

INDIAN DIASPORA AS CULTURAL DIASPORA WITH REFERENCE TO MANJU KAPUR'S THE IMMIGRANT AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS

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Abstract

Culture defines the life style of the people living in a particular society. Culture influences personal and social responses of the individuals. People migrate to various places where they can find better living. The migrated people take their culture to the new place along with them. In the initial days of migration the migrated people experience conflict with the experiences they encounter in the new place. In course of time, they compromise with the new culture and start leading a pleasant life. Indian diaspora that started in the early nineteenth century has gone through various forms and now enjoying the phase of cultural diaspora. This paper focuses on how the Indians have become the cultural partners in the foreign lands and become the cultural representatives of their mother land.

Keywords: *Diaspora, Culture, Migration, Indentured Labour, Globalization*

The abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1883 has impacted the millions of lives of Indians for the last two centuries and many generations. The abolition of slavery resulted in the cutting down of profits to the owners of British plantations. They were not ready to pay the genuine wages to the freed slaves which could reduce their profits. So they recruited many Asian and African people especially Indians as cheap labour to work in their plantations. Millions of Indians were transported to various colonies of British Empire across the world as cheap labour. Indenture was the contract generally for three years or five years. After the tenure was over, the Indians were allowed to return to their homeland. While some of them returned to India after the indenture was over, the rest of the Indians decided to stay back in the respective colonies. They got married in the same place, started families and in course of time they were developed abundantly.

The interesting aspect of indenture was the system left nightmares to all the coolies who involved in it. The coolies were abused and beaten. They were provided cheap facilities and adult rated food for their survival. Huge restrictions were imposed on the coolies during their stay on the plantations. "Gandhi's comrade in the fight to abolish indenture, visiting Guiana a decade after the system ended, described the logies there as "death-traps," "filthy slum property "that should be condemned as unfit for human habitation" (*Coolie Woman*, 84). There was nothing a pinch of difference between the conditions of men and women. Women were the crudest sufferers of the Indenture. In spite of the crudest victimisation they were

forced into, many Indians were willing to remain in the same migrated places. The Indians who opted indenture in order to escape from the terrible situations they were experiencing in the home country had encountered more struggles in the indenture. Precisely, Indenture was like continuation to the sufferings of the Indians from which they wanted to deliver themselves to enjoy a better living. The women who were the bitter sufferers of the patriarchy in the home country could not find any betterment in their living on the plantations. The patriarchy had left the women in isolation and physically, psychologically, socially and domestically they were severely abused and betrayed. The barbarous system of child marriages and *satī* had drowned the status of the women in the society drastically. The sufferings of widows were more pathetic than the other women. They were deserted from the family and society. The girls' parents or their in-laws did not bother about the widow women. When the widows were neglected from all the sides, many of them depended on prostitution for their survival. The feeling of neglect from the society and from the families effected the lives of the Indian women piteously. In such bitter situation indenture seemed to be a destination of escape for the Indian women. But the indenture did not come to the rescue but it had intensified the sufferings of women. Many beautiful women had become the sex toys for the crew members and the doctors on the voyage and to the managers and owners on the plantations. Besides the women were not given any relaxation from their work. They had to perform the task on par with the men but the women were not paid the equal wages on par with men. The poor and filthy residential

facilities and adult rated food given on the plantations resulted in the poor fertility rate among the Indian women. The wages of the women could not meet their needs especially during the time of pregnancy. So the women had to borrow nutritious ration from their owners. Later, when the women had resumed the work, they were compelled to clear all the debts they had made during their pregnancy. So the women had to work extra time beyond their contract to clear the debts they had made during their pregnancy. On the whole, the indenture did not help the Indian women to get freed from the clutches of patriarchy and the sufferings of their womanhood. Instead, the indenture had intensified their agony. "The rhetoric of empire cast the white man as the brown woman's saviour, but in fact white men paid brown women one-half to two-thirds what they paid brown men in every colony that received indentured laborers" (*Coolie Woman*, 91).

In the same way the Indian traders who became bankrupts because of the British good that were imported into Indian markets, the outcastes and the poor peasants who were unable to make substantial living in the home country had flown to indenture. During the British rule the Indian market never seemed to recover because of the huge inflow of British goods. The series of famines that hit the country in the late eighteenth century had killed millions of Indians. The dreadful climatic conditions had become an obstacle for the poor peasants to lead a satisfactory life. The outcastes who were unable to receive dignity in their lives and justice in their work had looked towards indenture for a dignified and contended life. But all their hopes were shattered very early. During the voyage, they were given harsh treatment that can be equalled to the treatment given to the Black slaves during their voyage in Atlantic Ocean. The men were forced to clean the toilets on the ships and the decks where the stay of the coolies was unhygienic. The actual ration was never given to the coolies by the respective authorities which effected the health of the immigrants and sometimes it resulted in deaths of some immigrants.

The coolies who decided to stay back in the colonies like Caribbean, Mauritius, and Fiji etc. after the indenture was over, grew in number. There the descendants of the indentured labour have been excelling in every field. V.S. Naipaul, a Noble laureate in literature whose forefathers left to Caribbean islands as indentured labour. Most of his works have a good amount of the culture of Caribbean. The population of Caribbean itself is a strange factor. Most of the people who live in Caribbean islands today came from Asia and Africa as indentured labour. The Indians

also have been assimilated into the culture and all the Blacks and Asians are living in the Caribbean islands. Indians uphold caste as one of the sacred aspects of the Indian culture. In the indenture the consciousness of caste had diluted to a large extent. "One scholar of indenture has remarked that the British didn't recruit "coolies" for their sugar cane fields. Rather, they *made* "coolies" (*Coolie Woman*, 43). Due to the glory attribute to Brahmins, during the indenture many people of other castes had announced themselves as Brahmins hoping that the Brahmin community would not receive heavy work on plantations. But the recruiters did not select the coolies from Brahmin community for plantation work because of their concealment to the hard labour. Even during voyage the crew had caught a Brahmin stealing vegetables to prepare food separately for himself. Later, on the plantations, the idea of caste had completely disappeared due to the prime importance was given to money but not the caste. The abnormal ratio of men and women on the plantations was also one of the reasons for the dilution of caste consciousness. The women who had received the first chance in her lifetime to earn and save money by herself was in lot of demand. The number of women was not even the half of men on the plantations. So women had got the choice to select the men for marriage. Though the plantations never allowed permanent marriage system, the women were very cautious in choosing her bridegroom. They gave prime importance to money because only few men could save money they were earning. The wages were very low and the women receive one-third or one-fifth of the men's wages and they needed money for their survival. So the man who could offer satisfactory money to the woman, he would be chosen. In this aspect the women neglected the caste of the persons but only money had mattered. Today the Caribbean islands and the other places where indentured was in full bloom once have produced well acclaimed politicians, academicians, sports personalities and various eminent in other disciplines. Mahendra Pal Chaudhry, an Indo-Fijian was the leader of the Fiji Labour Party. He defeated the former leader Sitiveni Rabuka and became the first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister in 1999.

In the novel *The Immigrant* penned by Manju Kapur, Ananda and Nina were the protagonists. Ananda left to Canada to his uncle's home after the demise of his parents in a car accident. "Of course this was not a world where family sacrificed their all for your success; here blood expected you to stand on your own" (24). After stepping into the new country, Ananda found it very strange to

survive in the new place. Though he finished Medicine and practising as a dental doctor in India, he was compelled to repeat the course in Canada. When he reached his uncle's house, he taught him to adopt the culture of Canada as early as possible. Ananda was asked to prepare his own breakfast every morning. His food habit had become a biggest obstacle for Ananda. Being born in a Brahmin family, he was not exposed to meat until he had reached Canada. His pure vegetarianism could not help Ananda to enjoy a comfortable living. His uncle who had left to Canada decades before had already assimilated into the new culture. Though he was a Brahmin, he married a white woman and habituate to the culture of Canada in every walk of his life. He advised Ananda to get habituated to the Canadian culture to enjoy a comfortable living. He advised Ananda to consume non-vegetarian food and take up a part-time job to pay fees for his education. It was a natural affair in the West that the youngsters pay their college fees with their hard earned money as part-timers. Besides, Medical course was expensive and his uncle could not afford it. But Ananda who was brought up with strong values of his culture had resisted himself from consuming meat for a long time. But he could not keep his values up for a long time and started consuming meat. It is easy to understand that Ananda was not influenced by his uncle's words that told him to change his food habits. At the same time, he was not tempted to enjoy non-vegetarian food that he had seen in his uncle's house and in the house of his friend, Gary. He was moulded to change his food habits only when the circumstances demanded. He was compelled to depend on fish and meat to complete his domestic chores quickly in order to attend his college and practise.

Ananda and Gary bought an old house in a partnership. While doing repair work Gary proposed to finish the repair of their house on their own. But Ananda dismissed the idea by saying that he did not know the job of carpenter and other trades. But Gary insisted that they should take care of few minute things on their own because it was very expensive in the West to hire a professional for every small repair. There is a huge distinction in working nature of the West and India. In the West, the people do every domestic work on their own unless the work demands a profession to take care of. They paint their houses and take care of minor repairs in plumbing, construction etc. But the culture of India is different. Different trades are divided among the people of various castes. The people who belong to the caste of pottery should make the pots and should not interfere in

the work of other castes. The same is the case with every caste. Brahmins, who are assigned the duty of teaching and priesthood are never exposed to any labour. So it was natural to Ananda to show his inefficiency to perform various tasks while repairing his house. "You'll learn on the job, that's what we all do. As it is, the plumbing will cost a bomb" (43). Later Ananda was married to Nina who was working as an English lecturer in Delhi. Though Ananda told her to taste non-vegetarian food many times, she resisted herself for a very long time. She used to prepare fish for Ananda and dal for herself. After she joined Library course, it had become harder to manage time. She compromised herself after lot of contemplation about her food habit. She had told herself that she had already entered into an extra-marital relationship which was a grave sin and consuming non-vegetarian was not sinner than the extra-marital affair. After joining in the library course, her attitude towards clothing had also been changed. After a great deal of insistence from her husband, she started wearing western fabrics.

One major shift that happened in the life of Nina was her decision to live independently away from Ananda. Nina was academically educated in India but she found her identity of womanhood in Canada. Especially when she was introduced to the feminist group, she started knowing more about feminism and feminine. She had read good number of books on feminism and she participated in co-counselling sessions along with her peers. During the interactions she developed herself into more self-respected woman. Until she met the group, she was satisfied with the part-time job she was doing but Beth, her friend had motivated her to do a regular academic course in Canada so that it would open wide range of opportunities to earn better and to live with self-esteem. Her transformation was evident when Ananda was dissatisfied with her for spending more money on clothes. At that point of time she decided that she would not use her husband's money to buy anything. She made a strong resolution for herself that she would buy expensive clothes only after she started earning money. "I will never spend any of his money, never. I will earn on my own, buy ten cashmere sweaters on my own" (275). When she found that she was just living under the shadow of her husband, her identity as woman was completely hijacked by her husband and when her opinions, wishes and wants were never recognized by her husband, she decided to desert her husband and live alone. She was confident that she could live substantial life with the job that she would secure with the help of her education. A woman giving divorce to

her husband in India was surely a strange affair in 1980s. But the culture of Canada, her realization of womanhood and the confidence of Nina to live independently had influenced her to take a bold step to break her marriage and live independently.

In the novel *Desirable Daughters* Tara was married to a wealthy businessman Bish Chatterjee. By the time Tara was married to Bish, he had already established a company in Silicon Valley and earning in millions. During the course of time Tara did not find liveliness in her marriage. So she divorced her multi-millionaire husband and started living independently. While she was working as a teacher, she was introduced to Andy, a Buddhist. She started live-in relationship with Andy. She neither repented for divorcing her husband nor for being in a live-in relationship with Andy. "Love is having fun with someone, more fun with that person than with anyone else, over a longer haul" (27). Such kind of relationships were strange in the Indian culture but the immigrant Indians adopt the native culture that was approved by the society.

The cultural diaspora of India has been richly spread by the Indian immigrants abroad. While assimilating in the new culture, it is quite interesting and appreciable factor that the Indians did not blindly adopted the new culture. They have embraced some of the aspects of the society for their well-being in the new place and at the same time

they have not forgotten their rich Indian tradition in which they were born and brought up. Especially, Nina, Ananda and Tara are the perfect cultural representatives of India. They have adopted the new culture when the circumstances demanded but they are not carried away in the tide of new culture. It is clearly evident in the fact that they are in complete consciousness about the values and tradition they are brought up in Indian culture.

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