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Teaching Diaspora Literature to ESL Students - An Overview

J. Abiraami, M.A., M.Phil.

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Abstract

Migration is a customary and acknowledged activity not only of animals and birds but also of human beings. It has been taking place since the historical past because it is a necessary and inevitable part of the developmental process. It is argued that people's movements contribute to the prosperity and a better way of life for the migrants. The origin of the English language began, only when the people who were living around the Black Sea moved towards Western and Eastern direction by around 3000 BC. The movement formed the Indo-European family of languages, from which the English Language evolved.

The term *diaspora* is synonym to the term migration. Migration – the human face of globalization attempts to show the relationship between culture and development. Traditions may undergo changes due to the change of social environment. Though migrants had enriched their social and economic status, migration also accentuates inequalities and losing their own identity in hostile environment.

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This paper explores the issues in defining *diaspora* and diaspora literature, outlines connections between diaspora writers and offers reasons for teaching diaspora literature to ESL students.

Introduction

Displacement and relocation is a part of human life. It can bring a lot of changes in one's life. Significant movement of population took place as result of economic deprivation and political upheavals in their land of birth.

The process of migration leads to mingling of culture and it gives a set of perspectives about the relations between ideas and practices of different people and their cultures. Hence diaspora writing paves the way for understanding the concept of 'displacement' and narrates a harsh journey undertaken on economic compulsion.

Focus of Diaspora

The emergence of the study of diaspora for ESL is fairly recent. It has been increasingly receiving academic and disciplinary recognition.

Research on diaspora is currently conducted from numerous perspectives including sociology, anthropology, human geography, international migration, post colonialism, political economy and communication. Generally speaking, diaspora is a minority community living in exile. But, at present, it refers to anybody living outside of their traditional homeland. It is used to describe the social, cultural and political formations that result from this displacement.

The Term *Diaspora*

Etymologically, the term *diaspora* is drawn from Greek meaning 'to disperse' and signifies a voluntary or forcible movement of the people from the homeland into new regions. A typical example of diaspora is given by the *New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of English Language*: "the dispersed Jews after the Babylonian captivity". However, the terms *diaspora* and diaspora communities are increasingly being used as metaphoric definition for expatriates, expellees, refugees, alien residents, immigrants, displaced communities and ethnic minorities.

The Online dictionary <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/diaspora> presents the following description for the word:

The history of the term *diaspora* shows how a word's meaning can spread from a very specific sense to encompass much broader ones.

Diaspora first entered English in the late 19th century to describe the scattering of Jews after their captivity in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C.E. The term originates from the Greek *diaspora*, meaning “a dispersion or scattering,” found in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 28). While this specific historical sense is still used, especially in scholarly writing, modern-day definitions of the Jewish Diaspora (often with an initial capital letter) can refer to the displacement of Jews at other times during their history, especially after the Holocaust in the 20th century. The term can also refer generally to Jews living today outside of Israel.

Diaspora also has been applied to the similar experiences of other peoples who have been forced from their homelands; for example, to the trans-Atlantic passage of Africans under the slave trade of the 17th through 19th centuries, which has been called the African Diaspora.

More recently, we find a scattering of the meaning of diaspora, which can now be used to refer not only to a group of people, but also to some aspect of their culture, as in “the global diaspora of American-style capitalism.”

Focus of Diaspora Literature Writers

Diaspora literature writers tend to portray the cultural dilemmas, the generational differences, and transformation of their identities during displacement. Their living in-between condition is very painful and they stand bewildered and confused. They are deeply attached to their centrifugal homeland and they caught physically between two worlds and this double marginalization negates their belonging to either location.

ESL and Diaspora

As learners of ESL, we can identify the tremendous creativity of the immigrant writers. Through their literary articulation, migrants took English as a means of communication and became spokesperson of his/her distinct identity and thereby put forth the motion of cultural distinctiveness. Their political unrest and the amalgamation of various issues like apartheid, ‘state of in-betweenness,’ and seeking for their identity are well expressed in their works.

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Some of the famous Indian diaspora writers are Bharathi Mukerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Uma Parameswaran, V.S. Naipaul who have chosen literature as a channel to pour out their passions and emotions. They express their longing for their old country while at the same time they also portray an objective picture of Indian society. Though they migrated to different countries in search of better economic prospects, they consider 'India' as 'Home' a safe place, where there is no need to justify themselves to others. But, as members of diaspora they ought to redefine their own identity in the hostile environment. They are caught between two cultures and one can experience the conflict between the Indian ethos and the forces of marginal existence in the adoptive country.

A Wider Perspective

By analyzing their works, students of ESL can envisage the native consciousness of the immigrants. The diaspora discourses give an insight into the ethnic pluralism of different countries. It offers a fresh outlook and expands its vocabulary in order to accommodate the diversity of multicultural reality.

Despite the variations, a thread of certain common themes runs through the diaspora writing and learners of ESL in South Asia will be able to relate to the content easily.

The common thread includes the following:

- (i) They or their ancestor have been dispersed from a special original centre or two or more peripheral of foreign region.
- (ii) The displacement leads to mingling of culture which influences the beliefs and attitudes of individuals as well as those of the community.
- (iii) Traditions may undergo a change due to the change of social environment.
- (iv) They acquired the citizenship of the foreign countries and it becomes the usage of the host country.
- (v) They play a significant role in the lives and societies of the country of its adoption as well as the country of its origin.
- (vi) They have an international audience and an international mindset.

Conclusion

Extracting, appreciating and creating beauty is the main objective of studying literature. Interestingly, there is an interrelation between life and literature, literature and language and

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language and life. In any society, all these components are important and inseparable. Among them, life provides the base and then language evolves and using the language the literary works are created. In literature different writers have been influenced by different aspects and provide common basis for valid generalization. Diaspora literature made a significant contribution to Indo-English literature by its rich exposure to multiculturalism.

Though the sense of displacement may be an essential condition of diaspora literature, it is not experienced precisely with the same identity by all; it differs according to time and place. The spirit of exile and alienation enriches the diaspora writers to seek rehabilitation in their writing and establish a permanent place in the minds of readers. A large number of diaspora writers have given expression to their creative urge and have brought credit to the Indian English fiction as a distinctive force. Hence ESL learners can read and appreciate the great works of the diaspora writers and be aware of the intrinsic value of Indian Literature.

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J. Abiraami, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor of English
Faculty of Engineering
Avinashilingam University for Women
Coimbatore 641027
Tamilnadu
India
dhyanabi@yahoo.co.in

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