

Diaspora Fiction and the Question of Style of Representation- A Study

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Abstract—This paper attempts to make a meticulous study of the Diasporic Fiction and tries to study the narrative techniques and methods which have been evolved by the authors and poets. It is a well known fact that Diaspora Literature is a segregation of the nostalgic feelings, memories, longings for the homeland, trauma and pain of dislocation and solitude and also the biased and prejudiced treatment which is meted to the immigrants. This study will try to find out how these elements are interwoven to develop the narratives. The narratology shows that the common techniques used are- Reinterpretation of Myths, Repetition and Fantasy; but the ending of the novels and texts also plays a vital role in determining the structure of the work. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri have come up with innovative techniques to develop their narratives in their novels which are much admired in the global literary world. Their style of representation, the economy of words and also their art of telling their stories have become examples for other writers, and this is also the reason Indian Diasporic Writing is gaining new laurels everyday. This article is a peep into that direction and an endeavour to unearth those styles and techniques.

Keywords— narrative strategies, memory, repetition, fantasy, myth, autobiographical.

Most of the diasporic writings are autobiographical and their aesthetics of narrative rhetorics is largely based on memory and it involves the recollections of the past. These memories are not merely linked to the past but they are often intermixed with the present and have deep set implications in the future. Thus, when the narrative structure is closely observed, it is spatial and deliberately repetitive. Often it is found that things rush simultaneously and the past and future get rolled up onto one ball in order to evoke some sympathy out of it. The readers in most of these writings live through the incidents and anecdotes recorded through memory and work their way out of their own time boundation. Time gets animated and is constantly rushed forward and backward. Some experiences of time in actual life get diminished and some get expanded so as to orient the reader to the vivification of time in a narrative rhetoric. The narrative imagination of the diasporic writer is a means to escape from the linear time, and thus, the reconstructed time illuminates the secrets of past or future time. The awesome power of the narrator to look backwards, forwards, sideward or upward makes him a master story teller. An example of this is very well illustrated in *Midnight's Children* where we find that Rushdie, through Saleem Sinai frequently takes us to his childhood, or well before his birth during the time of Adam Aziz; or even Ameena Sinai and

back to the present time while he migrates to different places in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

This paper attempts to study the narrative technique of diasporic fiction through a close study of well known texts-novels and works of fiction by the well known writers; and the techniques and methods they have taken up to weave the narrative. As stated earlier, memory and recollection plays a very important role; and it is the memory which is used in multiple ways- it is restructured, reshaped and recast to construct and produce the narrative plot in such a way that a plot is generated where time is moved back and forth and various episodes are lodged along the contours of time. In this paper, works of prominent writers like Meena Alexander, Bharti Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie have been taken up and their narrative techniques have been studied; and also poets like Dom Moraes, A. K. Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali have been looked upon to find out their method of construction of the narrative in their poetry.

Women writers from third world countries face double problems while evolving narrative strategies. One is, how to step out of the framework defined by men and by patriarchal values; and secondly how to identify and create a tradition of their own. The post colonial societies, on one hand, find it difficult to dissociate from the colonial influence and the baggage of complexes related to them; and on the other hand they want to create their own individual identity and this would only happen if the native culture is revived. So, a conscious effort is required all the time because women have always remained marginalised and have always remained in the periphery. This is also because men have specified history and historic time, both linguistically and culturally. The strategies which the writers often use in order to make some spaces for their selves include the use of local myths and legends in their writings. They seek to reinterpret ancient myths in a new manner, and the stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bible and figures like Sita and Draupadi from Indian Mythology are interpreted in feminine contexts.

Repetition is another narrative strategy. They go over the same ground over and over again through memory and recollection.

Fantasy is put to strong subjective use both by Alexander and Arundhati Roy. Fantasy allows an extension of the self and becomes a survival strategy which when indulged in, (by the writers as well as the characters) signifies the desire to cross boundaries.

The ending of the novel is again a narrative strategy: it is never the logical conclusion to a story, as the ordering of the plot would lead us to believe. The way a novel ends is a statement on the self on its ability or inability to survive, especially when the 'self' is a woman, cornered in a world that does not provide for her 'self' expression. Madness, death, suicide, surrender or going in for fresh opinions are some of the ways the story ends but the ending of the novels themselves may end on an entirely different note. Thus we see that the aesthetics of narrative rhetoric is closely connected with the autobiographical where memory is drawn around time, which seems to fit and float in the consciousness of the protagonists.

Meena Alexander is a notable diasporic writer with immense contributions in prose as well as poetry. She is a powerful voice today in International Literature and her indelible print is found in works like *Nampally Road*, *Aesthetics of Dislocation*, *River and Bridge*, *Fault Lines* and many others. The works of Meena Alexander are based heavily on memory and on autobiographical elements. Her works are based in Tiruvalla, or Hyderabad or New York or Khartoum- all places where she has either spent or is spending her life. For example, *Nampally Road* is set in Indira Gandhi's India and more specifically during the time of the notorious emergency. The text bears a ponderous and brooding tone, a heavy organ voice. Both in *Nampally Road* and *Fault Lines* we find that the literary thought and literary language are held together with snippets from the past of people and places and events experienced by the author in such a precarious balance that writing becomes as much an act of "affiliation and establishment" as an act of "disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation." (*Bhabha's Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation*, *Nation and Narration* 295)

In other diasporic writings too, like that of Meena Alexander, one can find the backward glances of the writers are fraught with desire for their homes left behind and even their criticism of the reality of time confirms the same longing and desire, though in a slant manner. Alexander very often uses a fictive technique reminiscent of M.H.Abram's lamp mirror hypothesis, that is, her writings are the reflection of outside reality and the expression of inner experience. The protagonists are the permanent victims, doomed to bear the burden of their country's chequered history personally and socially. Alexander in her writings, blends national history with the personal lives of the protagonists in a manner that is characteristic of much of modern Indian Writing in English. Thus, displacement and double blinds experienced by the protagonist become the mark of the narrative rhetoric. Thus, in texts like *Nampally Road*, *Fault Lines* and *Manhattan Music*, we find that these contain the flavour of the historical as the contemporaneity of its texture and the historicity of its orientation together acts as a parallel for the lives of the individuals. In all the diasporic writings, events, episodes and incidents are fished out of the dark and deep crevices of the memory and then given two dimensional life; which later on take flesh, blood and bones and they become live experiences of the readers as well. Thus, authors like Alexander are

obsessed with memory and are always involved in experimenting with it and never miss a chance to bring out every component of it.

Alexander portrays scenes, anecdotes and events with a documentary precision and style. The readers become conscious of how meaning lights up the past and shapes the present. They stay clear off linear narration and focus more on the suffering of the characters, their loneliness and the irony of situation, as the characters cope with their disturbing memoirs.

Kiran Desai is a young writer who has carved out an individual identity in diasporic writings. She came up with her novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* and followed by *The Inheritance of the Loss*; both of these novels have been widely acclaimed and have received several awards and honours all across the world. Desai is a novelist who is a green card holder, yet an Indian citizen. She herself confesses that it is impossible to do away with the Indianness which is inside her, and it is this rootedness to the country which propels her to write. *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* is a whimsical tale which blends fablesque magic with satirical comedy. And the writer sustains the interest of the readers by the powerful command of her narrative technique and the novel reaffirms Kiran Desai's major experiments on diasporic fiction. It seeks to explore the backgrounds of social, psychological, religious, and spiritual events that steadily moulded Desai's fictional art. In particular, the innovations with the technique of magic realism ensured her success as a great writer in Diasporic English Fiction.

Bharati Mukherjee is a renowned American based Indian prose writer who has several popular novels to her credit, and beautifully delineates the immigrant life and cultural changes in her writings. In *The Holder of the World* (1993), she is more experimental with the form and structure. This novel constructs natural history as a complex network of narratives that criss cross various spatial and temporal zones. Here, 17th century Puritan New England, Old World England, Mughal India and present day America conjoin and coalesce to resist the stable and linear narrative for assuming national identity. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) is a novel of Mukherjee, where text constructs the Indian nation not as a simplistic and polarised space, but as a configuration of diverse spatial and temporal determinants. In fact, Mukherjee's fictional technique to fracture the space of the nation into its multiple spatio temporal indicators can be traced to her espousal of what she calls the 'Mughal aesthetic', named after the style of the Mughal miniature painting, which she describes as a cultural form that is crammed with narratives and subnarratives, taut with detail and dramatic function, with its insistence that everything happens, simultaneously, bound only by shape and colour. Central to Mukherjee's embrace of the Mughal aesthetic is its ability to bring into sharper focus the true space continuum of the novel in order to problematize the linear and unified narrative of national culture and identity. Again in *A Wife's Story* (1982), the narrative itself opens by foregrounding Panna's predicament as a woman mediating among and mediated by the contradictory dynamics that impinge on her visibility as an Indian woman. The trope of visibility, of seeing and being seen, becomes a

representational strategy to articulate the ambivalence, the splitting, the instability of Panna's subjectivity. The text proposes that there are only the multiple narratives that reposition the subject in ways that disrupt the dominant mythology of home as single and homogeneous. It is from this space that Mukherjee restages narratives that blur and reconfigure ideas of national and cultural identity, in which difference cannot be so simply and completely appropriated because of the way it slips beyond the dominant culture's ability to define and control it.

No analysis and criticism of Diasporic Literature could be complete without Salman Rushdie, who has given a modern and new steer to the Indian English Writing and Diasporic writing too. He is the master of narration at present time. The charm of his themes consists in their narrative qualities. His novels demonstrate the unique narrative which lures the reader ever onward into the pandemonium of the text. His narrative technique is used for the factual rendering in historical setting. Rushdie's narrator constructs his own reality, which is dependent upon the events of the outside world but it is interpreted privately, because everybody interprets it through its own mood and way. He gives the heightened picture of reality through a realization of true self and thus rejects the partial realities. About his technique Rushdie told in an interview with *Literary Criterion* (1983): "There is a technique that Dickens used that I thought was very remarkable. He uses a kind of background or setting for his works which is completely naturalistic, down to the tiniest details. And on top of this completely naturalistic background he imposes totally surrealistic images – like the circumlocution(...) what I tried to do – though not quite in the Dickensian way – was to make sure that the background, the bedrock of the book, was right- that Bombay was like Bombay, the cities were like the cities, the different dates were recognisably correct so that the fantasy could be rooted in that kind of reality (Rushdie & Pattanayak 1983, 20)

On the technique of novel Ron Shepherd states: "*Midnight's Children*, differs from earlier fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with the older form of diction are broken: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person; ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straight forward sense religious or metaphysical, the novel is full of cryptic clues, archaic utterances and seem always on the point of offering some important explanation, of arriving at some goal or conclusion but what this conclusion is one cannot be sure. It is a novel of signs and gestures and sleight of hand with a passion for narrating other than for clarifying meaning"

Rohinton Mistry is another famous India born Canadian diasporic writer who has received wide acclaim with novels like *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*. He himself acknowledges that the narrative of diaspora is essentially a narrative of the 'self'. Mistry's short stories collection *Swimming Lessons and other Stories from Firozsha Baag* takes a bird's eye view of the narrative techniques of a writer in dealing with the eleven short stories of the collection. It proves Mistry's ability to chart the inner voyage. He attempts

to depict the inner lives of all his characters. In this collection he employs new techniques and creative fragmented structures built on impressionistic glimpses of moments. His nostalgia comes on the surface by the remarkable use of stream-of-consciousness technique with flashbacks, in a fine blending of time past and time present scheme. The tightening of the structure is very important in all the stories. The reconstruction of memory is powerfully depicted. To carry over the same character to another story of the collection is also one of the narrative techniques to give it a single binding force and the commonality that links the stories.

The novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), is more of an inward voyage of the chief characters. Along with the historical events as its setting and background, the writer employs images and symbols more decisively for the reconstruction of his past memories. The novel is unique in the sense that the narrative is made up of a series of reverie. In Mistry's conception of reality, mere description of persons and outward movements is of little significance. Reality is something that exists below the surface; it inhabits the consciousness, and finds expression when the character reminisces. Gustad Noble, the chief character becomes nostalgic frequently in the novel and many desires that are unachieved or unfulfilled linger on the border of his consciousness. More often they are expressed through the mythical mode blending with realism.

In his novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), Mistry's narrative depicts reality of the multi ethnic groups in the society and their misfortunes and hardships seem exaggeration for these who do not have sensitivity to feel their pain and agony.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a child of three countries- she has Indian roots but has spent her major part of life in London and later in Rhode Island USA. She has even confessed to not ever feeling like she belonged to any particular place. She seems to express her feelings as a diaspora through her characters. As an immigrant, she has experienced the first hand trauma of never being able to fully connect to any particular place.

"Growing up with ties to all the three countries, Lahiri has lived with a sense of homelessness and an inability to belong to any of these countries." (Sah 152) However her search for identity is not weighed down by insecurities but is rather, a quiet, mature and reflexive one. Her stories are the product of an observant, reflexive mind. If one goes through her important works like *The Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, it is found that her creative outputs are mostly based on first and second generation Indian immigrants. One praiseworthy aspect of her writings is the sincere honesty in her narrative style. She doesn't have any experience of living in India, but has gathered knowledge about India from her frequent trips to India. She does not write about the resident Indians, but rather about a subject she knows intimately and that is the life and predicament of Indians living abroad.

"Lahiri projects the Indian immigrants of Bengali origin as economic refugees, self chosen exiles, and transnational hybrids who form a new generation of Indian Americans in a codified Homogeneous American National Culture."(Nayak 134)

She also doesn't follow the clichés or eccentricities which immigrant stories are prone to. Her stories are always humane, and in this sense they involve with human relationships and the struggles and joys of life by the en masse people everywhere. Her stories are realistic, genuine, thought provoking and always seem to carry a deep moral message.

"Lahiri remains a detached observer of the daily events in the lives of her fictional characters." (Kadam 122) Lahiri has the ability to write in the voices of both the genders. She professes the ability to write in a male perspective as "an exhilarating and liberating thing to do." (www.Bookbrowse.com) Her stories though are fictional in nature, yet contain autobiographical strains as Lahiri draws richly and honestly from her own experiences about life. The characteristic narrative technique is her sparing words which is economical yet deeply eloquent. Like other diasporic writers, she has taken up the problems of immigration faced by the diasporic community such as identity crisis, marginalization, ambiguity of 'home' but these are entirely taken in a psychological plane.

The reader or the critic is only surprised when he goes through the large corpus of Diasporic Fiction and also the galaxy of writers who are pouring out their writings to this genre. The Narrative technique and the style of representation is always an important aspect which is responsible for the success of a novel or a story. It is the distinct style or technique adopted by the author which makes the text stand apart from the multitude of works. New techniques and styles are being constantly executed by the writers; be it a change in syntactical structure, or the economy of words, or the manner in which the conversations between the characters take place. Many things are perceived and understood by the reader from the technique which is followed by the author. The same applies to the ways in which the story has been told- it may be the flashback approach, or through an omniscient narrator or even the stream-of-consciousness technique. Often we find an Hemingway style in Lahiri's short stories and also the use of asyndeton in Lahiri's *The Lowland*. It was beyond the scope of

this paper to make a study of all the writers and their works; but an effort has been made to look into the style of representation of some of the most important diasporic works, and also the common styles which have been followed; which by and large revolve around memory, nostalgia, desire to go back to the roots, dislocation, trauma and also the discriminatory behaviour with respect to gender and colour.

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