

Between Worlds and Languages: Reading the “Splintered” Self

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Abstract: Diasporic writings in Hindi, specifically from the ‘new’ diaspora, have only recently been translated into English and are yet to be researched as widely as Indian diasporic writings in English. Susham Bedi deftly explores the dilemma of diasporic identity in her evocative short story titled “Splintered”. The protagonist Ananya seeks to reconnect with her Indian heritage and yet identifies herself as ‘American’. Originally written in Hindi, the short story examines the mundane realities and resilience of women wedged between two contrasting cultures, claims and codes of behaviour. Ananya’s attempts at grasping her own sense of self result in a psychological breakdown, signalling that the process of self-formation is unusually complex and strenuous. The story highlights the predicament of women in the diaspora, caught in circumstances of an unfamiliar culture and retaining the agency to carve out a self from what they perceive or recall from the culture of their homeland.

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Women in Diaspora, Hindi Diasporic Literature

Diasporic writers from India have attained global recognition and inspired considerable academic research and publications. It is, however, interesting to note that such popularity has largely centred around writers originally writing in English. Such fame and acclaim have eluded most diasporic writers writing in Indian languages. The proposition is that works in various Indian languages need to be published, read, and researched not merely as additives to the already existing category of Diasporic literature; these works possess the potential to reshape the contours of Diasporic literature and enrich our understanding of diasporic literature. This paper seeks to examine a short story titled "Splintered", written originally in Hindi by a diasporic woman writer, Susham Bedi. The story under consideration has been translated into English by Chandana Dutta and published in a collection of short stories by Sahitya Akademi, edited by Rekha Sethi and Hina Nandrajog. The endeavours of translators from Indian languages into English must be appreciated, without which works from diasporic writers in various Indian languages will not be able to reach a wider reading public and academicians.

The conceptual category of Diaspora in the twentieth century has been variously explained. Often overlapping with migration and migration studies, there is a sense of displacement (real or imagined) along with a yearning for the homeland. "As a social form, the term refers to individuals who live in different parts of the world but identify collectively with one another, with the countries or region from which they or their ancestors originated, and with the society in which they currently reside." (Agnew 5)

The hyphenated identity is at the core of all theoretical engagements in Diasporic literature. In Indian Diaspora Studies, a neat distinction is drawn between the 'old' and the 'new' diaspora. The old one features the transportation of indentured labourers in the Nineteenth Century to Fiji, Mauritius and Trinidad. The new one is of the Twentieth Century, in the period of late capitalism, to Europe, the United States of America and Australia. It is obvious to note that the old and the new diaspora are results of very different historical reasons and of different geographical regions. (Pande 3)

In Hindi literature, diaspora literature is called 'Pravasi Sahitya'. Interestingly, the old diaspora and texts from diasporic writers from Mauritius and Fiji have been more fecund and largely better known in Hindi. Susham Bedi's Hindi short stories are a rare exception, as she can be identified with the new Diaspora of the twentieth century located in the United States of America. She is a widely acclaimed Hindi short story and novel writer. A collection of her popular and widely anthologized short stories has been translated into English and published by Sahitya Akademi in 2024. She moved to Belgium in 1975 along with her husband and then to New York, United States of America in 1979. Here, she also held the post of a professor of Hindi language and literature at Columbia University. Her move to the USA marks her most prolific period of writing. Her own engagements with domestic duties and adjustments to a significantly different lifestyle are reflected in the short stories produced around this time. She reveals that each of her short stories is a result of some specific dilemma. "Sensitivity is the first requirement of any composition which affects the writer and in turn affects the reader." ("English translation of the quote"; Bedi 11, my trans.). This statement provides a valuable insight into the author's focus and impetus to write with an acute consciousness for both her characters and the reader. The mundane lives of women in a foreign land navigating household work with vastly diverse social, cultural, and moral values form the canvas of her works.

It is further highlighted that the Indian Diaspora, whether old or new, must not be erroneously considered a homogeneous category. It is as diverse as India because of region, religion and also caste. Women have always been a part of the diaspora. However, for a very long time, they were subsumed under the wider label of diaspora without adequate representation of their gendered subjectivities. With the advent of women diaspora writers, the canvas has been expanded to include their contribution. Women's voices, concerns and experiences are the central themes of multiple works, including those of Susham Bedi.

It is amply evident that identities are an ongoing process, not fixed or rigid. The theoretical underpinnings of identity highlight that identity is firmly dependent on identification as well. This is where Susham Bedi's own identification is significant. A prominent part of her work was published after she moved to the United States of America, yet she chose to identify herself under the rubric of "Hindi Literature" (if that can be considered a standard label); she expressed her caution about being 'identified' as a diasporic writer. She asked, "So, does that mean I am not an Indian?" (Sethi and Nandrajog xiii) The assumption that the label of a diasporic writer distances her from her first and preferred identification as an Indian/ Hindi writer reflects the dilemma of the writer too. The writer herself negotiates the language of her expression, in this case, the Indian language Hindi and the setting of her short stories, which is in the USA. Her concerns can also be read as a rejection of an artificial division between identities and their resulting literatures.

The short story "Splintered" is about a Hindi professor based in the USA and her encounters with an Indian origin student, Ananya. Ananya belongs to an affluent family, and her parents are doctors. Like most Indian parents, they expect her to study sciences. She, on the other hand, wishes to pursue research in Hindi literature. She expresses, after looking at Hindi books, "I feel at home." (9) Linking the mother tongue to a sense of feeling 'at home' is distinctly expressed in this short story. Hindi language does not only remain a language among many languages which can be learnt; for Ananya, it becomes a means to reconnect and retrieve her Indian identity. This also brings attention to the crucial concern of diasporic imagination and lived reality explored in vernacular languages rather than being largely dominated by English. As Himadri Lahiri highlights, diasporic individuals continue to hold on to a persistent nostalgia for the cultural practices they lived by and actively seek to integrate themselves into the prevailing culture of their newfound location. (4)

The name of the protagonist, Ananya, means unique or exclusive in Hindi, a deft marker of her position and predicament, straddling the two worlds beckoning to her simultaneously. The narrator observes that Ananya tries to reclaim her 'Indian' identity by wearing colourful clothes as opposed to black or grey clothes worn by American girls of her age. However, on being asked about her sense of belonging, she casually exclaimed, "I am American, of course, there is no doubt about that...but I do not like this country...I don't like the people here. Moreover, what I hate more is that my parents are like them...even my elder sister...Earlier, I was like them too, but now that I understand it, I find it very odd that we should try to become what we are not...imitate others...although our own culture is so rich." (Bedi 13) Her responses revolve around popular formulaic labels about India, a sense of social familiarity and warmth. The narrator also observes that her answers are not logical or reasonable, but are entirely removed from the actual realities of India and mere meanderings into an imagined idea of the homeland. Her first term for self-identification continues to be 'America'. Vijay Mishra underlines a very crucial characteristic of the diaspora, which is "its irreducible complexity at the level of lived social and political expressions" (2). It

is the exploration of these lived practices which form a central framework in the works of Susham Bedi.

During one of her classroom interactions, she argues with everyone that they all perceive Indian women as victims devoid of any rights over their bodies, choice of life partners, etc. According to her, all her aunts are highly educated and well placed in life; when the narrator (who is also a professor) gently points out that her immediate family is not the only measure to judge the predicament of all Indian women, Ananya treats it as an act of betrayal.

“In a nutshell, diasporas are specific types of transnational communities marked by migrations, by continuity and rupture, by hybridity and by dual or even a multiple belongingness which manifest through economic, political and social interaction with home and hostland simultaneously.” (Pande 2-3)

It is commonplace knowledge that in straddling two dissimilar settings, women are often expected to carry the cultural baggage of classic patriarchies of the homeland which are at odds with often more liberal conditions of the host land. The tussle between the conditioning received in the homeland comes into conflict with more progressive orientations of the host land. The hyphenated identity of the diasporic individual is further hyphenated through gender as well. Amba Pande correctly points out that researchers need to be wary of perceiving women in the Indian diaspora as merely secondary participants or victims of competing patriarchal and migrant conditions and expectations. A Feminist Standpoint would identify their agency and assertion in navigating two very diverse cultures and practices of living. (6-10) This paper seeks to place women not as passive receivers of the diasporic dilemma but also to examine the ways in which such navigations enable them to rethink their lives.

After this rather bizarre incident, Ananya misses several classes, and one day it is reported that she barged into the room of the Head of the department and physically attacked her. The Head calls her ‘schizophrenic’; we later get to know that Ananya is admitted to the hospital. Her mother’s priority is that she must complete her coursework for graduation, and not her urgent need to heal from her breakdown. The narrator exclaims, “How many persons can one person be...tied down by so many different voices...” (24)

“...the diasporic imaginary is a condition (and ‘imaginary’ is the key concept here) of an impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia.” (Mishra 9) Ananya exhibits her preference for her Indian roots and identity through her choice of learning Hindi, her clothing, her taste in music, and getting trained in kathak, etc. All markers of distinct features of distancing herself from the American identity, yet she selects to call herself “American”. It is this splintered, or hyphenated existence which is the central theme of this short story. The dilemma of the Indian girl whose academic choices are of her own, but she must excel in those choices is reminiscent of academic expectations of middle-class Indian value systems. Her parents have perhaps achieved the great American dream and are ardent followers of it. Ananya herself is ill at ease; her idea of India is a nostalgia-imbued, jingoistic blend of admiration and blatant denial of any flaws in the culture of her homeland. These ongoing tensions have resulted in the ‘splintering’ of the self. The ‘mourning’ for what she believes is her essential core, mores, and practices eventually turns into melancholy. It is important to observe her position in the USA, where she does not seek to fit in; rather, she wishes to stand out.

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