



## Concerns and Controversies in Postcolonial Indian Diaspora Fiction in English

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**ABSTRACT:** Questions of representation have always been the focus of academic debates with the rise of Postcolonial studies. In recent years, scholarly studies and intellectual reflections keep stressing on the need for the reconfiguration of Postcolonial studies through a serious scrutiny of issues of representation and authenticity in the cultural productions emerging from the colonized countries. Such discussions become stronger in case of literary output of the diaspora of the colonized countries. On the one hand, the diaspora writing, more specifically the diaspora fiction produced by the writers of the colonized countries settled across the globe are analyzed for their exploration of “diasporic experiences”. On the other hand, contemporary diaspora narratives are examined in terms of their massive production, circulation, consumption and the influence of market economy on them. In the background of such deliberations, the present paper tries to map certain concerns and discussions taking place in the field of postcolonial Indian diaspora fiction. Based on this exploration, a few questions are raised about perceiving this genre.

**KEYWORDS:** Postcolonial, Indian Diaspora Fiction, Market economy, Representation.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, anything that is made in India or which has the tag of ‘Indian’ has become an eye catcher. This holds good in case of contemporary Indian English novels too. The production, circulation and consumption of the Indian English novels including the diasporic novels are on the rise especially with Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga’s novels winning the Booker. Call it Booker post effect or post Salman Rushdie effect, but it is certain that Indian novels are making their mark in the world literary scene. Amidst the scenario, Indian diaspora fiction has garnered much attention these days.

Study of Indian diaspora novels become interesting in the sense that the genre ‘novel’ entered India with the colonisers. Ever since their entry into Indian literary milieu, novels are seen as the depictions of Indian society and sensibilities [1]. Many scholars have discussed in detail the arrival of this alien form on the Indian literary scene and the process of ‘Indianisation’ that novel underwent so that it can be made suitable to portray Indian themes and reality of Indian society [2]. Some scholars have also debated upon the way this genre called ‘novel’ narrates the nation and represents national consciousness [3].

However, if we observe the latest Indian diaspora novels, we can notice a significant pattern. It seems that there exists a similar kind of pattern among them when it comes to the depiction of ‘India’ and ‘Indian society’. Some of the latest studies by scholars like Lisa Lau, Om Prakash Dwivedi, Cristina Mendes etc. have challenged the notion about the connection between Indian novels and social reality of India. Instead, they have come up with the argument that recent Indian novels in English are, in fact, reproducing orientalism. They have made a detailed analysis of the description of India in Indian novels in English, specifically the diaspora novels and have identified that there exists a similar pattern among these novels when they talk about Indian society. They argue that “Amongst the host of writers writing in English about India and South Asia, it is common practice to write for a predominantly Western readership, thus representing through Western eyes, using Western values and cultural references, and for Western consumption”. Based on this premise, they claim that “Orientalism, therefore, is very much alive” [4].

In the backdrop of such debates, what is fascinating is the enormous production, circulation and consumption of Indian English novels penned by Indian writers – both settled in India and abroad. In this context, the primary concern of this paper is to map certain discussions around contemporary fiction in English produced by the Indian writers from diaspora. Based on this examination, a few questions are raised about perceiving this supposedly young genre.

## II. CERTAIN CONCERNS AND CONTROVERSIES

Since the turn of the century, Postcolonial Indian diaspora writing in English, particularly, the genre of fiction has gained much attention in the academic world and among enthusiastic readers. In fact, the emergence of Indian diaspora fiction has been celebrated as a welcome sign. Ever since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) made its arrival on the literary scene, the world's eye is wide open towards the literary output emerging from the postcolonial countries like India. Rushdie's text not only won the prestigious Booker Prize and the Booker of Bookers, but it also heralded a bright future for Indian writers in English. Years later, Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga went on to win the Booker Prize in 1997 and 2008 respectively and with this, a well-established space for Indian fiction in English got carved in the global literary landscape. Such a spectacular rise of Indian writers in English has also created a lot of interest about writers from the Indian diaspora spread across the continents. Today, Indian diaspora writing, especially novels, are being taught exclusively as a distinct genre within the umbrella term 'Indian English fiction' in academia both in and out of India. The genre has drawn serious academic engagements and extensive research, film adaptations and reading public.

When we look at the reactions of the critics and scholarly responses towards the fiction produced by the Indian diaspora, certain strands of discussions can be noticed. Many scholars discuss the themes that diaspora writers negotiate with. For instance, according to Prof. Bijay Kumar Das, the "emigrant writers work, in spite of their living in a different country... mostly about their former homeland and its culture" [5]. He quotes the examples of A. K. Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy who wrote more about India than what they had done while they were in India. Some scholars talk about, to use Vijay Mishra's classification, the "old diaspora" and the "new diaspora" [6] while scholars like Makarand Paranjape discuss the two phases to which the South Asian diaspora falls into – one being the "settler" diaspora that include all the forced migrations caused by slavery and indentured labour etc. and the "visitor" diaspora that include voluntary migration of businessmen and professionals. Though Paranjape focuses on the South Asian diaspora settled in Australia, his observations can be applied to Indian diaspora in general. He explores the attitude of South Asian Australian diaspora writers towards their host land by examining the two texts by South Asian women diaspora writers settled in Australia. The first text, *The Time of the Peacock* (1965) represents the first phase of diaspora as per Paranjape's classification and this text is discussed to show the ambivalent attitudes towards homeland and Australia, issues of assimilation, complexities of diasporic existence to name a few. He also takes up the study of the contemporary writer Chandani Lokuge's text *If the Moon Smiled* (2000) that depicts the alienation that her female protagonist undergoes while negotiating between her home land, Sri Lanka and her host land, Australia. With this analysis, Paranjape tries to draw our attention to the fact that both the texts "represent the complexities of diasporic experiences" [7].

However, the latest studies within the domains of Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies have begun to question the issues of diasporic experiences, representation of colonized countries and their culture as well as the authenticity of such representations in the contemporary cultural productions including art, literature and novels. These studies argue that, the contemporary cultural productions emerging from the colonized countries including the ones generated from the diaspora are producing art and literature more for Western consumption than for representing their culture. Graham Huggan, for instance, highlights what he calls "constitutive split" within postcolonial, that is, on the one hand, the term postcolonial refers to "cultural embattlement but at the same time, on the other hand, the term also gets circulated as 'sales – tag'". He expresses his doubt regarding the capitalist mode of production in recent years. He argues that in these days, terms like 'marginality', 'authenticity' and 'resistance' are getting circulated as commodities under the "Postcolonial exotic". He claims that "post-colonial literatures" and "postcolonialism itself" has become "a cultural commodity" [8]. Scholars like Graham Huggan have not only identified the limitations of Postcolonial studies, but have also explored the interconnections between Postcolonial creative and literary outputs, Western academia and publication influences.

Similar explorations have also been taking place in the case of Indian English novels too. Especially the fiction of Indian diaspora writers emerging from across the globe is getting a different kind of scrutiny. Much discussion is taking place to explore the connections among issues like Western consumption, increased production of exotic novels by the Indian diaspora, market pressures and publication politics in bringing Indian English writers into limelight. The volume, *Indian Writing in English and Global Literary Market* (2014), for instance, argues that market pressure and publication influences are the major reasons for the commodification

of the creative works, more specifically the novels produced by both Indian and Indian diaspora writers. In this sense, Indian Writing in English (IWE) itself is a “celebratory genre” as argued by Pramod K. Nayar. He traces the factors contributing to the making of what he calls “celebrification process” of IWE. According to him, such a status is the result of a “convergence culture”, that “brings together the public sphere, media, festival culture, literary production, academic discourses and author – centered discourse to produce an amplification of the genre itself”. With this observation, Nayar argues that various factors of “cultural production” converge together to make IWE a “celebrity genre” [9]. Therefore, it is natural that the novels produced in English whether by the Indian writers settled in India or abroad to gain much attention.

Nevertheless, a few scholars argue that the works of Indian diaspora writers build up an image of India in the West. For instance, Vrinda Nabar observes that the diaspora writers from India are received by the West as “India’s spokespeople”. She states that most of the first world thinks of ‘Indian literature’ as synonymous with the literature of the diaspora. She makes an analysis of the celebrated Indian diaspora woman writer Chitra Divakaruni’s works to show the manner in which Indian diaspora writers “have frequently manipulated details to present what is really marketable, contrasting the sanitized ethos of their brave new world with the darker realities of ‘Indian life’”. She also argues that diaspora writers have “commonly looked at the past, not the rapidly changing India of the present” and as a result they are more prone to become “judgmental about ‘Indian’ attributes that exist in their imagination, juxtaposing these against their alleged liberation from them in the first world” [10]. At the same time, V.G. Julie Rajan also takes one more step to provide an outline of the manner in which the fiction created by Indian writers in English living both inside and outside India is marketed to “English-speaking audiences in the West”. She argues that Indian writing “resonates with common Western stereotypes of India, Indian people and Indian culture – that gains the most currency and, hence, value and visibility in Western markets” [11].

The portrayal of Indian immigrant life and the implication of such portrayals are also getting critical examination as is evident in the discussions by Dorothy M. Figueira. Through her analysis of popular Indian diaspora women novelists Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni, Figueira claims that these writers “portray an America that speaks to the fears and longings of both Americans and Indian Americans. They depict Indian culture as quaint, slightly exotic and non – threatening to American culture”. She shows how the Indian diaspora writers make America responsible for the loss of values and diasporic experience of the Indian characters in their fiction. Further, the characters in this fiction, though they are immigrants staying in America by choice, are still depicted as suffering, feeling uprootedness and sense of alienation. Despite all this, they never go home. Figueira also recounts her personal experience while teaching such Indian diaspora texts to her students who keep asking her the reason for the description of loneliness in Indian diaspora narratives. Figueira argues that such depiction of characters and “tailor - made” themes has more to do with the “function of this literature than with any reflection on reality”. Hence, she strongly argues that Indian diaspora texts fosters a kind of “immigrant *imaginaire*”. She also speaks about the effects of such depictions. On the one hand, for the Americans it provides “portrait of exotic Indians... bit more colorful and successful, but not at all threatening” and on the other hand, they enhance the “self – image” of the Indian diaspora community in America, by “championing myths about Indian diaspora identity that may have nothing to do with actual Indian culture” and attains “tremendous economic success in America”. She argues that the works of writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni’s are “removed from Indian experience” and evoke Indian values as “exotic tropes” which gives no understanding of India to the readers at all [12].

Anis Shivani too argues that the publishing industry from America promotes certain Indian English writers and by doing so, it is involved in “commodification of an exoticised Orientalism”. He studies the works of Pankaj Mishra, Amith Chaudhury and Manil Suri’s novels to illustrate the manner in which they build up similar images of India as something that has been “static, unchanging collectivity of people obsessed with private identity struggles”. He argues that this new fiction is “devoid of any sense of politics, history or economics” and criticizes these novels for their inability to capture the changing India after the onset of globalisation. He further claims that this newest version of orientalism coming from Indian writers lacks any real ideological challenge characterising multiculturalism [13].

Thus, these scholars claim that Indian diaspora writers in English are marketing the exoticism and thereby cater to the market demands and publication politics of the West. They argue that by referring to cultural markers of India and exoticising India these writers more particularly the contemporary writers are involved in appealing to the Western readership and by commodifying the Orient, the Indian diaspora writers are engaged in the reproduction of Orientalism in newer fashions and modes (Anis Shivani, Lisa Lau, Ana Christina Mendes, Om Prakash Dwivedi etc.). This phenomenon is described by Lisa Lau as “re – Orientalism”, “Re-Orientalism theory takes as its starting point the salient fact that by the 21st century, the East has increasingly seized the power of representation; however, this representation is not exempt from being partial and skewed, and, moreover, it is still Western-centric and postcolonial” [14].

These reflections about Indian diasporic fiction bring to our notice many concerns and controversies that envelope the genre. The central aspect of these discussions is the serious engagement of the scholars with this genre of postcolonial Indian diaspora writing and the issues of representation in such writing. The studies show the academic involvement with the aspects of authenticity of representations. Even though it is not possible here to sketch all the claims and arguments taking place regarding Indian diaspora novels, efforts are being made to present a few such debates to capture the nuances of these arguments.

### **III. A FEW QUESTIONS RAISED**

In the backdrop of debates and deliberations as sketched above, certain key questions can be raised – As already noted, novels produced by the Indian diaspora are being taught in many Universities and undergraduate courses. The question now is, as teachers, how do we perceive and understand the very nature of this genre and teach it to the students in the background of the discussion explored above? What is meant by authenticity of representation? Is it fair enough to say that these writers are marketing the exotic in the name of narrating homeland? How do we account for those writers who say that they depict their own experiences? How do we understand the phenomenal growth of diaspora fiction of Indian writers? In short, the question is, how to make sense of the Indian diaspora novels and the discussions that surround them. Such questions need to be researched and explored further to get a better understanding of this genre. They certainly open up a wide range of topics for further study and rational engagements.

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