



Multiculturalism in Language Use: Reading Select English Texts of English Diasporic Literature

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The term multiculturalism and Diaspora are often referred together as the very idea of multiculturalism is complimentary to the literature of Diaspora. Marilyn Edelstein in her essay “Multiculturalism: Past, Present and Future”, discusses about the term “Multiculturalism”. A Multicultural society is “a society consisting a number of cultural group” and “distinctive of the cultural groups within such society are maintained or supported”, whereas Culture is the “ensemble of beliefs and practices” (Greenblat 225) or “the forms through which people make sense of their lives” (Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg). Diaspora literature, on the other hand, is primarily concerned about the crisis “in between two value worlds and two different cultures” (Sarangi). It celebrates rootlessness through the nostalgic longing for the “homeland” and at the same time adapts the culture of the new land. Therefore cultural references of different worlds are central thematic aspect of literature of Diaspora. The range of diasporic writers in India is vast - Raja Rao, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Stephen Gill, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth and many others have enlightened the history of Indian diasporic writings. Multiculturalism, in diasporic literature, not only presents itself through its plots or thematic issues but also through the usage of language – vocabulary, choice of words, dialogues, images, reference of myths, cultural symbols, even through the very idea of communication and translations or in some way presenting language as a theme. This paper will discuss few short stories (Jhumpa Lahiri’s “The Interpreter of Maladies”, “The Blessed House” and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “Clothes”) and novels (Amitava Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* to highlight different layers of language usage in conveying the idea of Multiculturalism.

In the story “Interpreter of Maladies”, Jhumpa Lahiri employs the idea of multiculturalism vis a vis the idea of language and communication. Apart from the use of Indian words or myths, the concept of multiculturalism is projected also by “interpretation”. In the essay “Cultural Translation of

Subject in Transit”, Tzuhsiu Beryl Chiu has reflected her view on the gap between cultures that prohibits the protagonists to understand each other through language. “The text also addresses the role of translator and the tension between translatability and untranslatability, which may shed some light on the task of cultural translator”. Mrs. Das, an American Indian finds solace when she comes to learn that the driver Mr. Kapasi works for a doctor as an interpreter between the patients and the doctor, in Gujrat. He helps the doctor to diagnosis when the patients are unable to convey their problems through language. So language, interpretation and communications- these are very central to the story from the beginning. When Mrs. Das comes to know about the work of Mr. Kapasi, she feels somehow impressed and says “that’s romantic”, she explains that it is romantic because the doctor has to depend on him to understand the maladies of patients. “In a way, more dependent on you than doctor...well for example, you could tell the doctor that the pain felt like a burning, not straw. The patient would never know what you had told the doctor, and the doctor would not that you had told the wrong things. It’s a big responsibility”. He interprets her compliments as a weakness and initiates a romantic imagination within himself about Mrs. Das, “while she interprets his role as an interpreter of maladies symbolically and sees him as someone who can cure her ineffable pain. Therefore, they are both anxious for an opportunity to be alone, but for different reasons” (Chiu). When Mrs. Das feels victimized by her husband’s friend, Mr. Kapasi is disappointed and asks “Is it really pain you feel or is it guilt?” This question is actually projecting the juxtaposed worldviews of two persons from two different cultural setups. This pain clearly presents the inexpressibility of the psychic lacuna of Mrs. Das. He is unable to get that “her maladies are of a culturally hybrid generation to which Mr. Kapasi can no longer relate. Because he has lived in India his whole life, he probably has been inscribed with local views of race, women, family, interpreting, romance, guilt and consciousness” (Chiu). The interpreter, Mr. Kapasi, who is willing to work as an interpreter between two nations, India and America by exchanging views with Mrs. Das, fails to get the situation of Mrs. Das and this indicates the distance between cultural standpoints in the multicultural world that cannot be surpassed with language.

There are many references regarding culture of India, conveyed to the family of Mr. Das who belongs to the American Christian world now. For example, in the very initial part of the story, when the kids of Mr. and Mrs. Das are excited to see the monkeys on open street, Mr. Kapasi mentions those as “hanuman” which is a Hindi word, related to the Hindu ancient

epic Ramayana. Mr Kapasi brings reference of the myth of “Lord Sun”, “Nagamaithun” and so on to Mrs. Das, as he does to other European and American tourists. Therefore the story reflects the different cultural worlds and the laps between them through language.

In the next story “The Blessed House”, Lahiri has raised the issue of faith and religion through portrayal of the newly formed life of a married couple. The themes of cultural difference and adaptation of the story are captured through the dialogues between the protagonists. While Sanjeev is very conservative about his Hindu identity, Twinkle is much more enthusiastic about accepting the new religion of West: Christianity. Sanjeev is in-between two cultures and his helplessness is presented through his dialogues. “We are not Christian” ... Twinkle says “We are not Christians, we are good little Hindu”. This Hindu identity is running through the mind of Twinkle as well so she is talking about the Hindu idea of reincarnation: “Do you think the previous owners were born again?” It clearly indicates at the Hindu idea of reincarnation after death. Language plays important role because the entire cultural conflict, centered around religion, is presented through dialogues. Like “this is our house and this statue is a part of or property” or “you can’t throw away this statue, I won’t let you” and “For now I am going to put it in the garage, then tomorrow morning I am going on my way to work I am going to take it to the damp” : these opposite dialogues present the different attitudes of two family members and most importantly two different family values: one is traditionally Indian Hindu, the other is adaptive cosmopolitan and more than that it is the dialogue between the nostalgic past and newly changed present cultural parameter under similar context of Diaspora. A sense of cultural loss of Hindu identity is disturbing Sanjeev and on the other hand Twinkle is trying to settle with her acceptance of changed socio- cultural scenario. And all these duality are presenting the hybridization of culture through a diasporic dilemma in the characters in a subconscious level. Even in the end of the story Sanjeev can guess that the discovery of new statue will give Twinkle a new gossip on adventure to present before the Christian neighbors and therefore through the help of language and rhetorical art she will get a new chance to present her cross-cultural or rather multicultural liberalism before others. The references of “Christ”, “Noah’s story”, “St Francis”, and the “Mother Mary” apart from that of Hinduism, are creating the context of multiculturalism in this diasporic text.

In the Story “Clothes” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, we will see how the language conveys cultural representations via the vivid image formation.

Through the images of clothes, with different cultural reference, she is presenting not only the shift of life's journey of the lead female character, but also setting up multicultural parameters. The story is taken from the collection of short stories named "Arranged Marriage" presenting Suhmita/ Mita's life journey from maidenhood to marriage and afterwards, from a village of India to America. In the very beginning the scattered images of a village life in Bengal is given by mentioning "Charak Mela", or Bengali Fairytale that describes a prince from his "kingdom beyond the seven seas". The first image of clothes comes when the family of the bride is going to visit the house of the groom. Mita wanted to wear blue sari but the mother wanted that to be tainted with red as it is considered lucky for a married woman or a bride. It reveals Indian cultural and superstitious practices among Hindus and the cultural reference is manifested only by the provocation of the images through words. The protagonist says "Finally Father found one to satisfy us both, midnight blue with a red thin border as the same I am wearing on my forehead". The words simply evoke the image of traditional Indian Hindu bride going to get married. So the very first image of "clothes" is indicating a cultural reference of India. The second image of clothes comes in America when she wears jeans and t-shirt, "The t-shirt in Sunrise orange, the color I decide of joy of my new life, American life". The image, with its expressions and choice of words, becomes the representation of the "Great American Dream". Her change of "clothes" represents her shift from the old cultural values of India to the new one of America. In the mean while her husband Somesh Sen gifts her with a top and a skirt of brown and cream combination. The dress is praised not only by Mita for its beauty, but also because it gives her an imagination, a dream, a confidence to do something in America. It enhances her self-dignity and strengthens her to get a hold on the social status in America and therefore this image of "clothes" becomes a symbolic representation of American culture as well as her adaptability in the new cultural alternative. In the final scene, after her husband's death, the clothes appear to be altogether different. "I hold in my hands the plain white sari I am supposed to wear... white, widow's color, color of ending." It indicates the Hindu tradition of wearing white saris for widows, therefore the image emerged by these words becomes cultural indicator. The writer is subtly commenting on the widowhood, through phrases like "white sari," "cutting of hair", "bangle breaking rituals" which are loaded with cultural history and contrasts the cultural parameters of two countries, and Mita is somehow in-between the two bipolar cultural atmospheres . The suffering of her dual position is provided with the re-emergence of the image on the mirror "... her eyes apprehensively get steady, She wears a Blouse and

skirt of the color of almonds” in the final line.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is highly commendable for the multicultural and diasporic contents in search of lost history through the eyes of diasporic characters. In the novel, the cross cultural barriers and communication among different persons from the different parts of the world are projected through the theme of language and translation. The novel is centered around two characters Kanai Dutta, an NGO member settled in Delhi, and Piyali Roy, an Indian origin America based scientist and both of them have come to visit the land of Sundarban for different purposes. Kanai Dutta works as an interpreter for Piyali Roy to help her to communicate with the local illiterate Fakir. In “In Our Translated World: Trans-cultural Communication in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*”, Christopher Rollason has analyzed the importance of language and its different multilayered uses along with translation. He shows how language is used as a theme to present its capability in the field of human communication and its limits to cross the cultural barriers. Kanai Dutta becomes a kind of contact zone between the two worlds of Fakir and Piyali, the local and the global. The use of English as the medium of the text is sometimes two folded. When Kanai is translating the extract from the journal on Sundarban, written by his uncle Nirmal, Amitav Ghosh is presenting that in English while the readers are supposed to imagine that in Bengali. On the other hand a lot of Bengali words are included in the text. This is to reach out to a larger target audience for the text and to present the vast cultural diversity within the matrix of the medium itself. Kanai is a multilingual person who becomes a mediator between Piya and Fakir. This collaborative existence of these three persons is presenting a kind of multicultural and multilingual world in front of the readers where they are trying to interpret each other through language. But there comes a time when Kanai is unable to translate the song sung by Fakir. Kanai says “You asked what Fakir was singing, and I said I could not translate, it was too difficult,... for those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country” (354). It emphasizes the cultural differences that cannot be crossed by translation, as for the same reason Diasporic writers often present the local words. And for this same reason some times Piya becomes able to communicate with Fakir even without Kanai Dutta. Kanai Dutta therefore “stands as conscious of both its (translation’s) limitations and necessities” (Rollason). The reference of myths also present the co-existence of different cultures: the reference of Bon Bibi through oral narratives is an accurate example of that. It relates itself with both the Hindu and Muslim communities as the myth of Bon Bibi relates its origin with Arab and the deity gets worshipped in Hindu

way. Born in a Sufi family, Bonobibi and Shah Jongoli got chosen for a divine mission of making the Mangrove area fit for human habitation and thus Bon Bibi became the deity of the island. Rollason comments “The tide people are prior Hindu, and have ended up in India rather than Bangladesh, but it does not prevent them taking on substantial elements from the adjacent world of Islam”. By mentioning “the glory of Bon Bibi”, Ghosh is reemphasizing the cultural coexistence in the land of tides as well as mentioning the importance of the oral form of language presenting myths.

In another novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, language plays variable roles. Rushdie seems to present the history of the hero Saleem, as well as that of the nation named India. Harish Trivedi in his essay “Salman and Funtoosh : Magic Bilingualism in *Midnight's Children*” shows that the use of Indian words were found in writings of previous writers from R.K.Narayan to Muluk Raj Anand but the way Rushdie has incorporated the local words, is absolutely different from that of the previous writers. Unlike Indian English, that often includes glossary to explain words, his use of words is threefold in a way because in his English text he is incorporating the Hindoosthani words and translating them again into English. For example Trivedi gives the example of the word “Funtoosh” that mean “finished”, which has been used four times and every time he is using the word, he is translating it. For Trivedi , Rushdie is using language in a way as he “ seems to at his privileged insider best as bilingual native informant and authority , what two English words “finished” or washed up cannot adequately communicate, is summed up in “Funtoosh”...which Rushdie knows and English or western reader does not”. Similarly he uses “muhallas or neighborhood”, “dugdugee drum”, “I don’t need to tell that aagh means fire”, “Allah–tobah heaven forefend”, He is incorporating expressions like “baap re baap”, “faluda” directly , or literally translating some Indian phrases like “ piece of moon” , “donkey from somewhere”. He also creates some hybrid words like “mother ji”, “ladies and ladahs” and making some deliberate mistakes too like “maharajin” instead of using maharani. The reference of Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, or Hindu mythology in the text by a Muslim Indo-British author, of course provides the vast multicultural context within the text just like India itself. For example, he refers to mythical Shiva -Parvati union resulting the birth of lord Ganesha through the union of Parvati the witch and Saleem’s other half Shiva and the birth of Adam with flapping ears. The three different names of three characters: Saleem, Shiva, and Adam, who are interconnected, is multi-religious so as multicultural. Rushdie randomly borrows cultural reference from

Bollywood music and actors. From the song “Mera juta hai Japani” to the name of the actress Bano Devi -all refer back to the cultural diversity of the nation itself.

Thus with the help of his position from a third world cosmopolitan, multinational and multicultural identity, he is projecting the cultural hybridity in its fullest form. He is breaking the parameters of so called Indian English writings, pushing the boundaries of English language, and recreating the language itself to break its status quo. As Harish Trivedi has rightly commented “The Rushdie effect has critically contributed to the neo colonized entertainment of English in India not so much as an international as a multinational language.” The text therefore highlights the multiculturalism provided by linguistic approach in different levels.

The writers of Indian Diaspora have different issues to deal with which are the case or results of migration from one nation or culture to another, be it the situation of women or partition of a nation or forgotten local history or the very crisis of identity for the in-between situation. In any literary text the theme needs to have parity with the narrative technique and the logistic mode. So far this paper is especially being concerned with multiculturalism, I would like to refer to Homi K. Bhaba regarding cultural hybridity where he denies the presumed idea of culture as some uncontaminated entity. For him culture is not something static that can be conceptualized through mainstream discourses like history, nationalism, representation etc. Culture itself is a fluid entity that incorporates, exchanges and reforms itself. Literature is a space where culture writes its own historiography. As literature of Diaspora is engaged with political and cultural shifts, conflicts, exchanges, and acceptances, the issue of multiculturalism is very obvious in those texts in terms of both theme and language.

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