

The Different Manifestations of a Colonial Legacy: A Brief Study of Two Indian Diaspora Poems

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Abstract: *Diaspora Indian writers have always engaged themselves in the processes of knowing, living it out and translating their experiences of being uprooted from their motherland while yet struggling to understand what their migration and the reallocation in a new continent means for them. There seems to be a marked departure in the writings of contemporary Indian diaspora writers from their predecessors in the subjects they choose, in the manner in which they treat the subject as well as in their mode of representations. This article is a brief account of two first generation Indian diaspora poets, Syed Amanuddin and Sujata Bhatt who migrated to the US in two different decades of the 20th century. The poets share their thoughts and experiences of living in the US in English that is very different from that of the native speakers there. Syed Amanuddin was born in 1934 in Mysore, Karnataka and moved to the US after his Post-graduation in India. Sujata Bhatt was born in 1956 in Gujarat and moved to the US as a child with her parents in 1968*

Keywords: Diaspora, trauma, resistance, identity, colonial legacy

Indian Diasporic Literature has always been much discussed and debated upon in the academia in isolation as well as within the framework of Post-Colonial Literatures. These literatures are at once liberating, painful, confounding compositions that have been conceived out of circumstances that are singular and defy any generalization. The concept of “diaspora” is as old as the human civilization. Yet, history has laid bare before us some of the most heart wrenching incidents and circumstances that perforce make human beings emigrate to faraway lands. Diaspora Indian Literature has offered us very insightful stories on these circumstances and experiences. A sense of loss, nostalgia, discrimination in the new lands arising from the cultural, linguistic, racial, physical, religious differences between the dominant and the immigrant cultures have been the distinguishing features of their works. This article offers, along these lines. A brief comparative study of two Indian diaspora poems ‘Don’t Call Me Indo-Anglian’ by Syed Amanuddin and ‘A Different History’ by Sujata Bhatt.

Although the diaspora voices have often been categorized into the victim, the imperial, the trade & commerce as well as the labour diaspora voices, almost all of these echo, to quote Roethke, the American poet “...this urge, wrestle, resurrection of dry sticks/ Cut stems, struggling to put down feet...”

The diaspora writers of Indian origin have found themselves susceptible to criticism for the peculiarities and oddities in their use of English language, which arises chiefly from a close contact with their mother tongue as well as other tongues that they constantly use in their everyday lives while residing in a multilingual environment in India. Was our love of English language a natural spin off from the impact of colonialism on our educational system? As a Colonial legacy, we continued to hold it in awe as post-colonial citizens. Subsequently, the language policies that were framed also accorded it with a prestige, and the promises it held as a medium of instruction for our social, professional upward mobility made us identify ourselves with Colonial master’s language, perhaps, as never before.

English is the associate official language in India; It is the legal language. The link language, the library language and the language which is dominantly the medium of higher education (Kothari Commission (1964-66)). A competence in English is desirable in competitive examinations. Good communication skills in English will definitely help the prospective candidate sail through their interviews as far as job market is concerned. Therefore, it is the language which is integrally woven into the, multicolored, multifaceted fabric of our social, cultural, religious, linguistic and political identity in many ways.

This leads us to the impending issues of ‘nationality’, ‘identity’, ‘multiculturalism’ ‘faith’ and so on generated by the debate over Indian diaspora’s choice of English as a tool for artistic expression. The poets Syed Amanuddin and Sujata Bhatt appear to grapple with these choices and transcend the numerous boundaries for arriving at their individualized diasporic identities/utterances. One can sense in their poems their disappointment, their disbelief, their anger, their resistance and their unwillingness to bend under the disparaging circumstances of their diasporic life. Sujata Bhatt enlightens us on her dilemma in one of her poems,

...you could not use them both together even
if you thought that way
And if you lived in a place you had to
Speak a foreign tongue, your mother tongue
Would rot, would rot and die in your mouth
Until you had to spit it out
("Search for my Tongue", Sujata Bhatt)

Syed Amanuddin’s poem ‘Don’t Call Me Indo-Anglian’ reflects on the hybrid identity conferred upon a diaspora writer and his rejection of this hyphenated identity.

no i don’t want to be
a hotchpotch of culture
a confusion of language
a nullity of imagination

A single identity, linking territory with its people was desirable and preferred. The ‘melting pot’ phenomenon would eventually merge the diversities, and they resisted it.

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cauvery flows in my veins
 chamundi hills rise in my mind...
 eyes of goddess smiling on the slain demon”
 brindavan fountains sing in my soul their musical
 colours

crippling me
 ...
 to be analyzed labeled n stored
 reanalyze reclassify me
 for shelving me again

Sujata Bhatt’s ‘A Different History’ contemplates deeply on how a language, that was once the tool for oppression, has now become a most resourceful instrument of artistic expression in the hands of the oppressed themselves.

He reveals that although his consciousness, is very firmly rooted in the land of his origin, he is not only of the East; his consciousness has embraced the outpourings of the artistic West as well –

And how does it happen
 That after the torture
 After the soul has been cropped
 With the long scythe swooping out
 Other conqueror’s face
 The unborn grandchildren
 Grow to love that strange language

... or go on a spiritual journey with dante
 ... meditate with khayyam ... drown with li po...

Their insights, the similarities and the dissimilarities that are so perceptible in their individualized use of ‘English’ language are a testimony of their unyielding resistance toward the hyphenated identities conferred upon them. Their English mirrors the anguish of the legacy inherited by them.

The term ‘diaspora’ is too restrictive, incomplete as a signifier of who he is at present. Amanuddin has, it seems, transcended all the physical, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, boundaries in his quest for an appropriate term for a word that would define him. He has internalized the inherited legacy in such a way that the term is redundant. He is part of the Universe.

they call me indo-anglian
 I do not know what they mean

He wields English language so artistically that he creates a new aesthetic along the lines of e e cummings. He deliberately subverts the authority of grammar and stylistic rules demanded by the English language.

It also tends to problematise, in effect, the space within which New Literatures have been created, explored, celebrated and sometimes lamented upon. At the outset itself, Syed Amanuddin flatly dispossesses the identity conferred upon him – ‘Indo-Anglian’.

The language is now his own, its rules and conventions are his own. Thus, very deftly, he manages to restore to himself the power to create his own identity, the power which was for long upheld by the imperial functionaries, is now his.

it’s true i write in English
 dream in the language of shakespeare n keats
 but i am not an anglo my friend...

He says –

“ don’t call me an ‘indo-anglian’ ”
 ...I damn all hyphenated minds”

These reverberations instill in the minds of the readers a deep faith in the individual’s power to create a meaningful identity; overpowering all the limitations.

The power of naming lies in the hands of the dominant class, race, gender. It crushes the self-esteem of the ‘named’ and thus begins the ordeal of resistance toward subordination. It is a bitter experience that further dehumanizes the all too sensitive immigrant. He either withdraws himself into a safe cocoon or confronts the realities. Amanuddin boldly confronts those who have conferred upon him this hyphenated identity –

Both poets maintain their faith in a Supreme power. They also agree on free thinking. There are instances - typical post-modernist utterances – where everything that carries authority or power is subverted and questioned and mocked. In Amanuddin’s poem –

they call me indo-anglian
 the mistaken, mis-informed folk
 n class me with a small group of writers ”
 ...i am a POET
 i have lived forty centuries under various names
 i am now amanuddin

no i don’t want to be
 an abortive affair
 between an indo and an anglo
 i denounce all labels and label makers...
 ... i am a POET
 i have lived forty centuries under various names
 i am now amanuddin

He tells us why he finds the “labelling” distasteful. The hyphenated identity fails to validate his ‘completeness’ and puts him at a disadvantage.

There are overtones of transcendentalism evident in these lines – the non-conformity, the breaking away from conventions, the belief in an individual’s power to create and find meaning in life, the belief in an ‘oversoul’. In the closing lines of the stanza, we see him, attain ‘self-reliance’ which is the essence of transcendentalism.

...the artificial bridges
 between artificial values
 in the name of race religion n language
 darn all hyphenated minds
 prejudiced offsprings of unenlightened minds

The subjectivity of his talented, educated, ‘self’ seems battered irreparably. He lashes out at their warped views which he says are
 cloistering me

They trust themselves and do not reject the diversity or the multiplicity of cultures that constitutes the realities of their new geographies. They do not shy away from exposing the powerful categories that misrepresent his nativity, his culture and his identity. He writes,

i have led the languages by their ears
 i have twisted creeds to force the truth out
 i have burned candles in the caves of prejudice
 i have surged in the oceans of being
 i have flown across the universe on the wings of my
 thought

Sujata Bhatt and Syed Amanuddin have thus attempted to represent the mis-represented. They have redefined the once silenced voices in a language which they have now rightfully appropriated as diaspora Indian writers.

Sujata Bhatt firmly reaffirms her faith in God at a time when the West was witnessing unprecedented radical changes at the domestic, social, religious, political, scientific and technological front. Spirituality was being replaced by materialism. In spite of it,

She says –

Great Pan is not dead;
 he simply emigrated
 to India.

The belief in the existence of a Supreme being helps her elaborate her perspective without showing any disrespect to her inherited consciousness. Her tone is detached, objective.

here, the gods roam freely,
 Disguised as snakes or monkeys;
 Every tree is sacred
 And it is a sin
 To be rude to a book.
 It is a sin to shove a book aside
 With your foot ...
 A sin to slam books down
 Hard on a table
 A sin to toss one carelessly
 Across a room

The trauma of dislocation, plays havoc with one's thought processes. It could build you, make a new person out of you or it could simply mar your, inflicting deep wounds. Language, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, are constructs that one must choose to confront and negotiate with on a daily basis as a diaspora. It is a choice, a conscious one, that one must exercise with great alacrity. Bhatt chooses to keep the well intended voices of the past in her heart and pays heed to them. Her beliefs, her ancestral traditions continue to guide her. She says,

You must learn how to turn the pages gently
 Without disturbing Saraswati,
 Without offending the tree
 From whose wood the paper was made.

In "A Different History" she discloses how her 'different' identity helps her confront the oppressive structures undauntingly. She acknowledges the power of the language with which she has to explore the realities around her. Her mastery over her colonial legacy enables her to combat with and navigate through the new geographies with considerable success. The processes of acculturation have also illumined the histories...of the traumatic stories of oppression suffered by the ancestors in the pages of history. She says,

Which language
 has not been the oppressor's tongue
 Which language
 Truly meant to murder someone
 And how does it happen
 That after the torture
 After the soul has been cropped
 With the long scythe swooping out
 Other conqueror's face
 The unborn grandchildren
 Grow to love that strange language

Sujata Bhatt and Syed Amanuddin have followed their own rules for writing. Bhatt chooses to follow the existing rules whereas Amanuddin deliberately chooses to violate the basic rules writing. He avoids capitalisation of initial letters beginning a sentence, avoids punctuations and uses contracted forms which is not the norm in formal writing. His individualized style is also manifest in the printing and layout of the text of the poem

It is also noteworthy that although poets are historically separated, they share a great deal of similarity in their treatment of the subject. They refuse to lament either for their homeland or for the exile experienced by them. There is neither an attempt to unveil before the readers an account of the history of mistreatment nor a desire to inordinately glorify either their indigenous inheritance or their diasporic successes. It is more an affirmation of the 'self'.

These poems by Syed Amanuddin and Sujata Bhatt are two different narratives on the psychosocial as well as psycholinguistic dilemmas drawn from the immigrant experiences. They may not be grand narratives by themselves, yet they do document the excruciatingly sensitive issues which have been of prime concern for many generations of Indian diaspora writers.

The works of the contemporary younger Indian diaspora writers unfold many layers of new perspectives in their narratives. Amie Nezhukumuttathil, a second generation diaspora poet, in one of her poems discusses the ethnic food habits that many diaspora cling on to. It intrigued her as a young child while growing up in the US,

Eating fried fish for breakfast
 Wonder why we can't
 Have normal food for breakfast like
 At Sara's house...
 Nothing with eyes

Among the second and third generation diaspora are those who break the stereotyping and boldly make known their preferences, such as "cross dressing" or "alternate sexualities", or speak up for "gender equality", or criticise "racial discrimination". Then there are those who have taken up performing arts as a medium of artistic expression to explore their hyphenated hybridized lives on completely different platforms and have successfully create a space for themselves in the audio -visual media for articulating their views. Innumerable themes and issues from the works of the contemporary diaspora provide an excellent insight into the politically charged diaspora narratives and how they have

tried to push the boundaries for making their lives more meaningful and purposeful.

In more ways than one, the Indian diaspora writings have illuminated new configurations in the domains of power, politics, changes in immigration policies in the face of globalization, in the nature of capital flow, in the environmental concerns, each of which have given their individual work “a local habitation and a name”. (Shakespeare, “A Mid-summer Night’s Dream”).

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