

Cacophony and Harmony: The Dichotomy of Voices in Indian Diasporic Literature

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Abstract: *There is a cacophony and harmony in diasporic literature as a result of the dichotomous nature of voices stemming out of the diversity of experiences of diasporic writers. Diasporic writers are diverse in that they have different levels of experience as well as acceptability in their host countries. India is a diverse culture in itself. Therefore, the diversity of experience starts at home before one is a diasporic writer. The number of years one has spent in the diaspora as well as the level of sentimental attachment they had toward their home is another factor. In any case, a diaspora literature can have a valuable impact on the home and diaspora Indian audiences provided that the writers have a strong level of commitment toward their home land and a sense of belongingness toward their original culture. This article analyses the diverse dichotomy of voices in diasporic literature. It looks at the contribution that diasporic literature has and the difference it can make in the lives of Indians in modern times.*

Keywords: cacophony, dichotomy, harmony, host, home, migration, postcolonialism, acceptability, alienation

In order to understand diaspora literature, it is important to have a clear definition of what the concept diaspora means. Ever since human beings existed there has always been movement of people from one point to another for various reasons. However, all of those movements of people don't necessarily constitute a diaspora community. For a community to be considered a diaspora there has to be an original place which they call home and with which they have strong relationship. If a whole community is uprooted and has no place they call home or wish to come back at one point, then the community can't be considered a diaspora. Even when there is a home, there may be certain strong cases of assimilation that the community don't identify with the one they used to call home and may not have adequate memories to hold on to or even want to come back to. In such cases the concept diaspora lacks the concept of home which is equally important for a community to have in order to complete the definition. The assimilation could be due to various reasons of acceptance by the host community or land or persecution by the one they originally belonged to.

In cases where there is a chance that the exiled people are not going to be completely accepted in the place to which they have migrated, and if the exiled community have a strong attachment to their original home, there is a great chance that they may want to come back and settle there. The settlement and comfortableness or the availability of greener pastures in their new home may determine whether they develop strong attachment to their original home as well. Whatever length of time elapses in between their exile from their home, if conditions are not right for them to settle and live well, there will always be nostalgic feeling and belongingness to their original home as the only viable option for returning to it if all else fails. It is in this kind of scenario that diaspora communities will maintain strong ties with their original home because they know that it might be useful for them to keep their memories fresh as they could use it to fall back on when the time comes.

It is when diaspora communities have a strong sense of belongingness to their home that they may create literature which has to do with their original place and community. That kind of literature is what is known as diaspora literature. It is a record of the level of their relationship and

awareness of their identity with their home. A community which has completely been assimilated and does not maintain strong relationship to its original home may not contribute a viable kind of literature. It is not necessarily that the diaspora community will have all positive things to write in their literature about their original home. However, even if they have strong feelings about their original home, it is still part of their own history and it gives them and their home a sense of belongingness and identity. It can contribute to the historical sense and identity of not only the diaspora but also to the home communities. According to William Safran:

...the concept of diaspora [can] be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland-its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not-and perhaps cannot be-fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return-when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran ix-x).

There is a cacophony of voices in diasporic literature starting from the manner in which the diasporic community views not only the concept of 'diaspora' but also the concept of 'home'. Identifying both concepts, especially the 'home' becomes of a paramount importance as one who writes from a diasporic point of view needs to have accepted with where their 'home' is. Due to the length of time abroad or due to several factors of assimilation process in the diaspora community, there is a slow if not a reluctance to devote

one's literary imagination with a complete acceptance of the 'home'. The identification with the home has to be complete and firm in the first place if one is to be identified as a diaspora writer. After one has fully accepted and recognized their belongingness in an original place which they call home, then one can contribute fruitfully to the discussion of socio political as well as economic affairs of home as a diaspora writer. Based on the level of commitment and affirmation of acceptance of the concept of home and the degree to which one is exposed to the host's culture and identity then the voices from the diaspora become diverse and form a cacophony of ideas.

The literature of diasporic community stems from the mental activity of the writers who have committed to their ancestral home no matter how much positivity or negativity there might be in the content of their writings. What is important is that at the level of the individual writer the diasporic author must have a dedicated commitment toward what they call home and have to have a sustained sentimental relationship with it. A writer who has committed to his home may find it difficult to appease the opposing opinions of the host community as they would have to balance their acceptance not only to the home but also to the host country's identity as well. There is a heightened level of scrutiny from both audiences for the diasporic writer as to whether they have stayed true to their place of allegiance. As a result the diasporic writer has to surrender certain aspects of their devotion from either the diaspora or from the home in order to hone down a meaningful statement in their diasporic voice as writers. A diaspora writer who glamorizes his home may be thought of as betraying his host environment and a subsequent question would arise as to why they have left home in the first place or why they haven't returned if things were rosy as they profess. Diasporic writers are caught in a cacophony of voices from both places of identity that they have to listen to themselves before they deliver their imaginative works of literature to the public. Glamorizing the host country on the other hand would result in people from home aspiring to leave their original home in search of greener pastures and an unfavorable reception of the literature would ensue from those enthusiastic nationalistic sectors of the original home. Therefore the diasporic writer has to take a great deal of care to balance the level of allegiance and commitment in their literature as they face scrutiny from both diaspora as well as home for their views. In the end the Indian diasporic writer would have to find the strong voice in their imagination that they want to share as there is a great deal of dichotomy in them. According to Chandrima Karmakar:

How does one identify 'home'? It involves both consistent imagination and acceptance. One needs to bestow recognition and affirm ascription. It should render a mental state to an individual that bespeaks relative contentment. Such a mental state can be achieved by the diasporic Indians only if they give up their occupation of the liminal space. A diasporic Indian needs to decide on a particular space as 'home'. S/he cannot be agonized with the yearning for another space. There cannot be a gaping chasm between desire of 'home' and fulfillment of the same. 'Home' entails commitment. The commitment can either be with the place that one has left behind or with

the place that one occupies. This is often not so in case of the Indian diaspora. They are generally suspended in an in-between (liminal) space between the two places. The simultaneous presence of an existential and a metaphoric 'home' places the diasporics in the 'interstitial space. (Karmakar 81)

Diasporic literature reflects not only on home but also on the host. As a diaspora community there are certain levels of discriminations and problems of belongingness they face from their hosts. Sharing those diverse cases of hostile receptions and problems of acceptance takes a variety of angles to explain. Diasporic communities are easy targets as a result of their minority status in the host community and certain hostile levels of accusations are targeted at them from various sectors of the society. Homophobia is one of the aspects of literature from diaspora imagination. However the delicate way that the diaspora writers have to express their frustrations with the hostility and stereotypical discriminations they face on the host country is very crucial as it may be seen as outright biting of the hand that that was extended to help them in the first place. Diasporic writers want to make their stay as peaceful as possible in the host community and they demand decent treatments to the inhabitants of their place of refuge. For this reason they feel the necessity to express their frustrations about discrimination or lack of privilege.

One of the most usual ills of diasporic life that diaspora literature aspires to discuss is discrimination and in particular, systemic racism. Racism holds center stage whenever a host country faces any sorts of adversity, be it in the form of unemployment to the spread of a communicable disease. Homophobic members of the host community blame the diaspora communities as the sources of all their predicaments. This hinders the peaceful coexistence of the diaspora community in the host country and leads to a great level of uncertainty and resentment. Diasporic literature addresses such issues with a view of home as a viable choice and a base to fall back on for solace in times of persecution. That is the main reason why diasporic writers want to maintain a strong relationship to their home because it might be their only true comfort when things go beyond control. As the same time the diaspora community are trying hard to make it work out for them in the host country, they are always looking over their shoulder to check they have not completely been cut off from their original identity as it may come handy in case all else fails for their acceptance and belongingness in the host country. Diasporic literature therefore creates a form of togetherness and a sense of belongingness to the community. It highlights the need for coming to help one another in times of need. It gives them a sense of home away from home. But everything comes at a price as in their effort to unite the diaspora community to look out for each other, they might in the way alienate themselves in the process from the host community. According to Nandi Bhatia:

In social life, too, hostilities from the "mother country" are manifest in the stereotypical discourses about immigrants as "unclean," "unprincipled," and "unconventional"; they are blamed for problems related housing and vagrancy and associated with the spread of

infectious diseases such as leprosy and tuberculosis (Juss 71).⁷ In the face of institutionalized racism carried out against the ex-colonial immigrants in the form of "immigration control, policing, racial violence, inferiorisation discrimination that has become the hallmark of their daily lives," diasporic communities carve their national identity in a home they left behind (Brah 186-87). This home remains "a mythic place of desire ... a place of no return even if it is possible to visit the territory that it sees as place of 'origin'" (Brah 192). This home is not only a territory to be claimed, but also restores an identity that provides communities with sense of security and certainty. When confronted with white racism on a daily basis, diasporic communities become more protective about their cultural values, viewing them as possible sites for countering racism cultural codes that present them as morally superior to the dominant culture. (Bhatia 514)

The dichotomy of voices in Indian diasporic literature has various facets. Even though it can be argued that the diasporic literature of India mirrors the image of India and is committed to India, there are several differences between individual writings and writers. There is a dichotomy of voices in India as the country is a multicultural society. So, before the writers even leave their country there is a great diversity of backgrounds, religious affiliation, caste system, economic discrepancy and so on at home. When the migrant community becomes a diasporic community, the obvious cultural assimilation process takes its toll and does so differently. Even the diaspora community is again widely diverse depending on the kind of environment the host country presents them with and the number of years they have been exposed to that diasporic life.

The Indian diasporic literature is identified by the way it reflects Indian culture, religion, family and social ways of life. However, there is a wide discrepancy on the way they are presented as they are a reflection of the background of individual diasporic writer as well as their peculiar experience and exposure to the host country. That makes the cacophony of dichotomous voices springing out of diasporic literature to be diverse and with endless possibilities. The reader will notice that there are certain changes that take place in the value systems of the Indian diasporic writer as the traditional customs of caste system and other practices they had at home are no longer sustainable in the host country. So their subjects as well as contents vary from what the local literature looks like quite markedly because they had to drop some of the very hard hitting issues they would have to deal with had they been writing from home.

The degree to which one adapts to foreign life as a diasporic community member is not the same for all individuals and communities. Depending on the strength of one's background in their belief and value systems before leaving home and depending on the level of acceptance they face in their host countries, their dogmatism or liberalism becomes quite diverse. As a result, looking into one or close to one unifying factor amidst all the cacophony of dichotomous voices in Indian diasporic literature needs a deep understanding of India as a diverse culture itself, and the host country's track-record in its level of acceptability and

assimilation of foreign cultures. No matter how diverse background Indian diasporic writers may have in their original history, what they produce has the image of India at its heart. With a careful consideration of which generation migrant diasporic writers one is dealing with, it is easier to identify as to whether the connection with the home is vibrant or less so. Several of these dichotomy traits are also true to other diasporic writers other than Indian. Therefore, there is an element of universality to diasporic literature regarding cacophony of voices. However, it is important to remember that not all original homes of diasporic writers are as diverse as India. According to Gijsbert Oonk

Bringing these various migration patterns together under the unifying label of 'Indian Diaspora' is no easy task.¹¹ The patterns vary regarding the causes and consequences of migration, the numbers of migrants, the periods of migration, the numbers of returnees, the manner in which they were received by their host countries, whether or not circular migration was transformed into permanent settlement and family reunion, and the questions of whether locally there was an emerging 2nd-, 3rd- and higher-generation of 'Indian migrants' as opposed to intermarriages and cultural alliances with the local communities.¹² Furthermore, there is a wide variety of religious, regional, and ethnic backgrounds of the migrants. They are labelled 'Hindus', which, of course, entails, a variety of castes, sub-castes and 'jatis'. There is a great variety of sects and beliefs among the South Asian Muslims (Sunnis, Ismailis) as well and the other religious/ethnic groups such as the Sikhs, Jains, Goans, among others. Moreover, there is also a broad variety of regional and language backgrounds: such as the Gujaratis (Hindus and Muslims) from northwestern India, Telugu migrants from the South, Bhojpuris-speaking peoples from the north east and central India, and so on. (Oonk 12)

The rate of diasporic migration has increased lately from India to foreign countries. Even before they leave home, nowadays people have more knowledge and exposure to foreign culture and history through the increased access to internet and television. As a result adapting to foreign culture has been made easier as the level of culture shock is reduced with the knowledge of what migrants expect from the foreign countries as compared to their home. The influence to foreign ways of living starts from home. As a result there is a diaspora culture even at home for many Indians. At the same time there is influence from those who are in the diaspora to the people who have not left their home. The increased contact made possible due to internet means that people are able to connect regularly and with little difficulty about life in the diaspora as well as vice-versa. Diasporic literature also has increased in its accessibility as a result of this age of information as its dissemination has become easier and faster with the development of digital transfer of data.

Both the personal as well as literary transfer of knowledge and information from the diaspora has now created a level of awareness about both home and the diaspora life more clear and vivid. The numerous voices coming out of diasporic literature have contributed for the knowledge that people

have about financial advantages both at home and abroad that they can easily decide where the greener pasture is in real time. Different writers have different rates of experience and create a cacophony of voices that are directed toward the diaspora community as well as the original home audiences. The reader has a wide array of perspectives as a result of these dichotomies of voices to figure out what life is like abroad and what their homeland looks like as compared to the foreign lands. The diasporic voices increase the awareness of global culture and the spread of globalization as well as making it easier for people to learn about jobs, educational opportunities and business activities. The contribution of diasporic literature in both home and diaspora Indians means that people can decide whether to improve their lives at home by learning from the diaspora and introducing new ways or could simply leave for a greener pasture in the diaspora. Most importantly travel and adaptability to foreign cultures and moving to diaspora has been made easier as a result of the influx of literature and information coming from the diaspora and aided by the rapid growth in connectivity and internet communication. This has meant that people are already aware of what culture is acceptable and what is not before they have moved to the foreign land at the present. Rita Joshi writes:

Indians travel more frequently now than before. Television has made foreign lands accessible at home. Many Indians are inevitably influenced by global culture. Inevitably the perspective on home culture (old world) is relativized. For the immigrant, 'home' is a contradictory site of nurture and also dark, decompositional elements (the reason he left for greener pastures). The New World offers professional opportunity and financial betterment but also insists on assimilation and acculturation, a rejection of old habits, traditions and conditioning, and a merging with the culture of the new context. He is therefore, in a sense, invited to experience the death of the self as he has known it. He is asked to despise home culture (his collaboration is implied in the act of immigration) which is seen by the New World as inferior, as less culturally and technologically sophisticated. The contempt the colonizer taught the subjugated in the colonial era in the colonized territory is now encouraged in the immigrant who crosses over to the First World believing in the myth of equality in the Western world in a post-colonial era. Obviously, most immigrants find these aspects of transition humiliating and even impossible, and resist. (Joshi 83)

Diaspora literature has one area of focus that recurs time and time again and that is the postcolonial legacy and history that affects the identification of individuals either to home or the host nation. Whatever amount of development has appeared in terms of globalization, business and connectivity which have made the knowledge about both home and the diaspora easier can't make up for the fact that one has to decide which nationality and identity they want to hold on to in the end. The attraction of professional jobs, education, business and financial opportunities may drive people to migrate and leave their home but the human connection and sentimental value of home life and culture is so appealing that belonging to one identity has to come as the cost of

alienating oneself from the two. Moreover the increased knowledge that has come as a result of the development of television and internet connectivity has highlighted the postcolonial history and awareness even more than ever.

Nowadays people are more aware of what colonialism has done to both the colonizer and the colonized in terms of economy as well as cultural influence. The colonizing West which was so happy to plunder the colonized countries such as India is now more unwilling to receive an influx of migrants as that would mean competition for jobs and other opportunities with the natives. But people will always follow the money, as they say. The host countries have taken advantage of colonialism to develop their infrastructure and economies which in return is attracting and even forcing people from the colonized nations to flow to those developed countries as they have fewer opportunities in their homeland. This is a trend not only in the case of India but also in Africa and other third world countries whose young people are continuously crossing seas and oceans to reach Europe in search of greener pastures. Postcolonialism that had plundered the third world countries has now become the main factor in pushing people out of their homeland to a life in the diaspora. The postcolonial effect on language and culture is also another attraction as many of the former colonies speak the language of their colonizers which means that they are flowing to their former colonial masters.

Diasporic literature therefore has a role in helping people determine which identity people in the diaspora should hold on to. It can increase their longing for home by increasing their knowledge of home and culture of their original place. This longing for home results in a sense of belonging to the home for the diaspora community. Similarly there would be a cacophony of voices preaching otherwise and are aimed at attracting people toward the diaspora and portraying negative images about home and in the process alienating people from home. The voices are many and are concerned about politics, economy, culture and society. Aparna Dharwadker writes:

However, the features of modern diaspora, mediated further in the case of India by a complex postcolonialism and a contested nationhood, suggest a need for rethinking the relation between diaspora and the postcolonial nation-state, which would also lead us to reconsider the sites of performance. The dialectic of "longing" and "belonging" which often defines diasporic relations misrepresents the experience of diaspora as well as the status of the nation-as-home. Peter van der Veer argues that "the theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left."⁷ This formulation assumes that home is a rooted, secure, and established unity, while departure is the disruptive choice that makes change and movement possible. But departures no longer uproot as they used to, while the "postcolonial condition," to the extent that the phrase refers reflexively to the situation of the post colony, is primarily a condition of accelerated political, economic, social, and cultural change. (Dharwadker 73)

In conclusion, diasporic literature is a diverse dichotomy of voices coming out of a diaspora which is committed to the home. Whatever sentiments the diaspora literature portrays about the home and the diaspora life has a lesson for Indian audiences. Due to the diversity of experience and exposure of diasporic writers and the length of time they have been away from home and in the host countries affect their opinions that they have different perspectives to offer. The reader has to navigate inside the cacophony of voices and take understand their messages accordingly. Even before one leaves for diaspora and become a writer, the fact that they are from India, which is a very diverse cultural society itself, means that the dichotomy of voices in diasporic literature is a natural outcome. Development in communication and internet accessibility has increased the global cultural awareness of people. People are able to learn in real time about business opportunities as well as professional attractions even before they travel abroad. This has increased the spread of literature coming out of the diaspora as well. There are always positives as well as negatives with dichotomous voices coming from the diaspora; however, the audience has an opportunity to a variety of information and a wealth of experience as they help advance in their knowledge of globalization and adaptability to diasporic life.

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