

Reflection of Gender Issues in Indian Diasporic Novels

Venu N

Lecturer in English and Ph.D Scholar(Reg No. 00609210082) , Bukkambudi, Tarikere taluk, Chikmagalur dist. 577145 (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 April 2019

Keywords

Diasporic Novel, Gender Issue, 'The Namesake'.

*Corresponding Author

Email: nvenubkb[at]yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses how the modern Indian diasporic novels present the situation of man-woman relationship in liberal vs. conservative cultures. Paradoxically those characters in these novels who are bound by the cultural conservatism remain stronger and have more secured feeling in society than those who live in modern secular society like in America having freedom to whatever they want to do. But these are the women who suffer from identity crisis more than anybody else. It defines the meaning and scope of Indian diasporic novels and then discusses how the women characters are depicted in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'.

The present article discusses gender issues reflected in Indian diasporic novels. In a way, the present paper tries to analyze how the concept of gender through a feminist perspective is reflected in the novels. Hence it deals in the area of cultural studies as well as gender studies.

The term 'gender' is significant in feminist studies. Though in everyday use both the terms 'sex' and 'gender' are used interchangeably at least in some cases, the feminists differentiate these terms. For them, the term 'Sex' represent biological differences among males, females, and transgenders whereas gender represents social differences among them. Simone De Beauvoir's most quoted phrase from her work 'The Second Sex' is "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". It is obvious fact that there are some physical differences between men and women but that does not make a woman as a social category. These differences do nothing to influence how she thinks or behaves or eats or wears.

These are often decided by the society in which she lives. A boy becomes extrovert and worldly whereas a girl becomes 'introvert and homely' due to the way they are brought up in society. So she intends to say that femininity is a social construct.

This paper closely observes how the female characters delineated in Indian diasporic novels. Before discussing this, the criteria to consider some novels as diasporic novels to be discussed. Wikipedia defines the term 'diaspora' thus,

A diaspora (from Greek διασπορά, "scattering, dispersion") is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland" [or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location", or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands"

The undisputed history of the term 'Diaspora' with capital 'D' refers to the exile of Jews from their homeland. The history of the Jewish migration as Wikipedia explains goes back to sixth and seventh century B.C., the time when they were out of Israel. They were dispersed from Jerusalem in the second century A.D. Again from the second century there were many

minor migrations and during World War II, they migrated to other European countries due to Nazi persecution. The term 'Diaspora' originally refers to that event. Here in this study the term 'diaspora' is used with the small letter to distinguish the expatriate from the 'Jewish Diaspora'. The term 'diasporic' is used as an adjective to the term 'diaspora'.

There are many thinkers who have attempted to define diaspora and the criteria to consider somebody as a diaspora. To consider someone a 'diaspora', Safran identifies six features of 'Diaspora' i.e. "dispersal, collective memory, alienation, longing for the homeland, a belief in its restoration and the act of self-defining with the homeland"

From the above definition, it is an evident fact that the term 'diaspora' refers more to the movement from one's homeland to the other. So to consider someone a diaspora need not necessarily demands the criterion that the subject to be living in the other land. The dislocation can also be due to various reasons like exile, war, migration, and other reasons. However, referring to a person as a diaspora raises another problem. A person may have dislocated from his motherland for a long time and he may have already considered as diaspora but when the same person is relocated into/returned to his native land, the question arises whether the person should be continued to be considered as a diaspora or not. This leads to complications in positioning the works produced by such a writer when he/she is in a diasporic condition.

Taking Safran's criterion for studying diasporic novels is difficult because modern diasporic literature has come a long way from its humble beginning to become more complex and diverse. Thanks to the progression of mass communication and technology, the diasporas have passed an era of alienation, nostalgia, and loneliness. The modern diasporas are no more indentured laborers but are mostly technocrats and highly educated who have still retained their contacts with their motherland. The modern mass communication technological evolutions like the internet, mobile phones, Facebook, WhatsApp, twitters, etc. create a virtual native land anywhere for them. Even in their motherland, the social contact for these people is not through physical contact but virtually. Moreover moving from one's homeland to a foreign land has

become so common and simple that it is comparable to moving from one city to another city thanks to the evolution in the field of transportation. Hence here the term diasporic literature is referred to the writings of those who either live outside the country. Hence the writers like Salman Rushdie, V S Naipaul, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, etc are considered diasporic novelists in this paper.

The diasporic novelists have more advantage in depicting the women characters in a more realistic way than the other novelists due to the fact that exposure to other cultures enables them to observe, compare and contrast the position of woman in a specific cultural setup. What becomes natural to a native of a particular culture becomes strange to a foreigner. So the diasporic novelist can have both native as well as an outsider's perspective in delineating his woman characters. The present paper discusses how women characters are depicted in Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'.

Midnight's Children was first published in Great Britain in 1981 and thereafter gained worldwide popularity. It was awarded both Bookers and Booker of the Bookers awards and brought name and fame to its author. Apart from Booker, it has won so many prestigious awards and has been translated into twelve languages.

Midnight's Children presents the familial history of a Muslim family, which spans over a period of 70 years. This, in fact, is a subjective and rehistoricized version of the history of Indian subcontinent covering three major countries: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in thirty chapters divided into three parts. These parts are named Book One, Book Two and Book Three. The distinctive feature of these chapters is that each chapter has got its own existence and all the chapters are combined together in a less sequential manner.

Simone de Beauvoir's view on femininity that a woman as gender is a cultural construct is true in the case of Naseem Aziz, the wife of Adam Aziz. Her character presents of the upbringing of a woman in Kashmiri Muslim society. When she is young, she was overprotected by her father Ghani who is a blind landowner. He does not even let the doctor Aziz see his daughter when she fell ill. He appoints four muscular women to hold a bed sheet with a small hole in it. The doctor is allowed only to see and examine the part of the body which has a problem. As a result of this upbringing, Naseem is reluctant to come out of her veil. For her, not covering her feet and face in front of strangers is being naked. Though Aziz tries to convince her to behave like a modern Indian woman, she never accepts that.

Her upbringing makes her less supportive to her husband on the bed also. Aziz asks her to move beneath him, she is enraged. Soon she puts on weight and becomes a premature - old woman. She was known as a reverend mother by the people. She felt it is all right for the religious teacher appointed by her to teach her daughter preaching her daughters to hate Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and vegetarians. As a whole, she is a conservative Muslim woman who is faithful to her husband but is unable to provide comfort to her husband either

on the bed or in life. The character of Amina Sinai, the mother of Saleem Sinai stands in exact opposition to Naseem's character. Amina is not faithful to her husband Ahmed Sinai as she maintains a relationship with Nadir Khan and secretly goes to meet him often however she gives her husband such comfort that soon Ahmed Sinai becomes a man with a pot belly. She is not a fundamentalist like her mother as when the Muslim people attempt to kill Lifafadas for entering into a Muslim street, she saves him putting her life in danger. She proclaims her pregnancy even before her husband knows about it. Thus Rushdie's depiction of femininity is ambivalent in the novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake presents the picture of women in different cultural contexts more powerfully. It may be due to the reason that the novelist herself is a woman who can understand the psyche of a woman more powerfully than the male novelists. Ashima is depicted as a conservative Hindu woman whereas Moushumi is a westernized Hindu girl who rebelled against all cultural constraints. When she was married off to an unknown person living in thousands of miles away from her homeland, she submissively accepts it. She felt that it is better than marrying an old man or a widower having children. Throughout her life, she is reluctant to wear a modern dress. Instead, she always wears a sari. She accepts the traditional role of cooking, cleaning the house, etc. But in the course of the novel, her strength comes to the fore when needed. Moushumi is in contrast to Ashima's character. She is the daughter of a famous chemist who had a profitable patent in his name. She never wants Indian men. When she is in France, she has innumerable relationships. She sometimes sleeps with one in the afternoon and another in the evening. Her dates are of innumerable types. Some are married, some far older having children in secondary school. They are German, Persian, Italian, Lebanese and so on. She falls in love with Graham whose father has divorced twice and his recent wife is a few years older than Moushumi. Though she marries Gogol, it becomes a short-lived. She again develops a relationship with Dimitri Dijanis that results in their divorce. Maxin, Gogol's date is free from such identity crises. She makes no hesitation in engaging flirtation with Gogol. She invites him to her home and Gogol is stunned to see how she kisses him standing one footed in front of her parents. Her parents Lydia and Gerald easily accept him as one of their family members. When she meets Ashima at Gogol's home in Pemberton Road, Ashima is horrified when Maxine kisses on her cheek and calls her by her name. The novel thus presents pictures of women from different cultural set backgrounds. However, the one who has more identity crises, loneliness and a feeling of alienation is Moushumi because she can become neither an Indian nor an American nor a French. Rushdian characters though appear to have bound by the religious and cultural barriers have secured feeling more than diasporic woman characters presented in the novel 'Namesake'. Aziz's mother when her husband is bedridden runs a gemstone business and feed the family, Naseem Aziz not only literally controls the whole of the family but also profitably runs a petrol bunk in Pakistan. Amina carefully changes the appearance of her husband to make him a replica of her secret lover Nadir Khan. Jameela, Saleem Sinai's sister becomes a famous

singer. Throughout the novel, the woman characters live stronger than male characters in the novel.

So the study of the diasporic novels makes the readers redefine the terms like dominant, subservient, the oppressor and the oppressed, etc. These novels are a wonderful material to study man-woman gender relationship in conservative societies like Kashmiri Muslim culture and liberal societies like American culture. When observed closely, though the women characters like Naseem, Aziz's mother, Amina Sinai, Mrs. Briganza, in *Midnight's Children*, and Ashima in *The Namesake* are bound by the cultural conventions, they readily

control the whole of the things happening around them. They effectively manage the situation when needed. But those women characters like Moushumi though enjoy a considerable amount of freedom, cannot act when the situation arises. She is seen as the person devoid of any purpose in life. Like the protagonist in *Moll Flanders*, she goes on searching for new kind of carnal desires from one person to another person. She is committed to no one in the world. In a way, the character of Moushumi is the epitome of those modern women who want freedom and happiness but do not want commitment and responsibility. Such are of no use of cultural progression in any culture.

References

1. Agrawal, Anju Bala, ed. *Post-Independence Indian Writing in English*. Delhi: Authorspress, 2008.
2. Arnold, Hodder. *The Essentials of literature in English Post 1914*. London : Arnold , 2005.
3. Bhautoo-Devnarain, Nandini. *Rohinton Mistry : An Introduction*. New Delhi : CUP Indian , 2007.
4. Das, Nigamananda, ed. *Dynamics of Culture and Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri*. New Delhi: Adhyayan, 2009.
5. "Diaspora ." July 2009. [wikipedia. wikimedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora#cite_note-webster-1). 26 July 2009 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora#cite_note-webster-1>.
6. Jain, Jasbir, ed. *Films, Literature and Culture: Deepa Mehta's Elements Trilogy*. Jaipur (India): Rawat Publishers, 2007.
7. —. *Writers of the Indian Diaspora : Theory and Practice*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. Jaipur (India): Rawat Publications, 2007.
8. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. London & New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2003 &2008.
9. Nityanandam, Indira. *The Tale Of The Diaspora : Jhumpa Lahiri* . New Delhi : Creative Books , 2005.
10. Pathak, RS, ed. *Recent Indian Fiction*. New Delhi: Prestige, 1994.
11. Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children* . London: Vintage, 1995.