an urge to prove oneself, are all such feelings projected by an expatriate. Novelists like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee deal with problems of identity, for them the quest for identity is not the issue of self alone, but it goes beyond the concerns of culture that may also sometimes give rise to hybrid cultural forms. As Jopi Nyman observes:

Rather than searching for roots and authenticity, migrant writing constructs itself in the space of in-between ness between different cultures, societies and homelands. In this process it reflects on both the old and the new, and questions existing political and cultural binaries. (53)

A continuous nostalgia for the past, along with a determination to be relevant in the new found surrounding becomes the theme and dominates their writings. Their techniques comprises of adoption, absorption, assimilation reinvention of religion, race, food, clothing etc. The representation of the entire immigrant experience from the time they arrive to the new country to their experiences there, later on the various phases of life they go through the motif of love, marriage and divorce all become the subject matter for diasporic writing. An expatriate writer creates rather re-creates with emotion and precision the experiences of colonization and racism. Evolving new styles by selecting, borrowing and mixing of various things that are inherited and then juxtaposing them to bring out something that fuses into the existing custom, experimenting with form, language, technique that a diasporic writer comes across becomes his literary activity, both by confronting and a refusal to the patterns of the dominant tradition.

Diaspora for women is when they move out of their homeland willingly or unwilling is of no

concern. Many a times they have to move away from their country to follow their husband abroad. It is assumed that they would like to settle in the new land and make a perfect home out of it. Marriage therefore results in rendering a large part of half of the population diasporic. Once they leave their country of origin what happens; It obviously results in crossing of borders not only the physical borders but a crossing over of emotional, psychological, social, borders of time, place, space as well as of location. The entire world changes for a woman, in a new community, new society where she alone becomes the guardian of her native culture, religion and morality.

Arriving in a new community means stepping into a totally new world, a world of “freedom,” a world with very different approaches to the one she is used to. Here she goes through multifaceted problems e.g. language at times becomes a barrier for her. Handling the modern culture while at the same time taking care of her own ancestral culture and tradition is what becomes her objective of concern. In the adopted country women at large are working whereas women from a new land may choose to stay at home which quiet often may be interpreted as not actually being her choice. But then there are numerous reasons over an immigrant a woman’s staying at home as a house wife. Back home our system is such that it is based on family, which is more important whereas in the adopted country money comes first. Though this is just an example, there can be many causes of misinterpretation between the two communities.

The women of the Third World in diaspora have to constantly bear the burden of comparison between them and their stereotypical images. Certain images of the woman and womanhood are structured so deeply in the minds of the people that they can hardly think of things and life beyond it. In this, the media has played a vital role, as it has left no stone unturned in portraying the women from such a position that she always remains in the margin. Each female has since time immemorial undergone this process, females before them have already been subjected to. And every female of the generations to come will also have to undergo the

same because it is a cyclic process. Even after the abolition of Sati, still the diasporic women are posed with question relating to bride burning, dowry death, vegetarianism, contraception and women's rights. As Hole opines:

One asks about these issues, as well as oppression by men, as if it was a proven fact that all women in India generally are oppressed and mistreated. It is a common feeling among the informants that the receiving community has very limited understanding of "immigrant women", or, more so, a generalizing attitude towards women across all categories. (455-456)

She further mentions that in order to standardize, the culture and social heritage is taken into account where the person's right as an individual is kept in the background. It is taking a community at large and giving no importance to a particular individual. It is the process of generalizing certain similar points and attributes of the members of the community as a whole. This tendency is quite commonly visible when the discussion involves the lives of women, in particular the Indian women. Having left the country of one's origin there seems to develop a tendency among the dislocated communities, a tendency of 'solidarity between the communities, on no other ground than the place of previous residency' (Hole 456). In order to get the sense of belonging to the same nation, of being related to one another brings them together. They start making friends with other people of same nationality as them and this is how the social networking starts. They look for similarities in social competence, background, mutual interests and education, field of work etc. The women get together at weekends or on holidays for tea, coffee and little chit chat and gradually they start discussing various issues regarding how to maintain balance between their culture, tradition, value system and the totally different culture of the adopted country.

A notion that is generally agreed upon by researchers and social scientist is that the women irrespective of their community, caste or creed are the bearers of religion. The entire responsibility with respect to religion, rites and rituals is expected

to be borne by the female. Research conducted in UK by Nesbitt says, "The presence of women in families has been highly significant in the perpetuation of domestic religious practices" (Jackson & Nesbitt 7). This is very much true of the women all over the globe whether she is in her homeland or somewhere else. The situation goes equally for the women of diaspora communities as well. Rather for them the question of adherence to their own religion and the entire process of transmitting their culture and value system to the next generation is more of a moral duty- some sort of pressure or burden on the first generation of immigrants. A similar view is put forth by the critic Hole when she says:

Like in all other cultures where the women are the bearers of religion, in the diaspora communities it is a duty much more difficult than "at home." Removed from the familiar, cultural surroundings, women have to balance the demands and impacts of the ancestral culture as well as the impact, questions and cultural demands for acceptance that the receiving culture puts on them. (458)

According to the critic Manju Jaidka, "insecure in his new environment, and uncertain of his roots in the old country, the expatriate is like Trishanku to her. Like Trishanku who, in the Indian myth, remains suspended in the triangle of the three worlds, the diasporic writer dangles between the mother country and the country of adoption" (24). Bharati Mukherjee who herself has moved from one geographical location to another. In her essay entitled "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old-woman", admits making use of certain elements which may be attributed to her dual background, for instance, her use of violence and the irrational because of her Indian heritage. But, she says, she wishes to make "the familiar exotic, the exotic familiar" (35).

The conflicting images of the Indian women are present and cannot be done away with as the society is multilayered and is largely driven by caste, class inequalities, the regional disparities, distinctions in linguistics and a cultural diversity that belongs to a civilization which goes back to 2500 B.C. "Given the plurality and complexity of

India, it is perhaps futile and inappropriate to search for and locate one dominant image for a typical Indian woman" (Women Images 14). Even though there have been innumerable hurdles in the path of social reformation for women in the nineteenth century India, there has been a consistency and continuity in the construction of femininity that does not do away with the traditional virtues, images and roles of women as from the past.

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