

READING INDIAN DIASPORA CHILDREN: REPRESENTATION IN DIVERSE LITERATURE

Anindita Shome

PhD Candidate, Centre for Study of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad, India

Email: anindita1089@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

“As a window into shifting value systems, children’s literature from Indian and the Indian diaspora is useful for its capacity to provide insight into contemporary Indian social situations, both national and transnational.” – Superle, Michelle.

Literature of any diaspora is replete with nostalgic tales being narrated through the eyes of children. Children, who have experienced migration first-hand, and who as grownups, recount the experience; or the second-generation children, who did not go through the migration themselves, but are living with the after-effects of it. Children of the diaspora have always been a subject of study for the diaspora writers, scholars, and the policy-makers. Children of the Indian Diaspora are no exception to this trend. Their sense of belonging and identity, their idea of an imagined home, their assimilation with the host nations, their hybrid self, their negotiations, etc., have formed the basis of a bulk of Indian Diasporic Literature. Although Indian diaspora children and youth have found their voices and representation through the writings of Indian and non-Indian Diasporic writers, yet Children’s literature and Young Adult Literature pertaining to Indian Diaspora is a relatively lesser-known variety. This paper aims at critically studying the distinct crop of variant Indian Diasporic writing- children’s literature, children’s magazines of the Indian diaspora, etc. Selected works of significant contributors to Indian Diaspora Children’s writings- Kashmira Sheth, Mitali Perkins and Uma Krishnaswami- will be analysed for the identities and experiences of Indian diaspora children in host land/s and homeland.

Key Words: Children’s Fiction, Diverse Fiction, Homeland, Hostland, Indian Diaspora, Representations

Introduction

Diaspora is defined as the movement, migration, and settlement of people of one nation-state to another due to the push and pull factors. These factors could be due to political unrest, in search of opportunities and livelihoods, lack of work opportunities at home, reunion with family members living abroad, and so on. James Clifford writes:

“An unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretive terms now jostle and converse in an effort to characterize the contact zones of nations, cultures, and regions: terms such as border, travel, creolization, transculturation, hybridity, and diaspora (as well as the looser diasporic (303).”

The postcolonial world has been moulded by the movements and settlements of people from one corner of the world to the other. This intermingling has led to several homogenous cultures turn multicultural, a “melting pot”, and so on. There have been several kinds of migrations and settlements of people in host nations- skilled migrants, refugees, exiled, climate refugees, war refugees, undocumented migrants, and so on. The migratory patterns have been numerous in

the contemporary era due to the newer technologies of travel and communications. Borders have been turning rigid as more and more people intend to crisscross borders and paths. Immigrants and diasporics occupy a space where cultures and customs of two or more nation-states merge. These diasporic spaces tend to dilute the strict binaries that exist in the narratives of a nation. The differences between the “insiders” and “outsiders” of a nation tend to get redefined/transformed/reinforced in diasporic spaces according to different socio-cultural and political contexts.

The intergenerational experiences and changes in a diaspora are signs of the equations of the diasporic community with the hostland and the homeland. How the younger generations of a diaspora connect with the nation-state of their birth, and to their ancestral land, imply how the nation-states and its political narratives treat the immigrant and diasporic individuals and communities. The accomplishments of the diaspora children could also be considered as signs of how well the diasporic community has been included in the adopted nation’s narratives. The immigrant and diasporic children also act as bridges between the host land and the homeland. The present and future equations between the host nation and the homeland could, in many ways, be altered and improved by the now diaspora children.

Selected Fictional Texts for the Paper

This paper has considered the following Indian diaspora children’s texts by Indian diasporic writers. Uma Krishnaswami’s text, *Bringing Asha Home* (2006) is a beautifully illustrated storybook, which familiarises the readers with the festival of Rakhi, a celebration of the brother and sister bond in India. Her *Naming Maya* (2004) is about a twelve-year-old Indian diaspora young girl, named Maya, who visits India with her mother. Uma Krishnaswami is an Indian diaspora writer, who is well-known for her stories and novels on Indian diaspora children. Mitali Perkins is an Indian diaspora author, who has lived a transnational life, and writes on Indian diaspora children’s experiences. Her novel, *Monsoon Summer* (2004) is about the experience of Jasmine Gardner, when she visits the city of Pune, India with her family. Kashmira Sheth is an Indian diaspora writer, who had moved to the USA from India during her childhood. Her novel, *Blue Jasmine* (2004), narrates the journey of a young girl, Seema Trivedi, who leaves for the USA from India.

Methodology of the Paper

This paper has studied and analysed the Indian diasporic children’s fictional narratives through a transnational lens. Content analysis of the selected narratives have been employed to thematically understand the texts, and also understand the representations of the Indian diaspora children through these narratives. Major themes- that have been found common in all the selected fictional narratives- are highlighted in the paper. This paper has attempted to situate the discussions on the immigrant and diaspora children in a space where two or more nation-states, cultures, traditions, and histories merge.

The Migrant and the Diaspora Child

Maren Bak And Kerstin Von Brömssen writes:

“In the discourse on the migrant child or the ethnic minority child, the focus has not been on competences. The incompetent child has often emerged as a representation of ethnic minority children, especially in school settings (114).”

Educational and recreational spaces are important places where diaspora children form networks and bond with other minority and majority children. Diverse representations in

educational and fictional texts offer a sense of belonging to children belonging to ethnic minorities. It also opens up spaces of understanding and cooperation amongst all the children of different backgrounds.

The Indian diaspora children and youth are important connections between the homeland and the host nation. The Indian government has specific programmes and initiatives for Indian diaspora children and youth from all across the globe. There are *Scholarship Programmes for Diaspora Children (SPDC)*, *Know India Program* (for youth of Indian-origin, 18-30-year-olds), and so on, by the Ministry of External Affairs¹, India. These programmes manifest the significance of the Indian diaspora to the homeland, especially the Indian diaspora children and youth, as they would be the ones who would keep the homeland-diaspora ties alive in the future. Diaspora children and youth hold the key to the future relations and connections in the homeland-diaspora-hostland space. The Indian diaspora children and youth are understood as the individuals who would keep the homeland ties alive in the host nations in the future. These connections with the homeland also provide a strong sense of identity to the Indian diaspora children and youth, which help them have their own unique ethnic and cultural forms and belonging.

Finding and Connecting with Homeland Roots in the Diaspora

The diaspora children, who are second- or third-generation diasporics, are familiarised with their ethnic roots through the stories of the homeland from their parents and grandparents; from the notions about their homeland from the natives of the adopted land; through representations of the homeland in various forms of media; and so on. The practices and customs of the ancestral/homeland, the celebration of festivals, help the diasporic children connect to their roots and find their distinct identities in a multicultural society. In the Indian diasporic fictional narratives, there are abundant references to India and the practices of the homeland. Although the Indian diaspora children grow up as citizens of the host nation, yet, most of the times, they do not discard the ties with the homeland, as these are the identities and memories that have been passed on to them through their families.

Children's Fiction and Representations: Alternate Spaces of Narratives

Xavier Mínguez asserts that:

“While children’s Literature undeniably includes an educational component, this may not be necessarily moralistic or didactic. However, even those works that clearly refuse this model and try to promote equal communication between receivers (Roald Dahl’s books, for instance) cannot deny their intrinsic condition as children books; they are part of the literary education of children (27-28).”

In a multicultural society, and an increasingly global world, it is important to have diverse representations of ethnic minorities along with the majority, so that children and adolescents are acquainted with each other’s cultures, and grow sensitive and tolerant toward each other. Children’s fiction of the immigrants and diaspora also help immigrant and diasporic children to relate to their lives through the fictional characters and understand that they are not alone in their everyday efforts to assimilate and integrate.

¹ <https://www.mea.gov.in/spdc.htm>

Children's and Young Adult Fiction are part of the alternate narratives of representations of a culture or community. These are, usually, not included as part of the mainstream narratives, but these fictional narratives are useful in tracing the contours of the future generations of a community or culture or nation. These alternate narratives provide alternate histories, alternate windows into an event or incident, and so on. Children's literature provides fresh and important perspectives on contemporary societal issues that must not be considered trivial.

The Parental/Ancestral Land and the Adopted Homeland

Diasporic children inherit homeland customs and traditions through their parents and grandparents, through community practices, through popular media, and through digital media and online mediums. As the protagonist in *Bringing Asha Home* tells the readers: "I tell Michael about Rakhi. In India, where my dad was born, sisters tie shiny bracelets on the wrists of their brothers..." (Uma Krishnaswami 7). The young protagonist also informs us that he used the domestic space of his home and juggles between the two nation-states he is a part of, through the use of his imagination: "I pretend that India is in the living room and America is upstairs" (Ibid 15).

In Krishnaswami's *Naming Maya*, the protagonist's mother makes it clear, on their visit to the homeland, that they have already built a life for themselves in the host nation, and they intend to return to their new home.

"It isn't my place to give you advice," says Kamala Mami, "but what would be so wrong with coming back here? To live. What have you got in America now?" "Mami, we've been through all that. My life is there now. There's no question of coming back." (Uma Krishnaswami, 7)

Reconstruction of a "new home" does not imply the denial of the home that has been left behind. The diasporic and transnational spaces offer the opportunities to belong to two or more nation-states, two or more places one considers as "home", and belong to those fluid spaces in the strict and stringent narratives of borders and nations.

The Indian diaspora children's fiction have rich narratives on the ways in which the diaspora child gets used to and embraces the clothing of the homeland/ancestral land. As in *Naming Maya*,

"I wait, tugging at my cotton salwar kameez. Its long tunic feels dressy over loose cuffed pants. I've grumbled about this, but Mom has paid me no mind. "This is India" is all she'll say when I complain. "You just can't go around in shorts, and that's that." (Uma Krishnaswami, 11)

There are a varied number of ways in which the homeland makes its presence felt in the life of diasporic children, either in the form of journeys to the homeland, or in the continuation of homeland memories in their families. *Monsoon Summers*'s Jasmine Carol Gardner was half-Indian from her mother being Indian and adopted by an American couple:

"At least I'll finally get some use out of those Hindi language classes. And see India for the first time. I am half Indian, you know." Mom's side of the family had this thing about "preserving our Indian heritage"... We ordered take-out curry all the time. My grandparents took us to see every Indian-made film that came to the Bay Area...since I was ten years old, I'd conjugated verbs with an

ancient Hindi tutor... Now that my brother, Eric, had turned ten, he'd started after-school Hindi lessons, too. He was always bugging me to help him remember which nouns were masculine, which ones were feminine." (Perkins 15-16)

Indian traditions are considered to be rich with values and these are, thus, passed on to the Indian diasporic children. These traditions are also ways in which the diasporic children stay rooted and do not lose grip of their ethnic identities and histories. The Indian diasporic children's fictional narratives reiterate these values and connections with the Indian roots as awareness and acknowledgement of one's ethnic heritages would provide the Indian diaspora children with renewed confidence in the diaspora.

The Indian diaspora children's fiction represent the Indian diaspora children's experiences in the diaspora. When Jasmine or Jazz visited Mumbai, the description is as follows:

"The plane drew closer to the big city of Mumbai, and the open countryside disappeared. As we descended, I noticed the smoke and dust covering the city. I saw acres and acres of shacks made of cardboard and tin just before we landed (34)."

In several instances, the descriptions of the homeland, and the people of the homeland, could continue the stereotypes prevalent, but, many a times, these stereotypes are lived realities of how the first encounters of the homeland might be for a diasporic child, as in *Monsoon Summer*:

"Everywhere I looked, dark faces stared at us. Dark eyes watched our every move. Dark hands pulled at our sleeves, palms up, waiting to be filled. Wet heat wrapped around us. Mom was mopping her forehead with her handkerchief. My jeans felt thick and heavy, and trickles of sweat dripped down the back of my knees. Dad's shirt was drenched by the time the four of us crawled into a taxi (35-36)."

When Jasmine and her brother, Eric visited Mumbai in India, they were surprised to find that uniforms had to be worn at schools. Their experiences are how they looked at the ways of life in India through the eyes of children: "The auto-rickshaw rattled furiously over a series of potholes, and Eric raised his hands in the air just like he did on roller-coaster rides (46)."

Indian diasporic children's fiction, visiting the ancestral land, tend to be full of images of traffic on the bustling roads- with honking and the noise, the aroma of Indian food, the colourful clothing along with the western clothes of young Indians, and so on. Diasporic children occupy this unique space of belonging to two nations and cultures, and, sometimes, they realise, they are considered as "outsiders" in the adopted land, as well as gazed at, when they visit their homeland/ ancestral land. At other times, they are the ones who gaze at what they are still unfamiliar with in both the cultures of the homeland and the host land. In *Naming Maya* by Uma Krishnaswami, the Indian diaspora child visits India from New Jersey with her mother:

"The day after Mom and I arrive in India from New Jersey, I watch the number 45B bus screech down the road. It clatters to a halt outside my grandfather's old house that we have come here to sell. Passengers tumble out. Another few feet and the bus will have gone crashing into the tea-and-soda stall that sits at a tilt against the tree on the corner. A narrow escape. The traffic hurries on (6)."

The Narratives of Food

Food carries memories of the homeland, it also represents how the diasporic community has integrated the adopted land's habits with the homeland's habits. Children of the diaspora are at ease with the food and food habits of the nation they are citizens of, but also, are fond of the aromas and smell of the homeland food. Indian diaspora children in the USA grow up with watching their parents relish tea, as is done in India, and are used to their lattes and coffees with peers in public spaces. As a scene is narrated in *Naming Maya*:

“We eat while darkness descends outside. I am starving, which delights Mami greatly. She heaps steaming rice on our plates, and dribbles a few drops of ghee onto it. Then she spoons up generous servings of vegetables and spicy sour sambar, with crisp fried appalam on the side (18).”

In Kashmira Sheth's *Blue Jasmine*, the protagonist, Seema- who is a child of the fifth grade-moved to America from India with her family. When children migrate with their parents, they leave behind a support system comprising of school friends, cousins, grandparents, and so on:

“Raju was my cousin, and I wanted to tell him that everything would be fine—but how could I? Today was the last day of fifth grade, and after summer vacation when sixth grade started, he would be walking to school by himself. For the first time, I wouldn't be going with him. I would be in America (8).”

Migration to a new land is as much difficult for the elders as it is for a child, as all of them have to get accustomed to newer ways of life. Seema, the little protagonist, describes how it felt to leave cousins and people related to them and move to a new country:

“From that day on, the four of us, Pappa, Mommy, Mela, and I, broke off from our family the way a lump of ice breaks off from a whole snow cone. In some ways the lump is still the same as it was on the snow cone, but somehow, after it breaks off, it's different. It melts away too fast and it doesn't taste as good as the whole cone does (9).”

The diasporic child grows up without the larger family circle and relatives, an enriching support system of children and youth in India. Indian immigrant and diasporic children maintain these links, if they desire to, through online platforms now. The nurturing of the grandparents and uncles and aunts; the bittersweet bickering and afternoon games with cousins; get-togethers of relatives for special occasions, are left behind in the homeland. Seema, in *Blue Jasmine*, is shown to have expressed a desire to stay back in India but, at the same time, wanted to move to the USA with her parents for the new life awaiting them there:

“Home was like the smell of ripe kesar mangoes that made me happy even before I took a bite. If I went to America, everything would be unfamiliar. But another part of me knew that if I stayed behind...A slice of me wanted to go to America, to fly away in a big plane and start at a new school and make new friend (12).”

Indian diasporic children's fiction also uses the rich metaphors of mango trees, a variety of homeland species of flowers, and the seasonal fruits to represent what India means to the Indian diaspora children- a land where childhoods are nurtured with a closeness to nature.

These are the memories that help the Indian diaspora children to remember the homeland in the diaspora.

The Transnational Travels

Indian diaspora, especially the second- and third-generations of the diaspora, have been becoming increasingly transnational, with easier ways of travelling and communications in the past few decades. Indian diaspora children and youth are exposed to travels that include transit in new countries, before reaching their destinations. Several Indian diaspora children also experience living in two or more foreign lands, as their parents change places due to their work, and, thus, the children are familiarised with different cultures and traditions.

“In the plane my mind tossed back and forth like a Ping-Pong ball between India and America. Not long ago, Iowa City had seemed like a place in a story. Soon, I was going to be in that story, and I wondered how long it would take before my home town, Vishanagar, would begin to feel like a fairy tale (28).”

The long journeys are an integral part of every migrant's life. These journeys that cross borders define individuals as migrants, immigrants, displaced, and so on. When the Indian diaspora children undertake these journeys, they become part of the larger narrative of the Indian diasporic community, that have been shaped by more than two centuries of travels and journeys to far off corners of the world. The postcolonial and transnational world have been defined by the innumerable ways in which the world comes closer with people travelling and moving about, shifting the socio-cultural and political shapes of several nation-states.

Belonging in the Host Nation

In Kashmira Sheth's *Blue Jasmine* narrates the first encounters of an immigrant or diaspora child with a new nation-state, and Seema, the young protagonist, looks at the host nation through innocent eyes:

“America was everything I'd heard it would be, and yet nothing could have prepared me for America. What struck me the most was that everything was big. Not only were the roads four lanes wide, but the gas stations had eight pumps...Stores were so large that they were never crowded. I remembered Vishanagar's bazaar, where people brushed against my shoulder as they walked past me. Here, there was space and no people to fill it. Where were they all? (28).”

Indian immigrant or diaspora children, similar to other immigrant children, get accustomed to the host nation, through their interactions at school and other spaces, where they meet children from other immigrant or native communities. After their initial days of understanding the differences and similarities between the homeland and the host land, a newly arrived immigrant child quickly assimilates with the host land, making the adopted land into a new home. In *Blue Jasmine*, the protagonist narrates how her new experiences in the supermarket; hearing more of English and less of Gujarati (her mother tongue); and getting accustomed to seeing lesser crowds. Gradually, the diasporic children learn how to negotiate their dual/multi identities in public spaces and in domestic spaces.

Conclusion

Changes and transformation are inherent parts of a diasporic life, and the diaspora children learn to embrace changes in every phase of their lives. As they are brought up as an ethnic

minority, they learn the skills to accommodate two or more cultures in their everyday lives. The Indian diasporic children's narratives focus on the factor of change and acceptance again and again in the stories. The novels or stories start with rigid ideas of the homeland and, towards the conclusion of the works, the diasporic children have embraced their homeland as well as host nation identities. The Indian diasporic children realise that they do not have to decide on one homogenous identity, and can carry two or more allegiances and identities together. The importance and significance of the Indian diasporic children's fiction in the developing and growing years of the Indian diasporic children cannot be exaggerated. Fictional representations provide spaces of empathy and understanding where identities tend to clash and fight over the existent power structures in societies. These alternate and diverse representations of Indian diasporic children could topple the hegemonies that continue to exist in host nation's educational spaces, that leave a deep impact on the immigrant children. The narratives of inclusion could be further fostered with the help of children's fiction, especially diasporic children's fiction, in an increasingly globalized world.

References

1. Bak, Maren & von Brömssen, Kerstin. (2010). "Interrogating Childhood and Diaspora Through the Voices of Children in Sweden." *Childhood-a Global Journal of Child Research - CHILDHOOD*. 17. 113-128. 10.1177/0907568209352938.
2. Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 302-338. Retrieved October 19, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/656365>.
3. Mínguez López, Xavier. (2014). *Exploring Education and Children's Literature*.
4. Perkins, M. (2004). *Monsoon summer*. New York: Delacorte Press.
5. Sheth, Kashmira. (2004). *Blue jasmine*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children.
6. Krishnaswami, Uma. (2004). *Naming Maya*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR), 2004. ISBN 1429921609, 9781429921602
7. Krishnaswami, Uma. (2006). *Bringing Asha Home* Illustrated by Jamel Akib. Lee & Low Books. ISBN 1584302593, 9781584302599
8. Superle, Michelle. *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Literature: Representations of Nation, Culture, and the New Indian Girl*. Volume 78 of *Children's Literature and Culture*. Routledge, 2011. ISBN 1136720871, 9781136720871.