EXILE LITERATURE AND THE DIASPORIC INDIAN WRITER

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ABSTRACT

The essay takes a holistic view of the word "exile" to encompass a range of displaced existence. It illustrates through John Simpson's The Oxford Book of Exile the various forms of exiles. The essay then goes on to show that diasporic Indian writing is in some sense also a part of exile literature. By exemplifying writers both from the old Indian diaspora of indentured labourers and the modern Indian diaspora of IT technocrats, it shows that despite peculiarities there is an inherent exilic state in all dislocated lives whether it be voluntary or involuntary migration. More importantly, a broad survey of the contributions of the second generation of the modern Indian diaspora in the field of Indian writing in English depict certain shift in concerns in comparison to the previous generation and thereby it widens the field of exile literature. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity. Yet, a peculiar but a potent point to note is that writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them. These writings in dislocated circumstances are often termed as exile literature. The word "exile" has negative connotations but if the self-exile of a Byron is considered, then the response to that very word becomes ambivalent. If a holistic view of the word "exile" is taken, the definition would include migrant writers and non-resident writers and even gallivanting writers who roam about for better pastures to graze and fill their oeuvre. World literature has an abundance of writers whose writings have prospered while they were in exile. Although it would be preposterous to assume the vice-versa that exiled writers would not have prospered had they not been in exile, the fact in the former statement cannot be denied. Cultural theorists and literary critics are all alike in this view.

INTRODUCTION

Histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions - may be the terrains of world literature. The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity.(Ashcroft 218)

The multivoiced migrant novel gave vivid expression to the ries of the "open" indeterminate text, or of transgressive, non-authoritative reading. (Boehmer 243)

In an interview with Nikhil Padgaonkar for Doordarshan, Edward W. Said reflected on the condition of exile: I think that if one is an intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary, and to see it from a point of view that looks at it as if it

were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence—commitment—but independence and a certain kind of detachment. (Said 13) John Simpson in The Oxford Book of Exile writes that exile "is the human condition; and the great upheavals of history have merely added physical expression to an inner fact" (Simpson "Introduction"). Indeed it is so if exile is taken to be identical with self-alienation in the modern, post-Marxist, Brechtian sense of the term. Physical mobility often heightens the spiritual or psychological sense of alienation from the places one continually moves between. The world, in existentialist terms, appears absurd and indifferent towards one's needs. In such a situation one cannot help but feel like an outsider. Therefore, it is well agreed that exile is a part of the human experience. Many a Shakespearean play has in it exile in the form of banishment and it dates back even before the time of Pericles of Athens. As for writers of yore there is Ovid whose hyperbolic lamentation on being exiled from Rome for publishing an obscene poem forms part of his Tristia I. There is Virgil whose Aeneas leaves Troy urged by the ghost of his wife thereby displaying the writer's predicament.

The effect that exile has, not on the writers' work, but on the writers themselves seems apparently paradoxical at first. Exile appears both as a liberating experience as well as a shocking experience. The paradox is apparent because it is just a manifestation of the tension that keeps the strings attached and taut between the writer's place of origin and the place of exile. Whatever may be the geographical location of the exiled writer, in the mental landscape the writer is forever enmeshed among the strings attached to poles that pull in opposite directions. The only way the writer can rescue oneself from the tautness of the enmeshing strings is by writing or by other forms of artistic expression. The relief is only a temporary condition for no writer's work is so sharp a wedge that can snap the strings that history-makers have woven. Even if a writer consciously tries to justify one end, simultaneously, but unconsciously, there arises a longing for the other. Therein lies the fascination of exile literature.

DIASPORA LITERATURE - A TESTIMONY OF REALISM

A diaspora (from Greek διαζπορά, "scattering, dispersion") is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established homeland" or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location", or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands"

The word has come to refer to historical mass-dispersions of people with common roots, particularly movements of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from the Middle East, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the southern Chinese during the coolie slave trade, or the century-long exile of the Messenians under Spartan rule.[3]

Recently, scholarship has distinguished between different kinds of diaspora, based on its causes such as imperialism, trade or labor migrations, or by the kind of social coherence within the diaspora community and its ties to the ancestral lands. Some diaspora communities maintain strong political ties with their homeland. Other qualities that may be typical of many

diasporas are thoughts of return, relationships with other communities in the diaspora, and lack of full assimilation into the host country.

The first mention of a diaspora created as a result of exile is found in the Septuagint in the phrase "esē diaspora en pasais basileias tēs gēs" translated to mean "thou shalt be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth". Its use began to develop from this original sense when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek; in Ancient Greece the term διαζπορά (diaspora) meant "scattering" and was used to refer to citizens of a dominant city-state who emigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire. The term derives from the verb διαζπείρω (diaspeirō), "I scatter", "I spread about" and that form διά (dia), "between, through, across" + the verb ζπείρω (speirō), "I sow, I scatter". After the Bible's translation into Greek, the word Diaspora then was used to refer to the population of Jews exiled from Israel in 587 BCE by the Babylonians, and from Judea in 70 CE by the Roman Empire.[6] It subsequently came to be used to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel, to the cultural development of that population or to the population itself. When capitalized and without modifiers (that is, simply the Diaspora), the term refers specifically to the Jewish diaspora; when uncapitalized the word diaspora may be used to refer to refugee populations of other origins or ethnicities. The wider application of diaspora evolved from the Assyrian two-way mass deportation policy of conquered populations to deny future territorial claims on their part.

INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Indian English literature (IEL) refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian diaspora, such as V. S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Salman Rushdie, who are of Indian descent.

It is frequently referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. (Indo-Anglian is a specific term in the sole context of writing that should not be confused with the term Anglo-Indian). As a category, this production comes under the broader realm of postcolonial literature- the production from previously colonised countries such as India.

IEL has a relatively recent history, it is only one and a half centuries old. The first book written by an Indian in English was by Sake Dean Mahomet, titled Travels of Dean Mahomet; Mahomet's travel narrative was published in 1793 in England. In its early stages it was influenced by the Western art form of the novel. Early Indian writers used English unadulterated by Indian words to convey an experience which was essentially Indian. Raja Rao's Kanthapura is Indian in terms of its storytelling qualities. Rabindranath Tagore wrote in Bengali and English and was responsible for the translations of his own work into English. Dhan Gopal Mukerji was the first Indian author to win a literary award in the United States. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, a writer of non-fiction, is best known for his The Autobiography of an

Unknown Indian where he relates his life experiences and influences. P. Lal, a poet, translator, publisher and essayist, founded a press in the 1950s for Indian English writing, Writers Workshop.

R.K. Narayan is a writer who contributed over many decades and who continued to write till his death recently. He was discovered by Graham Greene in the sense that the latter helped him find a publisher in England. Graham Greene and Narayan remained close friends till the end. Similar to Thomas Hardy's Wessex, Narayan created the fictitious town of Malgudi where he set his novels. Some criticise Narayan for the parochial, detached and closed world that he created in the face of the changing conditions in India at the times in which the stories are set. Others, such as Graham Greene, however, feel that through Malgudi they could vividly understand the Indian experience. Narayan's evocation of small town life and its experiences through the eyes of the endearing child protagonist Swaminathan in Swami and Friends is a good sample of his writing style. Simultaneous with Narayan's pastoral idylls, a very different writer, Mulk Raj Anand, was similarly gaining recognition for his writing set in rural India; but his stories were harsher, and engaged, sometimes brutally, with divisions of caste, class and religion.

CLASSIFICATION AND RELATED LANGUAGES

The English language belongs to the Anglo-Frisian sub-group of the West Germanic branch of the Germanic family, a member of the Indo-European languages. Modern English is the direct descendant of Middle English, itself a direct descendant of Old English, a descendant of Proto-Germanic. Typical of most Germanic languages, English is characterised by the use of modal verbs, the division of verbs into strong and weak classes, and common sound shifts from Proto-Indo-European known as Grimm's Law. The closest living relatives of English are Scots (spoken primarily in Scotland and parts of Northern Ireland where Ulster Scots is spoken) and Frisian (spoken on the southern fringes of the North Sea in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany).

After Scots and Frisian come those Germanic languages that are more distantly related: the non-Anglo-Frisian West Germanic languages (Dutch, Afrikaans, Low German, High German), and the North Germanic languages (Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Faroese). With the (partial) exception of Scots, none of the other languages are mutually intelligible with English, owing in part to the divergences in lexis, syntax, semantics, and phonology, and to the isolation afforded to the English language by the British Isles, although some, such as Dutch, do show strong affinities with English, especially to earlier stages of the language. Isolation has allowed English and Scots (as well as Icelandic and Faroese) to develop independently of the Continental Germanic languages and their influences over time.

In addition to isolation, lexical differences between English and other Germanic languages exist due to diachronic change, semantic drift, and to substantial borrowing in English of words from other languages, especially Latin and French (though borrowing is in no way

unique to English). For example, compare "exit" (Latin), vs. Dutch uitgang and German Ausgang (literally "out-going", though outgang continues to survive dialectally) and "change" (French) vs. Dutch andering and German Änderung (literally "elsing, othering", i.e. "alteration"); "movement" (French) vs. Dutch beweging and German Bewegung ("beway- ing", i.e. "proceeding along the way"); etc. With the exception of exit (a Modern English borrowing), Middle English had already distanced itself from other Germanic languages, having the terms wharf, schift (="shift"), and wending for "change"; and already by Old English times the word bewegan meant "to cover, envelop", rather than "to move". Preference of one synonym over another also causes differentiation in lexis, even where both words are Germanic, as in English care vs. German Sorge. Both words descend from Proto- Germanic *karō and *surgō respectively, but *karō has become the dominant word in English for "care" while in German, Dutch, and Scandinavian languages, the *surgō root prevailed. Surgō still survives in English, however, as sorrow.

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