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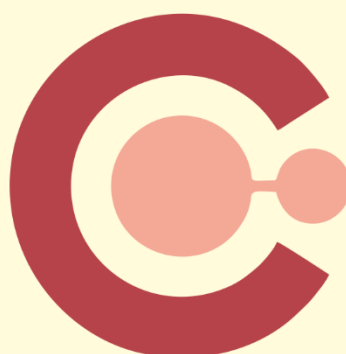
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Gendered Perspectives in Indian Diasporic Literature: Unearthing Feminist Narratives of Identity and Belonging

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on analysing the gendered experiences of the Indian diaspora as portrayed in literature. It aims to demonstrate how gender, as one of the multilayered components of identity such as race, class, or religion, influences the individual and collective experiences of diaspora, particularly through the lens of literature depicting the lives of Indian diasporic subjects. The guiding research question is: how do literary texts represent the Indian diasporic experience through the lens of gender, and what do these portrayals reveal about the processes of identifying, cultural negotiation, and social adaptation? It is critical to address this issue because research tends to focus on gender and diaspora separately without examining the interplay and impact of gender on the diasporic experience. Viljoen (2020) (Leslie, D) has noted the relevance of relational theory in data governance, which can also be used to analyse the gender relations within diaspora. Also, Walker (2009) (Leslie, D) pointed out the necessity of contextualization from the perspective of global social policy which, in this case, accentuates the need to analyse the contexts within which gendered experiences of diaspora operate.

Keywords: *Indian diaspora; gender; identity; belonging; narratives*

FULL PAPER

Introduction

The Indian diaspora is a dynamic and diverse community that consists of people of Indian origin and immigrants spread out globally, weaving together a net of socio-economic and cultural ties (Ibrahim, H). This diaspora is not a homogeneous unit; it contains a plethora of languages, religions, castes, and regional identities which depict the complex society of India itself. To fully comprehend the journeys of the diasporic Indian population, one has to employ a strategy that understands the differences within the group and the diverse settings in which deported identities are performed and negotiated. In relation to identity construction, gender especially stands out as an important marker to scrutinize in the context of diaspora which reveals how processes of migration, displacement, and resettlement transform men and women differently in relation to identity, roles, relationships, and belonging (Ibrahim, H). This research is unique because it integrates literary criticism with gender studies while concerning the Indian diaspora in order to fill gaps in the scholarship to provide new avenues on identity construction, culture and sociological metamorphosis within this heterogeneous community (Santo, W).

Background: Indian Diaspora and Gender Studies

The Indian diaspora is a complex community existing around the world and is a product of several migration waves that occurred over centuries (Botangen, K). It consists of people from different backgrounds and requires a sophisticated understanding of their gendered experiences. These movements were a result of a complex set of rest issues including economic opportunities, political instability, and colonial policies. These ranges started with the indentured labour system during the colonial period when people were sent to different parts of the British Empire such as the Caribbean, Fiji, and Mauritius to work on plantations (Botangen, K). Then professionals and businessmen started migrating to UK, USA, Canada for better opportunities (Botangen, K). In recent years, political and social turmoil in regions surrounding India has also led to the growth in refugee movements which adds to the diversity within the diaspora. This diverse diaspora calls for sophisticated ways to address the political, social and economical structural violence within their gendered experiences.

Gender studies provide important angles of analysis in relation to identity, power, and belonging when studying diasporic contexts. There are some theories which support applying gender as a primary analytical category, mainly because of the most critical concepts of the intersectionality theory which highlights how different socio-cultural aspects such as race, class, caste, and religion impact an individual's constitution. Transnational feminism has shown how women, including those of the diaspora, negotiate and transform gender relations to subvert western-centric views and therefore are not solely passive subjects of. Postcolonial gender theory focuses on the lasting impact of colonial rule on contemporary gender issues and relations in

diaspora communities (Gonzalez Garcia, G). These perspectives help to move beyond the simplistic and rigid understanding of gender relations to appreciate the complexity and heterogeneity in the Indian diaspora. Using the aforementioned theories of feminism helps to develop diaspora studies by filling the gaps and bringing the omitted issues to the forefront of focus.

Development of Indian Diaspora

The Indian diaspora's history stems from various motivations and diverse events. One of the formative aspects of the 19th and early 20th centuries was indentured labour, which included Indian workers being sent to various colonies to meet the labour needs, especially within farming. This process facilitated the creation of Indian societies in places such as the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. Later on, skilled migrants started to seek options in developed countries like the UK, US and Canada. In addition, movement of people as refugees due to political strife and social unrest in some neighbouring nations has further added to the diversification and expansion of the Indian diaspora. Indentured Indians, of Indian Sikhs, and Native Indians had simplistic views on the Indian culture and had conflicted notions towards politics.

Evolution of Gender Studies in Diaspora

Gender studies continues to be a potent framework to analyse the complex patterns of life within a diasporic community. One of the key components of its intersectionality is how gender, as a category, interacts with other identity markers like race, class, and caste, and what impact it has on individual reality. This is particularly important in the context of Indian diaspora where access to resources and social as well as cultural mobility are deeply impacted by these identities. Postcolonial feminism critiques the unilateral imposition of colonial legacies that distort gender and power relations within diasporic societies, and in so doing, it seeks to demolish ethnocentric feminism (Gonzalez Garcia, G). It observes how diasporic people relate to their countries of origin and new places and how the interplay affects gender identities and behaviours in both locales. Together, these concepts allow for a deeper comprehension of the complexities of gender roles and relations in a diasporic context instead of oversimplifying them and, instead, illustrating how people from those communities cultivate self-determination and ingenuity.

Family Dynamics and the Indian Diaspora

The scholarship on gender and the Indian diaspora in particular literature is rich but somewhat dated, as the diasporic lens has become a crucial focus of contemporary discussions in sociology. Cultural negotiation, especially for women, who suffer from both sides—heritage culture and the new home—has been a persistent issue (Santo, W). Scholars have studied how women's voices are articulated through the marginalization of culture in diasporic literature (Dutta, A). The impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on the gender and ethnic relationships within the Indian diaspora has also attracted attention (Leslie, D).

Gender and the Indian diaspora is analysed with a combination of postcolonial, feminist, and diaspora studies. The postcolonial approach takes into consideration the power relations of the diasporic experience as it looks at the impact of colonialism on cultures and societies' globalization and contemporary gender relations (Jo, F). Patriarchal patterns of domestic violence and arranged marriages are critiqued by feminist scholars who analyse how these practices are challenged and sustained in diasporic spaces (Santo, W). The study of diasporas focuses on identities that transcend geographical borders and the blend of cultures that accompanies migration, which illustrates the complexity and flexibility of gender in these identities (Dutta, A). Still, some scholars criticize these approaches for paying little attention to more specific experiences of people in particular diasporic communities.

While existing research is extensive, there remain gaps that need to be filled. Most of the studies concentrate on the narratives of the first and second generations. Interest in the later generations and their evolving connections, or lack thereof, to their Indian roots is lacking. Also, the study of diasporic subjects along the lines of intersectionality, specifically how gender interacts with caste, class, religion, and even sexuality and works for or against them, needs to be broad based and tackled more exhaustively. Moreover, the role of digital technologies on the formation of diasporic identities and the emergence of transnational activism among the Indians abroad are equally important and need to be addressed.

Structural Components of the Study

Some of the major components that concerned scholars focused on were: negotiations of identity, cultural hybridity, and relations within the gender power paradigm. Most of the research focuses on the more complex issues of how women of Indian descent deal with the competing expectations of Indian culture and the culture of the host country (Dutta, A). The result is often cultural hybridity, a blending process where elements from the two cultures are intermingled to form new identities. There is a body of literature that approaches the issues of power, and the relations of domination and subordination, as well as gender inequality in relation to the diasporas, from a postcolonial and feminist perspective. Other works in this area consider the impact of displacement and the search for self through the lens of psychoanalytic theory.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the Indian diaspora's literary experiences through a gendered lens, I will be adopting a multi-layered theoretical framework. It will be guided by postcolonial theory, diaspora studies, intersectionality, and feminist theory (specifically transnational feminism). These lenses are vital for understanding the complexities of power dynamics, identity politics, and representation within diasporas. Postcolonial theory assists in addressing colonialism's legacy concerning self-identities, cultural hybridity, and the power relations within the diaspora. From a transnational feminist perspective, the diaspora's women's experiences are analysed, paying special attention to the barriers and advantages they encounter beyond national borders. This

area of study examines how migration, displacement and identity conflict shape the experiences of people from diaspora communities. In addition, intersectionality addresses the intertwining of social divisions which include gender, caste, class, religion, thereby forming complex forms of discrimination or social marginalization. Employing these frameworks allows for the understanding of the impact of gender on the diasporic experiences while uncovering the processes through which gendered identities are transformed by those experiences.

Primary Theoretical Approaches

I will employ postcolonial theory as conceived by scholars like Gayatri Spivak, to focus on the colonial structures that impact the identity and experiences of the Indian diaspora. It enables us to study the ways colonial narrative remains self-perception and representation in literature. Feminist theory, particularly transnational feminism, critiques the Western-centric lens of the gender and upon women's experiences across cultures and contexts. It helps understand the engagements of gender with other socio-economic discriminations like caste and class within the Indian diaspora. Diaspora studies help confront the paradoxes and ambiguities of dislocation, belonging, and identity creation in a diasporic community. It helps understand how people construct relationships with their country of origin and their adopted country and their identities in those places.

Application to Literary Analysis

These theoretical frameworks will be employed to literary works to reveal the gendered aspects of diasporic experiences. Postcolonial theory will examine the impact of colonial legacies on the representation of Indian women in diaspora literature regarding representation, agency, and resistance. Feminist theory will focus on women's opportunities and challenges in the diaspora, including cultural adaptation, gender, and resource accessibility. Diaspora studies will offer perspectives on how characters relate to their homeland versus the adopted country, negotiating identity in the context of belonging, displacement, and cultural hybridity. Intersectionality will be applied to explore how gender as a social category interacts with caste/class and religion, shaping distinctly marginalized or empowered experiences within the Indian diaspora. This approach will enhance the understanding and appreciation of the broad and intricate nature of gendered experiences of diaspora in literature.

Methodology

To understand the gendered experiences of the Indian diaspora in specific literary texts, this study adopts a qualitative approach. The texts chosen include novels, short stories and poems. They are purposely chosen to reflect a multitude of perspectives within the diaspora based on geographical location like North America, Europe, and the Caribbean, as well as by generation, religion, and caste (Gonzalez Garcia, G). Preference is given to those texts that focus on gender, identity, displacement, and the politics of culture, especially in relation to Indian women and men's multifaceted experiences of living outside India.

The first form of analysis will be performed through close reading in addition to thematic and some aspects of discourse analysis. Close reading will enable an application of gendered experiences using feminist analytical approaches in relation to narrative voice, character construction, symbol imagery, and so forth (Awwad, G). Through thematic analysis, major aspects allied with gender negotiations are like dealing with traditions versus modernism, undergoing discrimination and racism, altering migration on family units, and building identities in the diaspora. Elements of discourse analysis will explore the intersection of language, power, and gender used in the texts to promote or subvert dominant ideologies.

This set of methods corresponds appropriately to the research question because they facilitate capturing the intricate and multilayered experiences of the Indian diaspora. Contextual qualitative methods have their strengths, but it is important to pause and reflect on the issue of generalizability. The conclusions drawn will only apply to the chosen texts within the scope of the Indian diaspora. Nonetheless, the understanding attained will aid in comprehending the issues of identity, gender, and the impact of politics and policies within the diaspora as well as the potent role of literature in revealing suppressed realities.

Analysing Gendered Experiences in Diaspora Literature

This portion investigates gendered experiences in a few selected literary works about the Indian diaspora, paying attention to how these experiences are influenced by the realities of migration, cultural adaptation, and identity development in a new place. The synthesis will focus on the different depictions of women and men, discussing how each is confronted with different challenges and opportunities, and how their gender, intertwined with other aspects of their identities, crafts distinct diasporic stories. Such understanding is vital in elucidating the complexity of the diaspora and understanding its representations, blending fabrications with reality.

Women's Identity

Literature focusing on Indian women in Diasporas usually show the daughters negotiating culture and identity which is commonly known as a hybrid identity. Women often face intra-generational clashes in which they are expected to cope with more progressive Western culture. This negotiation may take the form of the struggle to preserve the heritage whilst attempting to seek independence and self-expression (Khatri, H). The burden of traditional gender roles is another widely covered aspect where women contend with marriage, family, and employment expectations in a new society. Some narratives may show women as defying the boundary imposed by their families and the society at large by embracing education and becoming economically self-reliant (Ricard, J). These stories enhance understanding of how individuals in diaspora contexts transform traditional gender relations and arise as women redefine themselves.

Portrayal of Men

Indian diasporic literature considers men in the context of their masculinity, migration from their homeland, and cultural upkeep. Often, male figures experience a lack of control or power in a new setting, especially if their occupation or social standing is below what it was back in India. This is often exacerbated by feelings of alienation and identity crisis as they battle with traditional roles in the context of an entirely new life - that of a diasporic one. For men, the expectation of upholding cultural roots and catering for the family, especially, during dire economic conditions or societal prejudice, can be daunting. Some stories illustrate the plight of men who adapt to such hardships by reinventing masculine identities or reworking concepts of community, while others demonstrate the inability to cope with the remnants of a masculinity that is no longer useful.

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Gender Studies

Gender is not a self-sufficient category of experience. It interacts with other domains of identity, including class, caste, religion, or even sexuality in complex ways to determine the diasporic experience. For example, the caste background of a woman may affect her educational and career prospects in the diaspora, while a man's religious affiliations may shape his social engagements and feelings of alienation. Additionally, sexuality is particularly salient to the experiences of LGBTQ+ members of the Indian diaspora as they contend with cultural expectations about marriage and family. Understanding these intersections is important to grasp the pluralistic nature of diasporic existence and to contest simplistic views about gender and culture. In literature, addressing the complexities of intersectionality helps provide a more comprehensive portrayal of the Indian diaspora.

Literary works of Indian origin are an ocean of stories that depict the myriad problems and possibilities of people who live between cultures, especially when it comes to gender. These problems arise from the blend of Indian culture plus the new life in India, resulting in unique society- and internally imposed conflicts. Self-sufficiency, education, and even the journey of self-exploration can lead to empowered identity creation, but expanded opportunities are far from universally accessible and vary based on class, caste, religion, or even the region's political climate. These accounts often showcase the struggle of performing desi, sepia toned, culturally sanitized, narrations of home while grappling with the violence of gender norms in the west. Such works always focus on the desire to preserve

Gender Based Violence and Discrimination

Gender-based violence and discrimination seem to be one of the most pressing issues of concern with the Indian diasporic community. They include domestic violence, dowry abuse, and social ostracism (Awwad, G). Most of these problems stem from traditional forms of patriarchy which get transported and, in some cases, exacerbated in the diasporic setting. Literary depictions of such experiences often focus on absent articulations of women who are caught in cycles of violence and oppression, reflecting the kinds of issues that "The Augmented Voices" project aims

to tackle. There is typically a portrayal of the divided self of a woman who is caught between the demands of a family and the need for personal safety and autonomy. In one of the novels, there is a woman who is forced into an arranged marriage. In conforming to the gender roles prescribed to her socially and is racially discriminated against at the workplace. These stories testify to the extreme attempt of cultures (traditions) to subjugate people through violence and inequality, while also revealing the survivors' incredible strength.

Empowerment and Agency

Indian diasporic literature, regardless of its many contradictions, does portray some instances of empowerment and agency for both, women and men. More often, such stories reflect the people going against the patriarchy, transgressing imposed, and socially constructed gender roles, and reinventing diverse personas shaped by their multi-layered cultures. Storytelling tends to be a vehicle of power for people as well as a source of change because people share and recount their stories for the purpose of uniting with others to collectively work towards the necessary change. Women of diaspora, in particular, are often portrayed as change agents, going on to pursue education, careers, and even personal goals which was not possible back in their native country. The men also may undergo personal transformations where they become less accepting of masculinity and more of pro-feminist egoism. The literature illustrates how migration reshapes social norms, as well as the opportunity to free oneself from stringent social norms that govern, in most instances, dictate the standards and parameters for leading a difficult life.

Incorporating the community-based organizations, support systems, and Indian diaspora frameworks adds depth to the agency and empowerment discourse. These bodies frequently offer critical support and refuge that enables individuals to deal with acculturation and discriminatory challenges. They can also act as advocates for policy reforms that aim to increase recognition and acceptance of diasporic communities. Through literary imaginations, such organizations are portrayed in a way that demonstrates their contribution to the realization of identity and self-empowerment. In addition to that, the intertwining of gender with other parameters of identity such as caste and religion can further complicate the dynamics of agency and empowerment. To illustrate, women belonging to some marginalized castes are likely to encounter heightened barriers to education and employment opportunities, while LGBTQ+ individuals face discrimination and social ostracism in their communities. Literary works focusing on these aspects are important because they broaden the scope of how empowerment is understood, and the extent to which there is still inequity, exclusion, and difference.

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora literature demonstrates how both tradition and modernity impact identity construction in region. The examined narratives portray the specific challenges and successes that diasporic people try to achieve within the sphere of cultures and individual dreams. There are new possibilities for future

research, such as the changing influence of digital technology on issues of gender in these communities, and the possibility of how online spaces build identity and social relations . Understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ members of the Indian diaspora community is important in this regard as well, and helps broaden our understanding of the diasporic experience. This research has great importance in diaspora, gender, and literary studies by deepening understanding of the gender relations in the Indian diaspora, shedding light to the constant process of negotiating identity and belonging in the contemporary world.

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