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Review / Научный обзор

## Diasporic consciousness in contemporary Indian women's fiction in English: at a glance

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**Abstract.** Diasporic literature is a pivotal term in literature that includes the literary works of the authors who are the outsiders for their native country but their work is deeply rooted in homeland by reflecting native culture, background, displacement and so on. Indian women's literary work is at the forefront of diasporic literature. The advent of Indian women novelists on the literary horizon is an important development in the Indian English literature. These women writers have also contributed to other genres, such as drama, poetry and short stories, not only in English but also in regional languages like Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Kannada and so on. Some modern women writers flourish their writing in the form of fables as a literary genre in an impressive way to focus on the specific themes. In last two decades, Indian women's writing in English is blossomed, both published in India and abroad. The present paper is the review of diasporic consciousness in select works of contemporary Indian women novelists. It focuses on the attempt to highlight the quest for identity of those women who played a crucial role in defining themselves through their literary work in diasporic background.

**Keywords:** diaspora, Indian English fiction, Indian women novelist, quest for identity

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## Диаспорное сознание в современной индийской женской прозе на английском языке: краткий обзор

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**Аннотация.** Диаспорная литература – ключевой термин в литературе, включающий в себя литературные произведения авторов, которые являются аутсайдерами для своей родной страны, но их творчество глубоко укоренено на родине, отражая местную культуру.

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туру, происхождение, перемещение и т. д. Литературное творчество индийских женщин находится в авангарде литературы диаспоры. Появление индийских писательниц на литературном горизонте является важным событием в индийско-английской литературе. Эти женщины-писатели также внесли вклад в другие жанры, такие как драма, поэзия и короткие рассказы, не только на английском, но и на региональных языках: хинди, маратхи, бенгальский, панджаби, тамильский, каннада и др. Некоторые современные женщины-писательницы процветают, впечатляющим образом используя в своем творчестве форму басен, чтобы сосредоточиться на конкретных темах. Последние два десятилетия характеризуются расцветом творчества индийских женщин, писавших на английском языке и публиковавшихся как в Индии, так и за рубежом. Настоящая работа представляет собой обзор диаспорного сознания в избранных произведениях современных индийских писательниц. Предпринимается попытка осветить поиск идентичности тех женщин, которые сыграли решающую роль в самоопределении через свою литературную работу в диаспоре.

**Ключевые слова:** диаспора, индийско-английская художественная литература, индийские писательницы, поиски идентичности

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## Diaspora

The root of the word ‘diaspora’ is in Greek verb ‘diaspiro’ and in ancient Greece the term ‘diaspora’ stands for ‘scattering.’<sup>1</sup> Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defined ‘diaspora’ as the movement of the Jewish people away from their home country to live in other countries for work or survival purpose or the migration of people to another country.<sup>2</sup> According to Docker (2001), diaspora is connectedness between histories of native land and the migrated land of from different time spans and places including past and future also (p. vii). At the broad-spectrum diaspora is a process where people migrate from their ‘homeland’ (Bhabha, 1994) to other places for various reasons such as employment, business, education, trade and so on and Indian diaspora is recognized as one of ‘the most modern’ and ‘the largest’ diasporas across the world (Sahoo, 2014). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2007, p. 61) explained term ‘diaspora’ as “the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their home land into new regions.” Diaspora authors are having significant contribution in each and every genre of Indian English Literature. Majority of diasporic authors tried to reflect autobiographical elements in their work and the major outcome of the writings of these authors is the quest for identity.

<sup>1</sup> Diaspora. Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diaspora>

<sup>2</sup> Hornby, A.S. (1995). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English* (J. Crowther, Ed.) (p. 347). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### **Diasporic consciousness**

According to Cambridge Dictionary,<sup>3</sup> consciousness is the state of understanding and realizing something. It is a multidimensional phenomenon having sense of selfhood. Diasporic consciousness is the awareness of being scattered due to migration. Uma Parameswaran (1998) has highlighted main themes of diasporic literature as alienation in new land, dislocation from home country, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest for identity. According to her: “The first is nostalgia for the homeland, left behind mingled with fear in strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy in adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-culture issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and started participating in the larger world of politics and national issues.”

In literary world diasporic writers are the writers migrated and settled in other countries especially in the postcolonial era. Indian diasporic writing is flourished in modern times. The work of these diasporic writers flourished because of variety in themes such as nostalgia, cultural differences, dislocation, status quo in other ‘country’ and so on.

### **Diasporic consciousness in contemporary Indian women’s fiction**

Indian women novelists have played a vital role in exploring diasporic consciousness in their writing. It is as if these writers have rediscovered themselves when they are out of India and their writing focused on displacement and socio-cultural bond with their homeland in order to cope with the ongoing process of multi-ethnic acculturation. “Social identity is formed in society where we live and it is based on specific cultural genres and domains” (Arthur, 2010). Dasan (2007, p. 77) reflected on multiculturalism and transnationalism in the view of Indian diasporic writing as: “The current Indian English novel vis-s-vis diasporic Indian writing has started embracing multiculturalism and pluralism in the midst of cross-fertilization of ideas and new forms of cultural exchanges of humanity’s drift towards transnational cultural and social identity, thanks to globalization.”

While talking about contemporary Indian women novelists’ contribution in Indian English fiction, M.K. Naik (1985, p. 199) refers to these novelists as “new’ novelists who share most of the preoccupations of their male counterparts, and try to make their own room in terms of certain pressing needs and concerns.” A.S. Dasan (2006, p. 73) explained the challenges depicted in the new brand of Indian English fiction as: “Homogeneous perspectives and essential views on rootedness in Indianness or on culture, quest for identity, colonialism and post-colonialism are challenged in the context of celebration of hybridity, migration and diaspora.”

Indian English literature, particularly women’s fiction has flourished from last two decades. The 1980s’ and the following decades have witnessed great women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander, Jhumpa Lahiri, and others. These writers have written

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<sup>3</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

in multiple forms of genres such as fiction, novels, poetry, drama. However, contemporary Indian women writers broadened their area, they incorporate out of box thinking in their work and instead of depicting only the darker side of women like victimization, marginalization, alienation, otherhood, woman as an object, etc., they tried to present development, journey, self-awareness, queer theory, globalization, motivational and entrepreneurial mindset and technology driven practices and so on. Some of these have feathers in their cap as they are awardees of prestigious awards such as Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai have received Booker Prize Award, while Jhumpa Lahiri was awarded by Pulitzer Prize for literature and this is a great matter of pride for Indians. Many of the diasporic women novelists write, to use Rushdie's phrase, about their "imaginary homelands" through the lens of nostalgia (Gore, 2013). The diasporic writers are, "exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible one, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind... my India, a version and no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (Rushdie, 1991).

Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Uma Permeswaran, Sunetra Gupta, Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bhargavi Mandava, Ameena Meer, Meera Syal, Preethi Nair, Anjana Appachana, Meena Alexander, Bharati Krichner, Sujata Massey, Kavita Daswani, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Suniti Namjoshi are the distinguished Indian diasporic women writers. Some of them moved to the USA, UK, England and Canada for further education or migrated across with their families and later on became the novelists. Fictional works of these Indian women novelists explored their own theory, style, privileging multiple visions through creative and critical thinking and own perspective. For example, Suniti Namajoshi in her works mirrored Asian, alien, feminist and lesbian perspective (Vijayasree, 2001). Regarding their work, Archana Kumari aptly explained that it is based on themes such as isolation and displacement due to migration, nostalgia, search for self, controversies and complexities both in personal and social life (2014). The diasporic women writers' work leads to self-discovery. William Safran (1991, 83–84) explained six features of diaspora such as dispersal from homeland to other regions, collective memories of homeland, alienation in 'other' or 'foreign' region, nostalgia for homeland, strong desire to restore home country and self-consciousness with the homeland. The renowned Indian women diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appachana, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sunetra Gupta, and many more explore cultural consciousness, identity crisis in multiculturalism in such a way that one experiences live diaspora feelings. Their work became popular worldwide and created picture in front of the readers about their nation, its culture, tradition and society. Makarand Paranjape (2003, p. 239) in his essay *Writing Across Boundaries* explained diasporic consciousness as the result of "the whole importance of all diaspora and its potential for

creating a new kind of culture arises out of such a crossing of boundaries. The diaspora then must involve a cross-cultural or cross civilizational passage. It is only such a crossing that results in the unique consciousness of the diasporic.”

Gender identity is the milestone among diasporic Indian women writers' work. They explored problems one can encounter in the 'new' land, how to tackle with these issues boldly and confidently, adaptability of new culture, society, lifestyle through different characters. In line with this the term 'identity' is: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable or what ought to be done or what I endorse or oppose. It is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (Taylor, 1992).

The Indian diaspora is recognized worldwide and role of Indian women writers is vital in this recognition. These diasporic Indian women writers have broadened areas of their writing by incorporating current technology driven themes also. The following are Indian women writers who created new space for Indian diasporic literature. These are the blooming flowers in the world of Indian women diaspora whose essence reached at every corner of the world.

Attia Hosain (1913–1998) was one of the founder Indian diasporic writer, contemporary of Kamal Markandaya, domiciled in London. Her writing mainly comprises national level struggles related to politics specially after independence of India which resulted in partition of India. *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) is about the change took place both in political and personal life of Laila. The novel has four parts. She explored Indian politics through cultural pluralism in the form of Hindu-Muslim unity of India by portraying the character of Laila.

Kamala Purnaiya Taylor or Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004), published ten novels including *Nectar in Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1956), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), *Pleasure City* (1982). She is renowned diasporic writer and depicted post-colonial themes such as encounter in between the east and the west culture in her novels. She labelled herself as an expatriate and wrote aggressively on issues of modern Indian issues such as marriage, social discrimination and rural community. Her *Nectar in Sieve* is the bestseller novel in which she represented struggle of Nathan, Rukmini and their children as the representatives of rural India who suffered due to industrialization. Her contribution through this novel is the success story of Indian English literature. Her novel *Some Inner Fury* has an autobiographical touch in which she explored love story of a woman with English man. *A Silence of Desire* highlighted on social classes in the form of middle-class Indian marriage issues. The theme of clash between faith and science is presented through Sarojini and Dandekar, a middle-class couple (Agrawal, 2014). Kamala Markandaya projected social hierarchy as a common theme in majority of her works.

Anita Desai (1937) is the versatile personality in Indian English literary world. She was shortlisted thrice for the prestigious Booker Prize and was honored by Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her famous work *Fire on the Moun-*

tain. She has also received the British Guardian Prize for *The Village by the Sea*. She was the recipient of the Padma Bhushan award in 2014. Anita Desai in her works represented diasporic-feminine sensibility and psychology of women through female characters and their inner strive for an identity. Her *Baumgartner's Bombay*, *Fasting, Feasting*, *The Zigzag Way*, and *Bye, Bye Blackbird* reveal the characteristics of diaspora fiction. In *Bye, Bye Blackbird* (1971) Anita Desai nostalgically depicted alienation, expatriation, identity crisis, and the character's perspective towards their 'homeland' (India) and her 'new' country (England). *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) reveals all the characteristics of diaspora fiction. She deals with the character of a migrant Austrian Jew in India. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) takes up theme of post-colonial fiction: the encounter with the West. It is reflecting cultural diversity representing specifically in between India and America. *The Zigzag Way* (2004) depicts the double perspective of India and its background as well as the expatriates. Her latest creation *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011) is the trilogy depicting challenges of modern Indian culture.

Bharati Mukherjee (1940–2017) is the distinguished author of Indian diaspora who created space for herself in worldwide literary world by representing Indian English literature. She depicted Indian women characters, their struggles, quest for identity, and at the end 'free bird' in new nation. Her work is the mirror of experiences of South Asian immigrants who settled in America, she presented her personal experiences as an immigrant in America through different characters. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) is about an illegal immigrant Jasmine, a young Indian village girl. It reveals expatriation and immigration on alien land by Indian girl. Her *Leave it to Me* (1997) is a purely American and about men-women relations. *The Holder of the World* (1997) is about the search of a diamond called the 'Emperor's Tear.' She has represented cultural diversity by portraying Indian woman in her *Desirable Daughters* (2002). It is the manifesto of diaspora which deals with an identity of Asian- American. It also concentrates on the problems of migration, obsession of marriage, and lust for wealth, fame, fashion and life style addictions. She has covered many moods of immigrants like nostalgia, frustration, isolation, alienation etc. Her writing is the depiction of "phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates" (Alam, 1996).

One more feather in the cap of Indian diaspora is the contribution of Suniti Namjoshi (1945), living in UK. It has been observed that Indian diasporic writers retells the Indian mythology in their own work and Suniti Namjoshi is one of the names who used Panchtantra stories in her famous collection of fables *Feminist Fables* (1981) in which she depicted victimization, gender discrimination, isolation, quest for identity, commodification of woman by patriarchal society through the lens of feminist. Her *Conversations of Cow* (1985) is a novella portraying lesbian identity in the form of lesbian feminism as the main theme through the characters Suniti and Bhadravati. In *Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), Suniti tried to present matriarchal society by challenging the patriarchal society. In her *Goja: An Autobiographical Myth* (2000) she explored diasporic consciousness through own childhood experiences. In *Goja*, she revealed her lesbian identity in front of two

women, her grandmother and Goja, her maid. Her works reflected on quest for identity from Indian perspective, feminist perspective, and lesbian perspective through western experiences. Her famous works include *Building Babel* (1986), *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988), *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables* (1989), *Saint Suniti and the Dragon* (1993), *Sycorax: New Fables and Poems* (2006). Her Aditi stories are the collections of children literature series dealing with different themes. Suniti Namjoshi is one of the leading Indian diasporic authors who exposed queer theory in her works by declaring her own identity.

Indian-American author Meena Alexander (1951–2018), a leading poetess, a novelist and a prose writer is known for her *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997). She is a blooming star on the horizon of Indian diaspora. She creatively shared her own diasporic experiences, her journey of migration from India to Sudan, to USA. Like her life journey, her poems also have multiple layers evoking multiple themes. Her poems are intensely self-conscious and with minimum of words, she evokes layers of meaning (Nagabhushanam, 2019). The issues of exile, identity crisis, search for roots, migration, emptiness, frustration, east-west culture and discrimination are discussed from a much broader perspective. Her autobiographical memoir, *Fault Lines* (2003) is the representation of immigrant experiences due to relocations and expatriation and quest for stability. She is “a woman poet, a woman poet of colour, a South Indian woman poet who makes up lines in English, a postcolonial language...” (Alexander, 2003).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s (1956) *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) deals with trans-culturalism. Her *Sister of My Heart* (1999) depicts the cultural diversity in between the East and the West. Anjana Appachana (1957), settled in the USA, is awarded by prestigious O’Henry Festival Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. She provides a realistic account of the lives of middle-class women and their painful negotiations between personal aspirations and social expectations. Her first novel *Listening Now* (1997) is a woman’s love story with its agonized secrets. The work revolves around the experiences of an ordinary Indian woman in patriarchy.

Anita Rau Badami’s (1961) debut novel *Tamarind Mem* (1996) is a brilliant depiction of two generations of women set in India and Canada. She explores the cultural clash between two cultures. Her *The Hero’s Walk* (2001) is about loss, disappointment and frustration. It is also about the transmutations of a millennia old culture. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) is set in Canada. She has presented three women characters who became the victim of political turmoil caused due to India-Pakistan partition in 1947 and later on in the year 1985 when the demand for an independent Sikh State called Khalistan came into violent existence.

Sunetra Gupta (1965) is one of the leading authors representing Indian diaspora. *Memories of Rain* (1992), *The Glassblower’s Breath* (1993), *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1995), *A Sin of Colour* (1999) and *So Good in Black* (2008) are the creations of Sunetra Gupta in the form of novels. Her *The Glassblower’s Breath* presents the problems of alienation, dislocation, hybridity and the loss of the sense of belonging. It is about the young intellectual Indian woman who faces these problems in Calcutta, New York and London. *A Sin of Colour* is a family

saga which shuttles in between Britain and India. It is an exploration of family duty, love, race and Bengali culture. Her *So Good in Black* deals with the problems of migration and self-definition exploring quest for identity as main theme.

More recently one of the Indian women writers living abroad is Jhumpa Lahiri (1967). She is the recipient of Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the first collection of short stories. She was also awarded by PEN/Hemingway Award and the New Yorker magazine's debut of the year for *Interpreter of Maladies*. It has nine stories revolving around the South Asian immigrants dealing with Indo-American encounters. The collection portrayed communication and marriage as main themes showcasing cultural differences between Indians and Americans. Lahiri depicts the characteristic experiences of Indians living in an alien land. Lahiri has won The Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2008 for *Unaccustomed Earth* (2003). It is also collection of short stories based on human behavior and emotions in relationships. In *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri explores the cultural conflict experienced by the immigrants representing homeland and adopted land. She explores the ideas of isolation and identity crisis and throws light on the borrowed existence of immigrants in a foreign land and most poignantly, the tangled ties between generations that open whole worlds of emotion (Gouse, 2017). Her fiction has an autobiographical touch and she showcased own experiences by portraying characters' struggles, quest for identity, anxiety, alienation, immigrant psychology and behavioral patterns. These inner experiences are aptly explained as, "Hence the sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and at the same time being an 'outsider' to it creates an inner tension in her characters" (Kadam, 2008).

Kiran Desai (1971), a diasporic novelist differs from her mother Anita Desai, in her artistic exploration. Desai's debut novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) is set in a small dusty town of Shahkot in North India and revolves around the family of Sampath Chawla. The novel presents the problematic survival in an adopted language through eccentric characters. Her masterpiece and the Booker Prize winner, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) depicted the sense of belonging and quest for identity as main themes. In this novel, she elucidated the clash of culture, religion, race and gender, the consequences of colonialism and nationalism.

### Conclusion

This comprehensive survey of Indian women novelists in English makes us aware of the fact that they have retained their permanent stamp in the arena of English fiction. Diasporic philosophy itself is an artistic movement among the writers of present generation. Indian Diasporic writings provide the readers variety of themes rooted on different areas such as cultural dimensions, traditions, self, identity. The most reoccurring element in each of these Indian diasporic books is the quest for identity in migrated nation. It evinces that Indian women novelist in English have successfully utilized the language and made it a vehicle of their own cultural experiences and expressions. As a result, many Indian women novelists in English have won prestigious national and international literary awards and proved their identity in whole world.



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