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GLOBALIZATION AND LITERATURE: FEMALE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC VOICES

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Abstract

Globalization opened up many avenues for the people of the world, especially to the Eastern and third world countries, to migrate to the Western countries in search for better employment, economy, education, lifestyle, etc. The feelings of these expatriates, who moved away from their motherland, and their attempts to assimilate themselves in the alien land, are often exposed through the diasporic writers.

The opinion of the writers of diaspora is thus an invaluable source of information to comprehend the diverse complexities of the expatriates. There is a need to realize and expose the cultural encounter and bi-cultural pulls existing among the individuals in an alien nation. The paper seeks to study the immigrant experience through works of three female South Asian writers - Yasmine Gooneratne, Uma Parmeswaran and Monica Ali.

Yasmine Gooneratne's themes includes aspects of immigration and adjustment to new lands as exemplified in A Change of Skies, which deals with a Sri Lankan family moving to Australia.

Uma Parmeswaran's first novel, Mangoes on the Maple Tree, examines various tensions that arise within the family as well as tensions that arise between the family and the greater society in which they are a minority, in the lives of an Indian immigrant family in Canada. Monica Ali's novel Brick Lane depicts the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant and a woman coming from a patriarchal society, who inevitably experiences social and psychological alienation in certain periods of her life but is finally able to destroy the constraints at the end of the novel.

Keywords: Immigrant, Assimilation, Yasmine Gooneratne, Uma Parmeswaran and Monica Ali.

Globalization opened up many avenues for the people of the world, especially to the Eastern and third world countries, to migrate to the Western countries in search for better employment, economy, education, lifestyle, etc. The feelings of these expatriates, who moved away from their motherland, and their attempts to assimilate themselves in the alien land, are often exposed through the diasporic writers. Thus the opinion of the writers of diaspora is an

invaluable source of information to comprehend the diverse complexities of the expatriates. There is a need to realize and expose the cultural encounter and bi-cultural pulls existing among the individuals in an alien nation. The paper seeks to study the immigrant experience through works of three female South Asian writers - Yasmine Gooneratne, Uma Parmeswaran and Monica Ali.

1. Diaspora and Diasporic Literature

The word diaspora originates from the Greek word, *diasporá* meaning, a dispersion or scattering. Diaspora may be defined as dispersion of people, language, or culture that was formerly concentrated in one place. When an individual or group of people start producing literary production about people or language they may have disinherited, but writing in another language, they may be defined as diasporic literature. As a result, we hear about Indian diasporic writings in UK or Canada or Sri Lankan diasporic literature in Australia and so on.

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) traces the etymology of the word 'Diaspora' back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament (Deut: 28:25). The Dictionary commences with the Judic History, mentioning only two types of dispersal: the "Jews living dispersed among the gentiles after the captivity" and the Jewish Christians residing outside the Palestine.

Diasporic literature could be examined using several key features. First, it is based on the idea of a homeland; a place from where the displacement occurs. Secondly, diasporic literature provides narratives of harsh journeys undertaken for various reasons. Thirdly, diaspora provides accounts of another "sense of place" away from home land. Fourthly, one could read how "homeland-made" protagonists behave in a far off land either adopting or rejecting new cultural codes of their new "sense of place". Therefore, when reading diasporic literature, we can learn why and how some people choose to migrate to another country either voluntarily or due to other reasons, and how they get used to living perhaps, "peacefully" elsewhere, but losing home and homeland.

The present paper seeks to show that not everything about the meeting and clashing of cultures need be deadly serious.

2. Sri Lankan Diasporic writing in English

"He who crosses the ocean away changes the skies above him but not the color of his soul." [1]

The nationalist thrust of Sri Lankan politics in the last forty years seemed to favour the foregrounding of indigenous languages, namely, Sinhala and Tamil, rather than the acquired English. The projected decline of English writing, however, seems to have been averted and English has shown its resilience by remaining a popular language in the urban areas, and among the growing middle-class.

Along with the struggle between two cultural systems - Sinhala, Buddhist nation on one hand and a secular Tamil heritage on the other - one sees an accelerated process of westernization, fuelled by the free trade zone, the active tourist industry, the diaspora, and a general desire to

be part of the global economy — hence there is greater emphasis on English in general and a more noticeable use of the language in everyday affairs. In part, this might well explain the increase in popularity and the relevance of English writing, and the significant changes brought about by contemporary writers such as Ashley Halpé, Rajiva Wijesinha, and Jean Arasanayagam, together with the diasporic writers, including Yasmine Gooneratne, Chitra Fernando, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunesekera, Rienzi Crusz, Michael Ondaatje, and Ambalavaner Sivanandan, one can speak of a substantial and significant body of Sri Lankan writing over the past recent years.

The efforts of a handful of dedicated authors and critics, the opportunities provided by journals such as *Navasilu* and *Channels* and by the enthusiastic support of major international publishers concerned with diasporic writing needs to be lauded.[2]

The paper seeks to discuss the themes of immigration and adjustment to new lands in the works of Yasmine Gooneratne, as exemplified in her novel *A Change of Skies*, which deals with a Sri Lankan family moving to Australia. It juxtaposes two societies and two cultures – Sri Lankan and Australian.

A Change of Skies centers on the life of a Sri Lankan couple – Bharat, a young Asian linguistics expert, and his wife Navaranjini. Bored by his life in Colombo, Bharat answers an advertisement for a visiting professorship at Southern Cross University in New South Wales and is invited to join for a five-year term.

Initially, Bharat and Navaranjini's decision to go to Australia for five years is not seen in any favorable light. "*There's nothing there but koalas and kangaroos….And what about the White Australia Policy*?" (*ACOS*, p.33). She derives some consolation from the fact that their exile will be only a temporary one: "*Well, Bharat, it's only a short- term visit: just a five-year sentence, after all*." (*ACOS*, p.33)

Despite their ignorance of the country, both Bharat and Navaranjini are strongly determined to make a great success of their five- year stay in Australia. Navaranjini tries to equip herself for the stay by taking driving lessons and obtaining a driving license. She also takes swimming lessons at the Colombo Swimming Club.

The first encounter with Australia leaves Navaranjini breathless. The fast traffic, the people driving very fast-with tense and grim faces, shoulders hunched, eyes focused straight ahead and not glancing sideways, mouths unsmiling. Navaranjini reflects that the traffic in Colombo may be crazy but it is not death-oriented. There are no multiple traffic lanes, no purposeful forward movement of streams of vehicles. There it is merely swirl and muddle. People hang out of bus windows and stand on the footboards; nobody takes any notice whatever of zebra crossings. The stickers on the rear windows of the vehicles shouting the slogans 'ASIANS OUT' and 'BASH A PAKI A DAY' make her feel nervous and anxious.

Navaranjini mistakes a hail storm on the first night of their arrival in Australia to an attack on them. This is how she describes the situation to her husband. *"It's the Australians! ….. the Australians have come. They're throwing stones on the roof, and breaking all the windows."* (*ACOS*, p. 81) With the loud banging on the door Navaranjini grabs a kitchen knife in her

hand, in case somebody attacked her husband. They are dumbstruck when their neighbor informs them that it was a hail storm, which had caused all that devastation.

As a linguist, Bharat becomes aware very early in his sojourn that the Australians are lazy in their speaking habits and they find the long Sri Lanka names almost impossible to pronounce. He becomes very self-conscious about it when TV sports commentator reporting a one-day cricket match between Australia and Sri Lanka refuses to pronounce the Sri Lankan captain's name: *"It's written up on the SCG scoreboard, mate," he told his co-commentator. "Have a look – there it is – and as you can see it's taking up all the available space and more. You want me to give it air – time too?"* (*ACOS*, p. 96)

In his letter to his mother, Bharat voices his concern about preserving their ancient culture and traditional ways of life. He writes about the children of Sri Lankan families who have become infected with Australian values. In a tragicomic manner, he describes Mr.Koyako's efforts to preserve his national identity. As Mrs. Koyako tells Navaranjini: *"My husband …is very keen that our children who are growing up overseas should not lose touch with the traditions of their forefathers."* (*ACOS*, p. 92)

But when what was a five year stint becomes a permanent move, Bharat and Navaranjini change their names to Barry and Jean Mundy, to fit in Australia. They are determined not to act like expats: "*Expats make scenes, expats complain about the food being 'off' in expensive hotels, about faulty air conditioning, about the absence of toothpaste, about the dubious cleanliness of sheets, about the disgusting state of public lavatories. Expats make fools of themselves by losing their tempers. Nationals don't do any of these things*." (*ACOS*, p. 262)

By writing *The Guide* now, Barry feels he will be carrying his family's traditional pursuit of translation and interpretation into new country. In *The Guide for the Asian Migrants to Australia*, Barry writes that one question which haunts him still, even after spending so many years in an alien country is : "*When is it exactly that the immigrant throws overboard every other idea, every other possible destination and decides that here, and in no other place, he will make his home?*"(*ACOS*, p. 151) In every expatriate's experience, he feels, "*There must surely have been a moment a small space in time for all of us who are now here, when the anchor was let down, the sails folded, the landing made.*"(*ACOS*, p. 151)

Barry goes on to ruminate about his own case and that of his grandfather Edward and comes to the conclusion: "*We do not choose the moment of departure or settlement, we are chosen by them. And also that those moments, once they have touched us, make us different persons from the persons we were before, and place ceases to matter.*" (*ACOS*, p. 152)

The change started when Bharat and Navaranjini stepped out of the exit door of the plane at Sydney Airport. As Barry writes in his *Guide*: "*One conclusion I have reached that is sadly, but I think incontestably true is that people, like all material things, undergo change*." (*ACOS*, p. 154)

The issue of identity is central to the fourth section of the novel, entitled 'The Conduct of Travellers'. Previously, Bharat and Navanrjini have been involved in the clash of cultures as newcomers in a strange land. In this section, which looks back on the first five years of their residence, they confront the consequences of their choice. Barry decides that the real moment of his decision to leave Ceylon was when he decided he could no longer endure its confusion. Already largely westernized, he finds an opportunity to make his own choices and adopts the role of cultural communicator. Jean, on the other hand, both remains deeply rooted in her native culture and moves with great practicality into the life of her new country.

At the beginning of the fourth section, Jean, still Navaranjini, decides that Australians, deep down, are really Asians. Their appearance of insensitivity merely conceals their true nature. By acting on this assumption, she breaks through the superficial conviviality of her husband's colleagues to reveal their deeper prejudices and in doing so discloses her own. She earns admiration at the university open day, where her exhibition of rare books and manuscripts not only earns a profit for the English Department but confirms her opinion that a common humanity unites Asians and Australians. The mark of this common humanity unites Asians and Australians.

Encouraged by these successes, Jean accepts the role of supporting her husband while recognizing that she is the one who brings into the new land the old stories that can make sense of the common experience of people of different origins.

Similarly, at the end of the novel, when Barry chooses to set up a school to teach English to other newcomers, Jean provides the true meeting point of cultures by establishing a restaurant and school of cuisine. The change of her own skies has changed her soul, and she is now ready to change the skies, or at least the horizons, of her new compatriots.[3]

3. **Indian Diasporic writing in English**

The writers of the Indian diaspora, through their literary contributions have greatly enriched English literature. They have been aiming at re-inventing India through the rhythms of ancient legends, the cadences of mythology, the complexities of another civilization, cultural assimilation and nostalgia. Today, people all over the world are being nourished by the writers of the Indian diaspora namely V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, M. G. Vassanji etc.

Uma Parmeswaran's first novel, *Mangoes on the Maple Tree*, examines various tensions that arise within the family as well as tensions that arise between the family and the greater society in which they are a minority, in the lives of an Indian immigrant family in Canada.

The Bhaves and the Moghes are refreshingly different from some families that inhabit the world of diasporic fiction. There are no daughters being threatened with arranged marriages, no authoritarian parents, and no weepy sentimentality about the land left behind. Instead we have a narrative about a family that has migrated to Canada and whose daily life involves what most immigrants are familiar with -- a negotiation between different cultural values. This novel does not simply emphasize cultural alienation but also finds joy in everyday

immigrant life. (To borrow a metaphor from Parameswaran's earlier work, the Trishanku space, the "in-betweenness" of an immigrant, is a space of possibilities.)[4]

The Bhave family consists of the parents, Sharad and Savitri, and their three children, Jyoti, Jayant, and Krish. Sharad who comes from a wealthy family in Pune has taken to business in Canada after having given up a professional life as a scientist. Savitri teaches at a local school and is engaged in the life of disadvantaged kids whom she mentors. As parents, Sharad and Savitri, try to balance their desire to protect their kids while allowing them their independence.

Jyoti is a college student in relationship with Pierre about which she becomes increasingly conflicted as the narrative develops. The royal treatment at their grandparents' house is replaced by harsh racial discrimination in Canada, which makes Jayant, who has just turned 18, decide to leave home in a 1976 Pontiac car to California for an year, and the idea of leaving home preoccupy him.

Jayant recollects Sharad Poornima nights in their ancestral house and wonders how "*Hinduism has a place for everyone and everything*."[5] He pities himself for the loss by his inability to use Marathi and Hindi words like '*raat-ki-rani*', '*dhobi*', '*charpai*', '*vilayati baba*', '*chunam*', '*jamun*', '*rakhi*', '*kabaddi*', '*shehnai*', and '*tulsi*'. By thus recreating his personal pains he associates himself with his ancestral Indian past that gives him power to face the painful present. His gained stamina to survive in the new land enables him to help other Indian immigrants also to adjust and later assimilate the new culture.

Following Sharad, his sister Veejala, who is a scientist, also settled in Canada alongwith her family. Her son Vithal feels the same way as Jayant: "*They–white Canadians– don't want us to assimilate. They want us out. We'll be squashed like bugs soon*"(*MOMT*, p.81) While Vithal supports Jyoti's love with Pierre, Jayant is not able to, for he is immersed in the greatness of his ancestry.

Jayant is already of the opinion, "*Our people, our old country…Dad there's no our people, no old country for anyone in the world anymore, least of all for us…This is one land and here we shall stay*"(*MOMT*, pp. 30-31) He tries to become the citizen of the country by active participation and sincere contributions in the corporate living. He brings in a Christmas tree and deliberates, "*It is an evergreen tree…and it will stand until the snow melts and then it will fall because it doesn't have roots*"(*MOMT*, p. 220) and "*An evergreen tree…is a thing of beauty…And a thing of beauty is a joy forever*" (*MOMT*, p. 221).

The metaphorical meaning is that their life is also an evergreen tree without roots here in Canada; however, they will survive until there is snow, which is again a metaphor referring to the trials and tribulations they have to undergo in the new land. And, the snow is going to be ever present and their joyful life is also going to continue forever with beauty. Jayant is thus definitely acculturated and assimilated.

Jyoti also adds to this confirming the mixture of two cultures which could be the only solution for their pangs of immigrant life: "*We will plant evergreens and oaks with roots…And grow mangoes on maples, and jamuns on birches, and bilvas on spruces. God willing, we shall…*" (*MOMT*, p. 221).[6]

This novel traces the parenting and marital issues of both couples and the differences between the families are presented as merely differences that exist within the diasporic community as the families carve out a life for themselves in Canada.

4. Bangladeshi diasporic writing in English

Immediately after the liberation of the country in 1971, use of English in Bangladesh was drastically restricted and Bangla was declared as the only official language and the medium of instruction at all levels. In Bangladesh people publish, write and read books in Bangla. "This is a country that has a public holiday devoted to a moment of linguistic history. Known as Language Martyrs' Day, the holiday commemorates the killing of protesters who defied police orders and took to the streets on Feb. 21, 1952, against the decision to declare Urdu the sole national language for Pakistan."[7]

In the face of this, it is not surprising that English literature in Bangladesh is struggling for identity and survival. According to Rashid Askari, Bangladeshi writing in English is in the path of emergence. Although the stream is very feeble, it exists.[8]

Monica Ali is a Bangladeshi-born British writer and novelist. Ali was born in Dhaka, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1967 to a Bangladeshi father and English mother. When she was three, her family moved to Bolton, England.

In her novel *Brick Lane* – named after Brick Lane, a street at the heart of London's Bangladeshi community, Monica Ali not only handles the difficulty of being an immigrant, but she also reveals the problem of being an immigrant 'woman'. It is apparent that for an immigrant moving to a society whose cultural structure is different from her/his original culture, belonging is not as easy as it seems. So, when a person does not feel belonging to the society where s/he lives, the alienation problem becomes inevitable.

Nazneen is a Bangladeshi woman who moves to Tower Hamlets in London at the age of 18 by virtue of an arranged marriage to a 40-year-old man, Chanu. On the surface, her husband is an "educated" man who keeps on his intellectual life in England. Although he has spent many years in London and has been still working as an academician, he oppresses Nazneen in many ways.

At the beginning of her life in London, Nazneen scarcely leaves her flat and she does not even want to go out in case she has to speak to some strangers and so, she spends her days alone. It is her feeling of alienation in a society where she speaks no English, except "sorry" and "thank you". Her husband, Chanu, finds unnecessary for her to learn English as an immigrant woman worker who sews zippers and buttons in her own flat. When Nazneen says that she would like to learn some English, Chanu's reaction is thus: "*It will come. Don't worry about it. Where's the need anyway?*"[9]

Like many immigrant women, she submits her to her fate and her life passes at home in England without almost any social activity for many years because her husband, Chanu, does not see any necessity for her to adapt to the society. Nazneen's learning English comes as a necessity, a necessity not for Nazneen's needs but for her family.

Although Nazneen is aware of her isolation and position, she accepts it as it is. It is undeniable that the established roles that are expected from Nazneen as an immigrant woman are decided not only by her husband but also by the Bangladeshi society and traditions. Nazneen's mother used to tell her, "*We must not stand in the way of Fate. Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate*" (*BL*, p. 14). That expectation means not to resist against her faith whatever happens; such as her marriage at the age of eighteen to 'an old man, at least forty years old with a face like a frog', who would take her from Bangladesh to England. The motto which has been internalized by Nazneen since her childhood is: "*What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne*." (*BL*, p. 16)

So, she presents a condition of inertia against her invisible status in the world. However, the turning point in the novel comes when Nazneen attempts to stand against her faith and the norms.

To explain, after a period of being a foreigner in a foreign land, her life changes with her love for Karim, another Bangladeshi who brings the clothes she works on at home. As a result of this relationship, Nazneen is in a dilemma as on the one hand she wants to hold on her traditional and religious values, but on the other she cannot escape from her own desire and she enters into a difficult process in which gradually she will learn to fight against her faith.

Her discomfort in the situation, resulting from the dilemma of feeling torn between her religious and traditional norms and her own desire, is not solved by choosing one of those options. Nazneen puts an end to her conflicted situation and alienation by neither following her desire and being with Karim nor holding on her religion and continuing with her established role.

Her self-actualization comes with her ability to take the decisions by herself, without any restriction. When she decides that she will not go back to Bangladesh as Chanu wants or will not be with Karim, either –although he wants to marry her- , Nazneen is not a dependent woman anymore. For Nazneen, "freedom is to be gained through working friendships with other Bengali women not in a new relationship with a man."[10]

By defying everything and everyone, she decides to stay in London with her daughters. When Nazneen, alongwith her friends Razia and Jorina build up a dressing trade together; we do not see the earlier alienated woman anymore. She is changed, independent from her husband, and the religious or traditional norms. She becomes a part of the society in which she can identify herself.

At the end of the novel, Nazneen's daughters prepare a surprise for her and take her to ice-skating that Nazneen has watched on TV with enthusiasm since she came to England. While she is skating with her friends in their traditional costume, a sari, the last utterance of the novel: "*This is England… You can do whatever you like*" (*BL*, p. 492) represents the affirmation of a cultural freedom for Nazneen marking her sense of liberation."[11]

5. Conclusion

Thus in the works of all these novelists, the characters are initially placed in familial, cultural and ideological positions that prevent them from stepping outside their fixed assumptions and attitudes. Yet all novels suggest that breaking away from one's ethnicity and absorbing the new culture is the only way for survival.

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