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The Crisis of Deracinated Writers

Abstract: The complex experiences and the identity crisis of the deracinated writers can be clearly discerned in their writings. This essay highlights the themes reflected in their works, such as geographical and cultural dislocation, identity crisis, diaspora, migrancy, sense of alienation, multiculturalism, communal, racial and gender discrimination, assimilation and imaginative homeland. Some of these writers regret the loss of their homeland while others do not ponder nostalgically upon this irretrievable loss but cherish the new myriad identities and knowledges. However, the postcolonial diasporic women authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander and others have more explicitly narrated the plight and misery of their female and male protagonists in foreign lands.

Keywords: Alienation, Diaspora, Discrimination, Homeland, Identity Crisis

Exile and displacement narratives austere manifest the traumatized complex experiences of migrancy, cultural assimilation and the ensued hybridization on the one hand, and the lingering nostalgia, memory and the image of metaphoric homeland on the other. These prominent themes are explicit in the writings of immigrant postcolonial authors from a medley of once-colonised nations. For instance, Derek Walcott, declaring a diasporic attachment to Africa, Salman Rushdie presenting reflections of reality in 'broken mirrors', conquest of rootlessness in Jhumpa Lahiri, liminal persona in B. Rajan, stark diasporic sensibility in V.S. Naipaul, search for symbols and patterns to explain and recreate the world on various plains of

experience in Amitav Ghosh, disillusionment and racial marginalization in Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Chitra Bannerjee and so on. 'Home' to these postcolonial diasporic writers is a mythic place of desire which can never be reached as these deracinated writers are not oblivious of their double consciousness, that is, a split-consciousness of being Indian or African and American or British. The postcolonial writers in English explicitly exhibit through the effects of magic realism, a fissured, distorted world view concomitant with cultural clash, dislocation, relocation, hybrid identity, sense of alienation and reclamation of the history of homeland.

The term 'diaspora' meaning 'to disperse' is naturally associated to the colonial phase which meant displacement of communities or mass migration of Africans, West Indies and other colonized natives due to slavery, forced immigration, exile and colonialism in various parts of the world. So diaspora is not only a geographical displacement but also a cultural one. These uprooted servile people served as indentured labourers in the remote colonies of the Empire. Another type of diaspora is designated to those English-speaking denizens of India, Africa, West Indies and Fiji who for personal, professional and political reasons abandoned their homelands for a prosperous life in the First World countries like Britain, America etc. These globally dispersed minor communities may not have common ancestral homelands but they share the same feelings of rootlessness, alienation, cultural crisis and bafflement. The diasporans know that their journey to the foreign land is final yet they create an imaginative metaphoric homeland to which they must at all costs return. (Stuart Hall)

The writings of these exiled writers are marked by two dimensions – temporal and spatial. The temporal dimension (analepsis) retrieves history, past, traditions, native cultures and customs producing nostalgia, memory, images of homeland and reclamation. The spatial plane (prolepsis) stipulates the writers to write about cultural assimilation, negotiations, hybridization, new identities and cosmopolitanism through which these minor communities

can seek acceptance in foreign lands. These two dimensions represent people from two different generations. The first generation of migrants always retained in their conscious or subconscious mind the image of homeland - 'imaginative geography and history' as Edward Said perceived and 'imagined community' as Benedict Anderson called it. This is evident in the writings of Derek Walcott. The poet addresses his broken cultural lineage in 'Laventille':

We left

Somewhere a life we never found,

Customs and gods that are not born again,

Some crib, some grill of light

Clanged shut on us in bondage, and withheld

Us from that world below us and beyond,

And in its swaddling crements, we're still bound. (168)

Oscillating between two worlds these diasporans became 'transitional beings'; some of them acknowledging their dual, antithetical cultures, some trying to integrate new environment and identity while others taking refuge to their imaginative homeland. However, the second generation immigrants unlike their ancestors, are not so intensely psychically caught between the two worlds but celebrate their polyglot, multiculturalism adapted from different places and people across the world as the colonial borders of the past have been blurred in this postcolonial era. This can be witnessed in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* where the binaries of 'us' and 'them' mean the shadow lines that rupture human bonds, solidarity, integrity, disseminating racial and communal hatred and discrimination. In the novel Thamma's reaction "We have to kill them before they kill us" towards Bangladesh, her birth-place, is not only the

product of nationalism that designated her neighbours, relatives and friends as enemies, but also of the seeds of hatred and repugnance implanted by the colonizer. But through the memorable character of Tridib, Ghosh tries to explain that, it is not necessary to attain secure identities that bind one in a fixed place or nation or ethnic group. One must search for itinerant cultural routes both imaginatively and physically, to acquire cultures and customs of different peoples to create a one world. This consequently helps to forge a close relation between past, present and future and foreground human bondage eradicating discrimination based on class, caste, race and gender. A similar ideology can be found in Paul Gilroy's 'The Black Atlantic'.

In his essay 'Imaginary Homeland', Salman Rushdie clearly confesses:

Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the things that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands.... (15)

But Rushdie does not ponder nostalgically upon this irretrievable loss, rather he cherishes the new myriad knowledge and identities which challenge the age old concepts of rootedness, tradition and fixity. Homi Bhabha in his inventive essay 'The Location of Culture' (1994) rejects this idea of 'fixed', 'rooted', 'originary' identity. Rather he proposes that identity is a continuous incomplete process of negotiation, assimilation and articulation initiating in the formation of a diversified, extravagant, multicultural, novel identity.

British-born Hanif Kureishi, of Pakistani father and British mother, proudly claims that unlike his father, he is not intensely caught between the native tradition and British identity. Yet Kureishi contradicts his own proclamation when he describes his own imaginative, mythic, native Pakistan in *The Rainbow Sign*: "Stories to help me see my place in the world and give me a sense of the past which could go into making a life in the present and future". (35)

This insurmountable dilemma between two worlds is also evident in Derek Walcott's poem 'A Far Cry from Africa', where the poet expresses his agonized, tortured, liminal, hybrid identity:

I who have cursed

The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give?

How can I face such slaughter and be cool?

How can I turn from Africa and live? (3)

V.S. Naipaul one of the pioneer migrant writers realizes that, "Our own past was, like our idea of India a dream" (209) where dream is an illusion. For him, India is an imaginary place fractured both in time and space but the fathom of emotional attachment is inextricable as the act of migrancy leaves an indelible effect. He also portrays the clash between the traditionalists and assimilationists, a recurring diasporic theme, in his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*. On the one hand, we observe Mr. Biswas's endeavour to adjust and assimilate the creole world and on the other we find the Tulsi family repudiated foreign culture and secluded themselves in their culturally embellished abode, Hanuman House.

The distinct themes purportedly discernable in the expatriate writings of diasporic women writers, apart from portrayal of cultural dilemma, hybrid identities, sense of alienation, are the complexities of discrimination, identity crisis, racial victimization and humiliation faced by the aspirant immigrants and exile communities in alien lands, but not so powerfully observable in the writings of postcolonial male diasporic writers. These women writers include Bharati

Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander and many others. They wrote about the protean dynamics of migration. These authors are also intensely attached to their homeland and experience, their 'in-between' space. They also faced bewilderment, bafflement and confusion in their minds.

Meena Alexander registered in 'The Shock of Arrival' (1996):

Coming to America, I have felt on my heart what W. E. B. Dubois invoked: 'two souls, two thoughts... in one dark body'. But now, at the tail end of the century, there are many souls, many voices in one dark body. (198)

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-based American writer, personally experienced racial discrimination and difficult life, as a member of "visible minority" in Canada. As an immigrant writer she also delineates the issues of her own cultural location in India, her displacement (alienation) from her land of origin to Canada where she was "simultaneously invisible" as a writer and "over exposed" as a racial minority and her final relocation (assimilation) to U.S.A. as a naturalized citizen. Her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is about Tara Banerjee who travelled to America at the age of fifteen for higher studies. It was fate that she fell in love with an American, David Cartwright and eventually married him adapting new culture. In Indian tradition one should marry in his or her own caste or would be treated as an outcast or a sinner. Tara violates this conventional rule and makes her own choice. But her husband is wholly Western and asks naive questions about Indian customs and tradition. So it becomes difficult for her to communicate the finer nuances of her family life in Calcutta with her husband. After seven years she revisits Calcutta and feels completely insecure and alien even in the presence of her mother. Thus it is evident that Tara also suffers from a sense of alienation both in America and her homeland India. In her novel *Wife, Dimple*, the protagonist falls prey to inimical discrimination when she attempts to imitate the western culture and finally expiates

as a “nowhere woman”. In *Darkness*, she depicts the same picture of racial injustice, rootlessness, and identity and language crisis. Similarly Anita Desai’s *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* explores the claustrophobic and xenophobic atmosphere experienced by her characters in the novel which generated in them a sense of repulsion and isolation. Dev, one of the central characters in the novel, comes to London to pursue his studies. But gradually as time passes he develops a feeling of alienation from both the Indians and Englishmen. He feels like a kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth at a prison among the Englishmen. Kamala Markandaya’s *The Nowhere Man* delineates the East-West collision and the racial prejudices of England which ultimately generate loneliness in the mind of the protagonist Srinivas. The novel depicts the life of Srinivas whose rootlessness is at last brought home to him by the display of naked racialism in the English community that has shattered him for over fifty years. The misery of Srinivas is aptly represented by A.V. Krishna Rao: “The Nowhere man is the man that has no specific place to go to because he has either lost his original identity or deliberately extended it in order to adopt himself to an adapted culture.” (321)

The novel *Oleander Girl* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni centres around her female protagonist Korobi who continuously struggles with identity crisis and finds herself entrapped in a totally unacceptable social conditions both in India and abroad. Korobi’s quest for identity in a foreign land makes her realize and experience all the emotions of anger, protest, disgust, depression and distress. In Banerjee’s another novel *Queen of Dreams* the protagonist, Rakhi, an immigrant daughter and a divorced mother, wants to assert her individuality. Terrorism is a crisis in this novel that provides an opportunity to expose Rakhi’s self-identity. Kiran Desai, another Indian writer in her famous novel *The Inheritance of Loss* depicts the theme of losses, diaspora, terrorism, globalization, racism, alienation and identity crisis. Meena Alexander, an internationally acclaimed writer, born in India and later settled in England, portrayed through her first hand experience the pain of losing self-identity and dislocation in her novel *Nampally*

Road. In the novel, Mira, the protagonist had a complex inter-cultural personality as she was born in India, received colonial education and later travelled to England where she persistently struggled to cope with Western culture to find her identity.

So we can observe that these female writers narrate the tales of identity crisis, racial victimization, humiliation, discontent, misery, plight, violence faced by the Indian immigrant minor communities in foreign lands.

So the emergent exilic discourse and the globalised consciousness of 'acculturation' produced multifarious array of texts. In some writings we find the portrayal of 'homelessness' as a curse due to marginalization and destruction of indigenous history and culture faced by the immigrant minorities while others celebrate the 'deterritorialization', absence of fixed locality and liminal identity, romanticizing the 'Indias (or Africas) of the mind' (Salman Rushdie's 'The Imaginary Homeland'). Again, unlike the male authors the postcolonial diasporic women authors unveiled explicitly and distinctly the discrimination, humiliation, marginalization and oppression endured by the expatriates that retained an indelible impact in their mind. Some exilic writers through assimilation, dissolution, negotiation try to eradicate their hyphenated identities asserting and exerting their multicultural, fluid, continuous identities. So we can conclude that these diasporic themes which are abundantly found in the works of these deracinated writers, are definitely worthy of critical investigation and reflection as a theory.

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