

Diasporic Divulgences and Resultant Resentment: A Study of Suniti Namjoshi

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Abstract: *Suniti Namjoshi is an Indian English Poet. She is a poet of Indian origin who flourished in an Alien culture. Her works exhibits characteristics of multiplicity. Being a diasporic writer she has nostalgic reminiscences of her previous culture. There is complex anxiety and mix kind of belongingness. The theme of dislocation and diasporic living also dominate her poetry. At some places she highlights a beautiful kind of amalgamation of two cultures in her poems. She is always pre-occupied with the mythical and fabulous words. They become a medium to highlight her inner resentment. The special feature of her diasporic writing is the element of feminism. She is a popular feminist diasporic poet.*

Paper

The term diaspora has its origination in Greek where it means “a scattering and sowing of seeds” also known as the word used for beautiful offspring of globalization. Like any other theoretical concept, it has its own dynamics of origins and growth, formulation and explication. It is said that the term diaspora originally used for the Jewish externment from its homeland. Nowadays, the term has large semantic domain including the words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, exile community and emigrant.

In 20th Century due to the world wars, ethnic refugee crises and rise of nationalism, communism and racism, there happened a massive scattering of people from one country to another. Then started, a period of immigration for better lifestyle and bright future. There were also movements from one nation to another in the form of refugees, and exiles accord to escape political or economic difficulties of their native lands which Gayatri Chakravorty calls as part of “the brain-drain”. She has observed that “international or postcolonial issues are often more comfortably dealt with than antagonisms closer to home, differences structured by race and class” (Phulia 22). Post colonialism has been one of the most exciting, rapidly expanding challenging areas of literary and cultural studies. The study of post colonialism and diaspora has been vitalized by the theoretical innovations of Edward said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall and Gaul Gilroy in a challenging way. Postcolonial theory is a complex and contentious field. The greater significance to postcolonial theory is because of its implication to the term Diaspora. In such studies, migrancy is consisted of two term adaptation and construction - adaptation to change, dislocation and transformation and the construction of new forms of knowledge and ways of seeing the world. So diaspora is a theory of both ideological and conceptual aspects and the geographical and physical migration.

As far as Indian Diaspora is concerned, it can be defined as the people who migrated from India to abroad. It also encompasses the people who are descended in abroad. Along with the development of Indian diaspora, literary trends and writings related to it also developed simultaneously. This literature is called Diaspora literature. It is an amalgam of dual personality, cultural conflicts, questions of belongingness, placements and displacement, old values and new desires, identity crises and changing global conditions. Diaspora, border, trans-national, transcultural, hybridity and diasporic are a few terms which are often used to denote the existence and emotions of dispersed people.

Smadal Lavie and Ted Sweedenburg in their work, *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity* (1996), have argued that there is no ‘immutable link’ between cultures, peoples, or identities and specific places. Yet the most common manifestation of the one’s otherness in an alien culture is a question one encounters from time to time: “Where are you from?” not “who / what are you?” Its follow-up is often “No, I mean where you are really from.” An explanation of one’s being “by origin / birth” leads to an ambivalent rejoinder such as “what brought you here from there?” signifying sometimes a naive curiosity but often times a resigned resentment (Rath 83). Such questioning is common for people of Indian diaspora, arousing their attention to a radical separation between their home and themselves.

These immigrant writers exhibit characteristics of multiplicity in terms of racial, cultural, geographical and political contexts.

The sense of release, freedom experienced in a new environment may present juxtaposed polarities between the indigenous culture and the culture of their adoption but the racial-historical-political equivocations

are to be supplanted by the cravings of a new self, new equation that denote adjustment, order, harmony and solidarity. (Nagpal 84)

So the mental condition of the expatriate writers is very complex. There is anxiety and belongingness to two different cultures. In diasporic writings dislocation and uprootedness are used as a metaphor which evokes images of loneliness and cultural conflicts. There is sometimes a feeling of guilt on account of leaving the motherland that has nurtured them. Almost all the prominent Indian diasporic writers including Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth, Bharti Mukherjee, Uma Parmeshwaram and Nina Abdullah in their writings have projected different themes reflecting diasporic ambivalence like rejection, anxiety, love-hate relationship within two cultures and melancholy. As compared to the men, women in the diaspora are subjected to more conflicts and problems. The struggle they face is being reflected in their writing. This is because women are placed within very complex cultural situations, subordinated within most relationships, merged into other overpowering identities and the female desire for freedom. Suniti Namjoshi, being an Indian lesbian-feminist diasporic poet has articulated such fraught issues. "To critique her world from that margin is to wrestle with contradictions and paradoxes surrounding issues of identity and self-hood, of self-representation, and agency" (Palekar 107). The concept of positionality is central to Namjoshi's narratives.

Following poem of Suniti Namjoshi is a beautiful example of this:-

The old country says
My young people are all out,
Voyaging through strange lands.
And the old country says
To these strange new lands,
Look at my young people.
Have I not brought them up well?
Look at the shape of their eyes
And the colour of their skin.
My minerals fed them.
And now they are all out
And home ground well.
(“The Old Country Says” More Poems)

Expatriate writers suffer a sense of uprootedness and dislocation. The sense of connectivity and belongingness with the culture of new country does not come at once and the writer feels as follows:-
“In my own country I was a princess.” – “Yes, but this is not your own country. miss.”

.....
We are all princes in exile, she sang,
picking seashells, clamshells, crayfish and crabs.
(“EMIGREE” The Jackass and the Lady)

There was a period when Namjoshi began to bring animals into her poetic domain. She was also preoccupied with the mythical and fabular worlds. During that time she reflected the state of mind of an Indian woman living in Canada. Through the use of fantasy, myth making, female sexuality and pain of racism, she creates new literary space. The themes of dislocation and diasporic living dominate it. Among Namjoshi's central concerns are the process of 'othering' and 'marginalisation'.

The loss of self-identity in an alien land cannot be described well than as in the following composition:

First,
 You take off your clothes,
Your titles and name
And put on a robe,
Sterile and Clean,
With neat black letters,
Marking THE STRANGER
Then,
You walk down the street,
Alone in fancy dress.
(“How to be a Foreigner” More Poems)

The intellectual expatriate is not a failure. She is able to carve out a very successful place for herself in the new society. The poem “My Aging Country” pictures the confusion of mind of an expatriate Indian. She has great reverence for her ancient country and she too experiences a feeling of regret at her present state. The opening lines of the poem clearly indicate the confused state of the mind the poetess:

How shall I take you,

Having No handle?

("My Aging Country" 1-2)

Here the word "handle" is beautifully used as a symbol of connectivity. The poem "My Aging Country" also reveals the fact that the poet is not happy with present conditions. At that time our country was not as developed as Canada. It had just got a re-birth. The culture, society and lifestyle had just started to get space with the modern world.

She wrote in a language full of contempt as follows:-

"You lie there,

Smiling, lazy, wicked,

Unashamed of yourself,

Lazy in a blue sea.

You really don't think

You might smarten yourself?"

("My Aging country" 8-13)

But she doesn't want to hurt her country. She is afraid to do this. So she takes a U-turn from criticism towards the cave of the beauty of her nation.

My aging beauty,

God Forbid

That I hurt you.

You are a young man

With green eyes.

You are all the people I have loved.

You are beautiful geographically,

And I Love you.

("My Aging Beauty" 14-21)

Namjoshi experienced different experiences in a country of different culture, people and environment. In her writings the sense of belonging is more than, 'fitting in' or 'assimilating'.

Call this a forest of alien trees,

For most of the people do not hurt,

Like trees.

One might even admit

A passive beneficence

("All this a forest" 1-5)

In the above poem she compared alien people with trees. She could consider them indifferent, but at the same time good for herself. There was a kind of gap that stopped them to mingle. The whole country was like a forest of alien trees and she had to stay with them and commence a new life with them. Her efforts to adapt herself are indicated in above lines along with the natural gap that existed. We rarely find mention of monetary success in her poetry. She always speaks about some hidden psychological picture of a thought wave. In the following poem she gives a feeling of happiness in a free country that she experiences.

Somebody said:

Here is a country

With all the amenities,

Land of free air, water to drink,

("Those Astonishing Anglo-Saxons" 1-4)

Generally diasporic writers have to wrestle with the problem of racism. Suniti Namjoshi was also touched with this notion in her poem entitled 'A Problem'. The masterpiece poem begins with a question:

For Negroes, Foreigners and such like....

The eye floods with tears.

Can a body hurt the body?

(1-3)

This direct question is answered indirectly highlighting the political designs of neo colonial power centers and the question of power and domination. In following lines she brings out the ways in which racial discrimination operates :

Place a foreign body

In a given element

Put on new glasses

To blot out your sight,

When you find a given body

In a foreign element.

Oh look, it would seem
Assimilative America
Has a mote in her eye!
(4-12)

The poem 'Alwin Ailey' is a poem where she brings out the hateful, racial violence prevalent in American society. There is a situation when 'Negroes and Whites' danced together in a Ballet dance. Then few white kicked the Negro ladies out in a very disgusting manner. Such incidents make the poet speak "I flood with tears."

She writes:
Listen they danced for me last night,
The negroes and the whites in green and orange lights
And they were so beautiful.
The white devils kicked the negro ladies out.
If everyone was taught
To be a ballet dancer,
Life would be so graceful
And cruel.
("Alwin Ailey" More Poems)

Rushdie also pictured the condition of Indian migrants. "Migrants" says Salman Rushdie, "Straddle two cultures . . . fall between two stools" and "suffer triple disruption" comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and also the social dislocation (Rushdie, 5 and 279). These Diasporas live in what Homi K. Bhabha calls "in-between condition" which is very painful for them and there is a yearning for "home". (Phulia 33). Suniti Namjoshi in her poem "The Elsewhere fish" tries to picture the similar mental condition as discussed above . . .

It seems to me,
That I, in my element of blue,
And you in your foreign country,
Are being cheated unawares.
(20-23)

At some places we have agreed with Dr. Ritu Sharma when she says:

There seems to be no solution for the problems faced by the expatriates. There is no doubt regarding the fact that all expatriation involves anxiety and belonging to two communities that leads to a kind of struggle that others do not have to struggle with. Expatriate writers have also been engaged in a permanent act of uprootedness and dislocation through travel and travelogues. This growth may be painful but it is an inseparable part of the emigrant experience." (Phulia 48).

In this situation one more point is noticeable when adaptation of another's cultures happens; the hopes and aspirations of an expatriate are also redefined. This has happened in the case of Suniti Namjoshi too. This is a positive way of moving ahead. As the time passes the grievances appear as the cultural differences go through the process of self-acceptance. This cultural difference definitely enriches a person. It opens new vistas of life. The horizon of life broadens. Going through all these experiences she explores the cultural, intellectual and emotional dimensions. Due to the increasing variety and richness of her literature she shines like a star in the sky of Indian diasporic writers. Suniti Namjoshi has perfectly pictured the mind of an expatriate. Her poetry aptly pictures the sentiments, desires and adoption of all those who comes under the umbrella term (Diaspora) that came into existence in the postcolonial times. Postcolonial literature is writing at the margin and has unraveled all the most exciting, rapidly expanding and challenging areas of literary and cultural studies. The postcolonial discourse seeks to "reinstatement the marginalized in the face of the dominant" (Sinha XI). In almost all the literatures of the world, women writers have made their presence felt by transcending all the boundaries. The topics like quest for identity and self-definition, the agony of alienation, the pain of exile, displacement, issues of racism and 'otherness' are conceptualized by all the women writers whether they are Postcolonial or not.

Suniti Namjoshi has also dealt with expatriates, the exiles, the emigrants and the immigrants. While pen-portraying diasporic experiences, she enjoyed. She enjoyed not only what she liked, but realized that moments also which were strange and difficult to adapt.

Avtar Brah and Uma Parmesvarm states that diasporas after having crossed the political borders must cross the psychic borders and only then it is possible to make a mark of identification and recognition for themselves in the realistic, historical and political space of the relocation because "Both exile and home are here, within the new homeland," believes Uma Parmesvarm. No doubt, "the nature of the diaspora," 'Politics' and its behavior not only depends on that diaspora but also on the nature of the host countries (Phulia 33). Of course, since a considerable change has been visible in outlook, and identities of diaspora, but the major common concerns of Indian diaspora writers have been nostalgia for home, dislocation, uprootedness,

fragmentation, marginalization, racial hatred, identity crisis, cultural and gender conflicts. Being marginalized and simultaneously suffering from anguish, traumas and dilemmas of cultural lawlessness of the western countries, some of expatriates incline towards drug addiction, homosexual and lesbian relationships.

Namjoshi sometimes also highlights tendencies of 'Transitional beings' or 'Liminal personae'. She oscillates between Indian and Canadian culture, but this happens in her early poems. When she comes to maturity she is one with the Canadian mindset. Her bold attitude towards lesbianism is a testimony of this fact. If we look at her works from a spiritual point of view, we find the work lacks in spiritual tuning. When the world is trying to find a solution of complex life in spiritualism, when it is well proved that creating in this materialistic world is a kind of mirage and identity of a man is merely a mote in this infinite existence, The resentment of Suniti Namjoshi is resentment of the modern society that hankers after the satisfaction of physical identity rather than the realization of spiritual identification and universal oneness established in the ancient Vedanta philosophy of India. Suniti Namjoshi adopted the foreign culture in her own way. She was an Indian by birth and started living in a foreign land harmonizing and accepting the distinction of life style. She was learning, she was blossoming, and she was becoming a lady in an absolutely new world. She did this mingling happily; sometimes it is difficult to find her roots in her poetical fragments of thoughts. In her sense she was a great barrier buster. She broke all the barriers with the help of her all-embracing spirit. Being a constant learner her faculties were ready to imbibe all new experiences. We can say she is an excellent example of a plant nurtured in a different field. At some places she exhibits the consciousness of exile and at some other places she exhibits an all amalgamating spirit. At some places she reveals a crisis of identity and then in poems she is at home in exile. In her quest for self-realization, she breaks those social codes that circumscribe and undermine a women's spirit and deny her identity.

Thus, Namjoshi's narratives are effectively thematic and validate marginalized or others by finding new ways of belonging and formulate a concept of community with a move from isolation to recognition.

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