

Cultural Studies and Diasporic Literature

Kanchana Devi. G.

Abstract

All forms of literature interpret life for us, console us and sustain us. Each country has its own national literature bearing national and cultural identity. Cultural influences such as social strata, education and religious belief shape an individual's personality. But diasporic writers' cultural identity is debatable. Diaspora has been in existence since time immemorial. Displacement or migration takes place due to historical, political and economic reasons. History of Indian diaspora has coursed through three phases. Indian diasporic literature deals with themes -- nostalgia, memory, sense of alienation, globalization and hybridity. A study of Rohinton Mistry's novel, "A Fine Balance" shows his treatment of multiple identities, doubles consciousness and ethnic assertion. This novel is parallel to that of the migrant's life in the host-land. Modern diasporic writers assert their 'otherness' as a source of positive change. They are seen as 'brilliant improvisers'. Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' will lead us to read history anew. Literature should unify us beyond cultural and geographical limitations.

Keywords: Indian diaspora, Nostalgia, Sense of Alienation, Ethnic identity, Hybridity.

Value of Poetry

The renowned poet and critic, Matthew Arnold, in his critical work, "The Study of Poetry" extols high order poetry as one that 'interpret life for us ... console us, ... Sustain us'. This fact is true and applicable to all forms of literature. Each country has its own national literature bearing the national and cultural identity. An intensive reading of any literary work will unravel the author's feelings, thoughts and attitudes towards life.

Diaspora and Culture

Cultural influences such as social strata, education and religious belief, historic moment (time) and geographic location (space) play a vital role in shaping an individual's personality which ultimately reflects in his work of art. His sense of identity is grounded in his cultural identity. But what forms the cultural identity of a diasporic writer is a matter of political and intellectual debate.

Diaspora or displacement of a community or culture into another geographical and cultural region is said to have been in existence since humans inhabited earth. To begin a study of diasporic literature is to place it in the historical context. Migrations always take place due to historical, political and economic reasons which had led to Cross-Cultural encounters. The diasporic writing is thus 'both an individual story and explicitly a cultural narrative'. Diaspora writers are more concerned with spaces, landscapes and journeys.

Three Phases of Indian Diaspora and Diasporic Literature

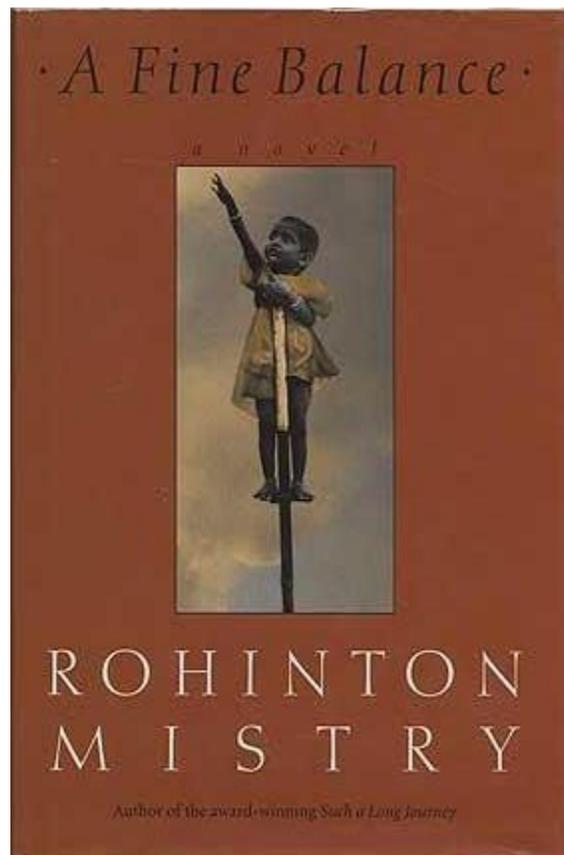
The history of Indian diaspora has had its course through three phases. The first phase began at the end of the nineteenth century when uneducated people were forcibly taken as indentured labourers to British colonies. During the second phase that began in the middle of the twentieth century, educated people travelled abroad to experience independence and economic development. The third phase comprising the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century saw people moving out of their homeland for the sake of education and employment.

The Diasporic literature of India is an offshoot of the immigrants who had access to education. They write in relation with the culture of their homeland, negotiating all along with the cultural space of their host-land. These diasporic writers live on the periphery and create 'new cultural theories'. Their works deal with themes such as nostalgia, sense of alienation, fragmentation, globalization, cosmopolitanism and hybridization.

While first generation writers concentrated more on cultural clash, the second generation portrayed the problems of identity and intergenerational gap. Due to the progress in communication technology, the second generation writers face the dilemma of dual identity, and their sense of dislocation creates existential angst upon their psychology. At the same time, they are also empowered to intervene in the transmission of cultured inheritance rather than passively accept the host culture’.

Hybridity

One of the themes of diasporic writing is ‘hybridity’, a term used by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha. It deals with doubles consciousness, multiple identities and ethnic assertion. Socio-cultural issues are stated in glaring tone as well as a series of discrete navigations that sets in motion the process of hybridity though never complete.



A Fine Balance, a novel by the Indian born Canadian writer, Rohinton Mistry could be analysed for the theme of hybridity. The author himself is an example of multiple identities.

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Being born in a Parsi community within India and later settling in Canada, he faces double displacement. The title of the novel itself suggests a fine balance between different identities.

The novel deals with the lives of four protagonists - Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, Ishwar Darji and Omprakash Darji. It explores the relationship between Hindu and Parsi communities. Dina Dalal born in an affluent Parsi family falls into bad times and becomes a widow, who is forced to sew clothes for living. Unable to pay the rent for her flat, she decides to take a boarder, Maneck Kohlah, a Parsi boy from North India who had come to the town for higher studies.

Since Dina's eyesight begins to fail, she hires the help of two untouchables, Ishwar Darji and Omprakash Darji. They belong to the Chamaar community who tan leather, but they learn the trade of tailoring to escape from hardship. They had escaped from their village due to the constraints of the caste system and hence readily accept Dina's offer.

In spite of initial hostilities towards each other, this group slowly bridges their social, cultural and religious differences to support each other. When adversity strikes them, they face it stoically and move on with their lives accepting the new turn of situation that occurs. Their capacity to adapt is highlighted in the novel.

Parallels

Though the novel is set in India, we find parallelism between the condition of the characters' lives to that of the immigrants' lives in their host-land. The novelist had deftly found balance between fiction and reality. Hybrid identities are perpetually in motion pursuing unpredictable routes and open to change as depicted in the novel. Thus Rohinton Mistry's portrayal is both autobiographical and communal at the same time.

Cosmopolitan Writers

Today's diasporic writers are viewed as 'Third World' or Cosmopolitan writers who map their experiences in their work which stands for the whole of their community. They seek

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narration itself as a return to Selfhood. They also view their state of marginality, plurality and ‘otherness’ as a source of energy and potential change. Hence they are termed as ‘brilliant improvisors’ rather than ‘pure inventors’.

Key concepts such as ‘Third Space’, ‘in-between space’, ‘enunciation’ and ‘hybridity’ from Homi Bhabha’s work, “The Location of Culture” mirrors the present scenario of diaspora where there is no claim of culture as ‘pure’ and ‘holistic’ but intermingled and manifold. His assertion that culture should be ‘rehistorised and read anew’ holds the possibility of the emergence of new cultural forms and diasporic literature aids the same.

As art grows out of life, literature should unify us beyond cultural and geographical limitations.

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