



SOCIO- POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN DIASPORIC WRITING TODAY A STUDY OF SOHAILA ABDULALI'S YEAR OF THE TIGER

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ABSTRACT:

Diasporic writers often talk about how difficult it is to negotiate life away from the homeland. It has , many a time, been considered as an uprooting, a forced transplanting and an unpleasant experience. However with the passage of time, these themes have changed their tone and content. So the present writers record the struggle and the trials of the immigrants but also delve upon how skillfully they adapt to their new abode and find much comfort and financial prosperity offshores. The present paper discusses one such work which offers new interpretation of diasporic writing. Issues of religion, class, race, nostalgia and other inter personal concerns have been brought in aesthetically thus re-defining the lineaments of this genre.

KEYWORDS : *Diasporic, negotiate,uprooting, adapt, interpretation.*

INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has always been responsive to the changes in material reality and theoretical perspectives that have impacted and governed its study since the time of its inception. At the earlier stage, the fictional works of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan and Raja Rao were mainly concerned with the down trodden of the society, the Indian middle class life and the expression of traditional cultural ethos of India. At that time, even to a much later stage when writers like K.S. Venkataramani, Kamala Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, ChamanNahal, Ruth PraverJhabvala, NayantaraSahagal, Arun Joshi, and Khuswant Singh wrote, Indian English fiction concentrated on the depiction of social reality of the times. The study of these writers was largely based on realist ideology. The critical study of their works was directed at exploring how far they had been successful in giving expression to the reality around them. Much of the study was based on sociological and Marxist perspectives. Apart from the views related to the study of external reality, the psychological analysis through different characters formed another aspect of literary expression.

The interplay of a variety of material and philosophical developments marks a discernible shift in the nature and study of Indian English fiction. Consequently, Indian English fictional scene has become diversified, complex and thematically richer. The writers settled abroad and the ones who divide their time between India and abroad have contributed much to this rapidly developing sub-genre of English literature. Now Indian English literature no longer remains limited to the writings necessarily of the indigenous scripiter. It has broadened the scope of fictional concerns of these writers from purely Indian to the global and transnational.

The diasporic writers in particular interweave the Indian and the global that marks the emergence of a cultural mix at a mass level in the times impacted by globalization and unprecedented growth in the field of technology and communication. Their writings show how the developments in one part of the world have immediate and wider impact in parts of the world. Their fictional works become more significant for giving expression to cross-cultural encounter from a different perspective. The writings of Bharati Mukherjee, JhumpaLahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, V.S Naipaul and Monica Ali(from Bangladesh), to name a few,

provide an inside view of the problems faced by the displaced people in their adopted homes in a way that questions the traditional understanding of concepts like home, nation, native and alien. These writers contest essentialist nature of the difference between cultures premised on binary division informing the east and the west. Whereas, the earlier writers depicting cross-cultural encounter often created stereotypical forms of life and characters to mark the essential difference between the cultures, Diaspora writers often contest fixed notions of identity and stable norms that govern life at home and abroad. Diaspora fiction highlights an altogether different attitude of the people from erstwhile colonies in the postcolonial times.

The term Diaspora is derived from Greek term which means "scattering or dispersion". It is scattering of people from their native place to a foreign land. Earliest use of this term can be traced in reference to Greece state and its emigrating people from one city state to another. Later on, when this term was used in Hebrew Bible, it was interpreted in relation to the Jewish immigration from one place to another. Diaspora has become a broad subject of study now-a-days. If one looks at the world history, one will find (on the basis of dispersion of people) different types of Diasporas such as intercontinental Diasporas in Africa, Asia, European diaspora and some internal ones as well. Especially in current times meaning of Diaspora has changed, it is no longer a theory rather it has become a practice, especially when one looks at war struck Syria where millions are being displaced. The term can be defined in plenty of ways, according to its cause, effect, era, ethnic groups and so on. Khachig Tololyan is a Wesleyan University Professor and one of the founders of the diaspora studies. He looks interestingly at the dispersion of the populations as to how they are reshaping the culture, politics and literature of nations worldwide. He has deciphered the definition of Diaspora as, "...it has referred to all dispersed people, whatever the cause, size, organization, or duration of dispersion" (*Encyclopedia of Diaspora* 35).

Diaspora (dispersion) from one place to another comes with various potentials conflicts and issues of the natives, who leave one place and go to another with his/her own bag and baggage with all sorts of cultural, linguistic, political, economic and psychological repercussions. Cultural Shock is one of the prominent of all these discords. Native culture with all its norms, myths, ethos, rituals and traditions prevails in the emigrant's identity. These identity conflicts emerge from sudden change of culture. Memories of the native land work as an aid in expediting the identity crisis. The interplay of memory and identity executes the whole concept of Diaspora. Vijay Agnew, a professor of social science at York University in Toronto, who is also an immigrant from India, defines Diaspora in her edited book *Diaspora, Memory and Identity*, "Scholars who define a diaspora by its social consciousness refer to individuals who live in a variety of societies and cultures and who emphasize their sense of belonging or exclusion, their states of mind, and their sense of identity" (Introduction 5).

Once the natives cope with the identity crisis, there comes the stage of assimilation with the foreign culture. Sometimes this assimilation is done by forgetting the past and at others by keeping one's own culture intact even in the host country. Immigrants seek to balance the ethos of the host country along with the cultural ethics of the native country. Assimilation is attained when all sorts of personal, professional and national interests work upon it. Assimilation of diasporic population in a foreign land also tends to impact the culture of that nation as well. Identities of the native and the foreigner both evolve in the process of adaptation and adoption. Both of them transform, thereby complex and hybrid personalities are born. New Identities emanate from complex ones, when all the conflicts are somewhat synthesized. A great deal of adjustments go into the making of a new being. There is a socio-cultural dialogue that also takes place and contributes in the process of adaptation. Vijay Agnew contemplates over struggle of dispersed person, "Migrants use their intellectual, social, and political resources to construct identities that transcend physical and social boundaries, and they are rarely, particularly today, mere victims who are acted upon by the larger society" (*Diaspora, Memory and Identity* 5).

This new found character is an amalgamation of native as well as new land culture, politics, economics, psyche etc. Though they try to become citizens of the host land but a small tincture of affection always remains there in the hearts of these migrated people. Elizabeth Mavroudi and Anastasia Christou

write about this special bonding with motherland, in their introduction to the edited book *Dismantling Diasporas: Rethinking the Geographies of Diasporic Identity, Connection and Development*, as, "...those in are often being political, performing identity politics; likewise, negotiations of diasporic identity and connection are not necessarily free from nation – building projects or homeland-oriented development"(n.p.). Thus these Diasporas have played a pivotal role in negotiating world cultures to a new height.

This research paper seeks to foreground the culturally hybridized phenomena of intra- and inter-continental exchange through transnational fiction and the diasporic novel. More often than not, the authors of such novels are based in Europe or America but use Indian locales, myths, historical and fictive narratives and socio-cultural motifs for their fiction. In the post enlightenment era, the European national/imperial systems established their hegemonic, political and cultural sway in large parts of the non-Europhone world. A corollary was the significant literary-cultural *mélanges* which occurred in the now free states, arising not only through direct migration but also through aspirational and lifestyle-hybridity. This led to not only the spatial expansion of Europhone societal and cultural normativities, but also to the crystallization of various 'Western' approximations of 'Eastern' cultures and vice versa. The diasporic Indian novelists represent an important, even crucial facet of the Asian cultural response to the normative and prescriptive presumptions of colonialism. Even without using the important and useful postcolonial analytical categories, one finds a keen non-monocultural, nuanced-hybrid rootedness in the novels of the Indian Diaspora, which represent an attempt to explore the Indian societal prism as alternative sites of multicultural coexistence and intercultural subjectivity.

Sohaila Abdulali was born in India and after her schooling, she moved to the United States with her family at the age of fifteen. She has to her credit degrees in Economics, Sociology and Communication at the graduate and the post-graduate level. In her personal life, she encountered the trauma of rape when she was seventeen while visiting Bombay. Her spirits were not stifled and she emerged stronger after the bizarre incident. She wrote an article after this heinous crime and shared a great message for coming generations: It lies in teaching our sons and daughters to become liberated, respectful adults who know that men who hurt women are making a choice, and will be punished... We have spent generations constructing elaborate systems of patriarchy, caste and social and sexual inequality that allow abuse to flourish. But rape is not inevitable, like the weather. We need to shelve all the gibberish about honor and virtue and did-she-lead-him-on and could-he-help-himself. We need to put responsibility where it lies: on men who violate women, and on all of us who let them get away with it while we point accusing fingers at their victims. (*New York Times*)

She asked particularly the Indian generations not to relate rape with societal stature of the victim, rather to eradicate it by punishing the violators. Instead of fading away from life Abdulali bravely faced it and moved ahead for great achievements. Since then, she has been engaged in different welfare activities such as the amelioration of the vulnerable children in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. She has also worked as Director of Communications at AIDS-Free World, which is an international advocacy organization engaged in creating informative database on the disease. She has had two Ford Foundation grants. The first was to research, produce and distribute three children's books on women's health in India. The results, the *Rang Bibi* and *Langraseries*, were sold all over India in four languages. The *Rang Bibi* and *Langraseries* of children's books were written with a grant from Ford Foundation in four languages - English, Hindi, Marathi and Tamil to aid the rural health and education groups. The second grant was to write a book about aboriginal people in Western India. The book is called *Bye Bye Mati: A Memoir in a Monsoon Landscape*. With the life history of a local tribe of Karjat, Maharashtra as the centre point, and the book deals with various social and cultural issues of Western India.

The *Year of the Tiger* (2010) is a Manhattan novel showcasing occasional excursions to India. It is about the new identity on foreign soil, work ethics, cultural ethos, opportunities and finding one's own niche in a big, bad world which is indiscriminate in its treatment. The title offers a glimpse into the fictional world inhabited by people who display the agility, dare and maneuverability of a tiger. Although considered a

dreaded beast of prey, the tiger has to be on high vigil in order to fend off sudden and varied threats. The characters imbibe the attributes of a tiger adding their own ingenuity and coping skills to lead a meaningful life abroad. The novel takes place in the heady beginning of the century, before 9/11 happened. It represents Wall Street during its mad moment of excess and glitter. It is the story of three Muslim siblings who decide to leave India and settle in the States. Zara Hussain is a young Wall Street trader living in the East Village with her twin, Kabir, a bohemian musician and their elder sister, Salma, a scientist whose emotions oscillate between her Hindu lover and the remnants of her Muslim mores. The story begins with a crisis in immigration at the JFK airport. As the year progresses, Zara gets involved in a snowballing financial scandal, Kabir realizes the sense of responsibility after many casual flings and Salma remains indecisive about her life. Along the way, one comes across a motley bunch of people, mostly Americans. These include family friend, Sam whose ardour for environment, specially the tiger, prompts him to settle in India with Zara, Benny, a mentally unstable man in search of beauty and Rick who wants to sail the seven seas. Despite differences in colour, race and nationality, what the characters share is reckless love for life, adventure, a hope for dreams and visions coming true and the innate goodness of heart.

Year of the Tiger (2010) is the second novel by Sohaila Abdulali, the first being *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) which had ecofeminist concerns. It is a representative contemporary diasporic work redefining the meaning, intent and content of what diaspora means today. The novel embodies the evolved stage of growth and maturity in creative and critical expression of Indian English fiction. The multi-dimensional perspective into the diaspora with diverse themes of exile, nostalgia, alienation, racial and gender discrimination gets renegotiated with facets such as assimilation, re-identification and hybridization added to it. All the three protagonists manage life variously. The novelist seems to consider life in the United States as equalitarian, liberal and non-conformist. There are ample choices in the personal and the professional domain. This is clearly indicated in the character portrayal where one of the girls is a stock-broker, another a scientist and the brother a professional singer. As the characters are Muslims, it adds one more dimension to their persona though this fact does not curtail their freedom in everyday life. As far as the gender issue is concerned the novel does not display any biases meted out to the two girls, that is, Zara and Salma, because of their gendered identity. In fact Zara is a ferocious broker dropping cuss words rather frequently. She realizes that "On the Street, showing squeamishness would be the kiss of death for her career. She was one of the boys, after all" (*Year of the Tiger* 80). Her skeptical outlook towards the Indian lifestyle comes to the fore in the following lines:

She didn't really like to discuss her personal life at work, and most people had got the hint by now. But Rohit, with typical Indian nosiness, blithely kept pestering her about her family and refused to be put off by short answers. She didn't really mind; he was like one of those people on Indian trains who keep talking to you even when you bury your nose in a book and look forbidding. There was something reassuring in having a brown person around who didn't respect the same boundaries as the white boys. (*Year of the Tiger* 100)

None of them is coy, submissive or restrained although they are on an alien soil. They exercise with impunity unusual choices in personal as well as professional spheres. The novelist even ventures into suggesting a Hindu-Muslim alliance between Ganpati and Salma. The other two siblings – Zara and Kabir also opt for American partners.

The novel is a critique of Indian traditions, customs and rituals as well. The arranged marriage scenario is mentioned a couple of times in the case of Salma, but none of the attempts is gratifying. Though the trio is conscious of the objections which would be raised by their parents regarding multi-cultural matrimonial alliances, they still prefer to take an individualistic stance determined by personal discretion. There is a tacit understanding and a special filial bonding which the twins share. Zara reflects, "She and Kabir never even bothered to try and explain it to themselves. It was just there, vast and taken for granted, like breathing. Like the sky" (*Year of the Tiger* 180). She admits:

I don't know, it's just like that with us. I am not looking at him or anything, but I always know where he is, in a crowd, and if he left I would figure it out right away. . . often we have radar or whatever it is, between us. Even when he writes songs, I usually figure out the tunes before he sings them to me. (*Year of the Tiger* 180-81)

Year of the Tiger appears to be an exotica – all inhibitions are overcome, all quandary-like situations tackled and many differences ironed out. Earlier India was the land where the exotic was explored – a country with multi-cultural, multi-lingual society, an array of Gods to placate with the most quaint of rituals. The contemporary diasporic writer transports the Indian characters to another homeland where the English friends and lovers make them comfortable and snug. The protagonists indulge in a fantastic lifestyle and acculturation takes place with ease and clever smoothness. This assimilation is both cultural and structural. The American lingo with its slushy slangs and swagger comes to them naturally. Kabir constructs a hideout in their rented apartment and calls it “the jungle”. It is a backdrop of many of his escapades with various partners. The Muslim upbringing does not cramp their flamboyant lifestyle. Not that these characters ape their western counterparts – instead, they seem more at ease in their adopted home which offers opportunity, hope, adventure and much more. Abdulali is reminded of the expatriate's unusual leanings and her descriptions are sometimes ethereal in nature. It reminds of Edward Said whose concept of ‘Orientalism’ highlighted the constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. In the novel the writer calls Zara and Kabir the ‘black twins’ and also discusses the telepathic bond and mature understanding shared between the three people coping successfully with the American lifestyle.

Abdulali contends that it is not the trial and rigors of a new country and its ethos which hampers assimilation in a foreign locale, instead it is the cultural and emotional baggage that the characters carry which creates obstacles. As Muslim girls, both Zara and Salma have been conditioned to consider a Hindu mate as a taboo, and anathema. So, Salma remains unwilling to accept Ganpati with whom she shares complete compatibility otherwise. She ponders over her cultural conventions where in a marriage not just the two partners but also the families should match. She also realizes the limit to which she could test her parent's tolerance and progressive views:

The Hussains were liberal, and the children could have brought home foreigners, Christians, perhaps even a yellow or black person, but a Hindu was another story altogether. To marry a Hindu was to play with all sorts of atavistic emotions that were too deep rooted and too dangerous to understand and fight. Salma understood this without even ever having had to be told. (*Year of the Tiger* 188)

Zara and Kabir make unusual choices whereas Zara decides to go back and settle in India with Sam, not for any cultural or religious reasons, but because Sam has a proclivity for ecology and wants to be close to tigers. Kabir's mindset undergoes a drastic change as he decides to return to the United States to support his partner Mildred who is expecting his child.

Abdulali's novel opens a new chapter in the annals of diasporic literature. At this point of time, the discord is subdued and the resolution of the discord is individualistically negotiated. Governments formulate policies and procedures of immigration, employment opportunities, international relations and so on. However, individuals have to face their own struggles and crisis and work out their own solutions which are not per stipulated codes but according to the given situations. Of course, some stereotypes remain such as one being suspected due to Muslim names and identity, as happens in the beginning of the novel. But these are compensated fairly when there is easy acceptance of the Muslim siblings in personal and professional life. The social fabric of the novel is made up of a multi-ethnic, transnational society which is culturally pluralistic.

The novel redefines diasporic writing in an innovative and daring way. A question, however, needs to be asked: Is it the idea of a multi-cultural society which is gaining popularity in the context of multi-ethnic societies like the United States or is it that the immigrants realize that by conforming to the value-systems of the dominant group and by institutionalizing the role expectations of the majority would they get better and faster acceptance? In fact it is a mix of both. Globalization has facilitated a comfortable amalgam of global

and the local. So the 'glocal' is the new norm which factors in during character delineation by the writer. The exile is now at home in the foreign locale and seeks rootedness and belongingness through tactful engagements and assimilative modes. The diaspora today has wider and varied meaning displaying maturity in decision making and adjustments. It is with this question in mind that Abdulali's novel needs to be understood. The negotiations are both social and political and the engagements are more individual centric. It is equally true that due to the dread which surrounds the fundamentalist organizations , immigrants face many unwanted restrictions and limitations. Still writers envision a more harmonious and less divided world where one settles more as a resident than as a refugee. This novel is a part of that vision.

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