

“Into A Multitude of Butterfly Colours”: Poetic Representation of Indian Diaspora in Scotland in Bashabi Fraser’s *Ragas and Reels*

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Abstract:

Representation depicts the essence of people, objects and ideas in a more abstract way. There are thousand ways of looking at the world on our own depending on time, culture and context. Thus, representation, although cannot mirror the actual reality, offers a different construction of things and experience of our world. All representation carry personal and cultural meanings and have personal and social effect. Sometimes these meanings are produced through a composer’s conscious choice of language and structure and at other times there may be unconscious reproductions of attitudes, beliefs and values in the world. This leads to the potential for different readings of text as representations are questioned and reinterpreted. The study aims at critically looking into the text to consider the ways into which different dimension of the lives of Indian diaspora gets reflected or represented. Bashabi Fraser’s *Ragas and Reels* is a charming depiction of life among Indian diaspora in Scotland in visual and poetic references through poems and photographs and mirrors to the point of synchronicity in assimilation and co-relation in living between cultures and its different designations.

Keywords: Migration, Representation, Culture, Assimilation, Diaspora.

The Pretext:

A large scale migration from the Indian sub-continent during 19th and early 20th century took place with the crossing of the sea in a manner that is most unusual in any migration history. Migration to Scotland is the pretext of that story being closely linked to the British colonial enterprise. Pakistani-Scottish politician Bashir Maan who was the first Muslim in the UK to hold an elected position fled the then newly created country of Pakistan and reached Glasgow in 1953 at the age of 26. His book *The New Scots: The Story of Asians in Scotland* (1992) is one such attempt that records the early example of South-Asian presence in Scotland. The first Indian migration to Scotland, according to him, took place in the form of seamen who worked under the East India Company. These seamen were poorly paid and ill-treated in the ship by the officers and therefore, often they escape with the arrival of the ship near the Scottish port of Dundee, Glasgow or Edinburgh. As the Indian seamen were British subjects, they were having the right to stay in Scotland and thus some permanent settlement of Indians is evident in these cities. This pattern was gradually followed and a substantial number of Indians settled in Scotland, as a British missionary named Joseph Salter points this

out in the mid-19th century- “at this period about 250 Asiatics, like birds of passage from a foreign land, were constantly visiting the provincial towns...at sea-side” (220-221).

The next flow came prominently in the middle of twentieth century with educated and semi-skilled pattern of migrants from South-Asia. This group of Indian migrants are the servants who were migrated with the Scottish officials, as J. Jean Hecht mentions in his book *Continental and Colonial Servants in Eighteenth Century England* (1954) that: “high civil and military officials who had acquired wealth in service of the East Indian Company returns home to establish themselves in luxury and splendour, and carried native servants with them” (50). Near the end of British rule in India and the subsequent Partition of 1947, this large-scale migration realises much different social underpinnings than the earlier one. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s the mass migration to Scotland is shaped by many a ‘push factor’ - the upheaval and tension among ethno-religious communities due to the Partition at home and the ‘pull factor’ being the UK where the Indians can migrate without any restriction and have the economic opportunities. Between 1961 and 1962 itself, a large number of migrants migrated to England and Scotland before the 1962 Emigration Act puts an end to the unrestricted migrant in the United Kingdom, thus, eventually in Scotland. According to Maan, nearly 16000 migrants in the 1970 were settled at that time in Scotland. Subsequent chain migration also took place in the later years and the individual skilled labour migration in the late 20th century saw the direct and indirect influence of globalisation.

The Study: Fraser and Her Poetry

Bashabi Fraser’s poems represents this long journey of Indians in Scotland with the vivid description of people, land and the surrounding. Her ekphrastic collection of poetry *Ragas and Reels: Visual and Poetic Stories of Migration and Diaspora* is first published in 2012 under the sub-head “Visual and Poetic Stories of Migration and Diaspora”. Ekphrasis is exercising the rhetoric in which one medium of art, with the notable example of painting and sculpture, tries to relate to another medium by defining and describing its essence and form. The process, however, maximises the propensity of the both in trying to relate it more directly to the audience, through its illuminative liveliness. This anthology is slightly different with the notion of ekphrastic poem as it illustrates and finds the coercive aspects of diaspora and the living stock in Scotland for Indians in detailing with colour photograph, one that has been duly credited by Fraser to Hermann Rodrigues.

Both the photographer and the poet are Edinburg based Indian origin people who are living there for decades. Hermann hails from Jaipur while Fraser is from Kolkata. Bashabi is a poet, children’s writer, editor, translator and academic. As a transnational writer Bashabi’s work traverses continents as she writes about Scotland and India. She is the co-founder and Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies and holds the position of Chief Editor of the academic and creative e-journal, *Gitanjali and Beyond*. Her writings include *Rabindranath Tagore* (2019), a critical biography, *The Ramayana* (2019), both a stage play and a screen play, *Scottish Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Continuum of Ideas*, Co-Ed., (2017), *Confluence of Minds: The Rabindranath Tagore and Patrick Geddes Reader on Education and the Environment*, Co-Ed., (2017), *The Homing Bird* (2017), *Thali Katori: An Anthology of Scottish & South Asian Poetry*, Co-Ed., (2017), *Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers* (2015) and *Rabindranath Tagore’s Global Vision* (2015).

Ragas and Reels notes Bashabi's attempt to establish a voice in between both the culture as herself clarifies her aim particularly in writing between Scotland and India.

Moments and memories held layers in history which have not been a one-way journey and do not form just a recent phenomenon. The colonial skein weaves these stories together as place names as sub-continent find their way to villages, roads, houses, structures and even in an education system- that begun in the east and was brought by the traveling Scot from India to surprise the Scottish landscape with names that have their roots elsewhere. But here they have grown new roots and come to stay. While place names have travelled from east to west, a sense of belonging has prompted the claiming and naming of Scottish islands by migrants investing in their western homeland. As people have followed colonization and decolonization which created new waves of reality, trade has been replaced by the trauma of Partition when new borders created fresh displacements of millions of people. The millions did not come to Scotland, but some who found themselves on the 'wrong' side of India's new borders, discovered that they were without a nation overnight, which enforced journeys across the 'black waters' in search of a 'home', they found in Scotland. (Fraser, and Rodrigues 119-120)

Ragas and Reels: The Lines of Engagement

The collection in its rhythmic imagery portrays the intricate stories, some in the juxtaposition of cultural elements and the complementarity but mostly idealises the dual space in-between. Her poem 'Madras College, St Andrews' reflects on the early migration and settlements in Scotland as the poet writes: "Oceans beckoned / The intrepid traveller / Across the Atlantic". The gradual process of settlement that started once primarily advocates the process of naming which brings a congenial familiarity is further suggested through the naming of places - "Of history's ironic themes / Of naming and claiming / When Tamil Nadu / And Chennai / Can claim kinship / With what was/ Once a name / They donned / With fortitude" (11). This brings a trepid of hard reality getting softened and thus, revitalising a claim to instantiate the whole process. In the same vein another poem 'Patna in the West' echoes the long association of Indians with the socio-political life of Scotland. The poet historicises as she attempts to mingle 'golden crop' rice into the export business-

Nalanda, Patliputra, Patna-
History shifts through earth's layers
A procession of voyagers course through
River ports and a hoary hinterland,
Till the entrance of East India
Company entrepreneurs allows a love affair to grow
With the golden crop nurtured by the Ganga
Flowing through impatient plains. (15)

Patna is a village in East Ayrshire, built in 1802 by William Fullarton for his coal mining workers. Fullarton's father had served in Patna for the East India Company. The then Scottish

nabob bought rice from the plains of Gangetic Patna and packaged and sold globally. The poet reminiscences 'the golden crop' flows through the 'impatient plains' referring to the landscape of the hilly Scotland and thus mingling the distant lands with the fruition of grain. The poem 'Young Prithviraj' provides a detailed picture of migration from India during the Partition-

Young Prithviraj came out from the east
He road across continents and stopped in the west
He had cross five rivers
That watered his land
He had witnessed lands severed
When the Midnight clock turned-
The faith of millions, who then had to flee
To claim new homelands beyond the wide sea.

Within the metaphoric naming of Prithviraj (meaning who reigns the world) - one that associates with the legendary 12th century ruler gets referred in two contexts. Firstly, the poem portrays the journey of people across continents. The harmony of undivided India is further alluded as the Prithviraj 'cross five rivers' which suggests the five rivers in undivided Punjab- Beas, Jhelum, Chenab, Sutlej and Ravi. Prithviraj is here believed to witness the fateful partition and mass migration of people who were compelled to leave their home in search of new habitat. Bashabi then narrates the settlement of Indians in this new land through generations as she says-

Prithviraj came riding through several decades
Three generations of chivalry, leading wedding parade
Today Prithviraj the third, trots into Leith
His white steed is gilded, crowned king and wreathed
The prince lifted a salute to his golden turban
Before lifting his bride to a bagpipe band. (23)

The cross-cultural engagement of the migrants is suggested here as the third generation of Prithviraj is going for his wedding, riding across Leith, a port city in Edinburg. With all the ethnic customs of wedding the music of bagpipe shows the internalisation of the foreign culture, where bagpipe becomes a part of the wedding parade. Here the actual reference to the historical Prithviraj is made in winning his bride who was the daughter of his rival Raja Jaichand of Kanauj.

The next poem in this context needs mention is 'Vellore in Scotland' where Bashabi carefully observes the historic rise and fall of the Vijayanagar Empire in attaining to the city

of Vellore that is near old Madras. The one that is in Scotland seems a baptised version to the poets' vision

The bustling city near old Madras, baptises
A mansion, a cottage and a road in a nation
Where it can slumber and dream of its many
Splendoured bygone days. (103)

With peculiar typification of names a beings connects all the above poems where a name gets transformed in a different cultural scenario but carries a strange lineation that is unique for both of them.

Bashabi in 'A Weekend Wedding in Stornoway' refers to the process of migration as old as colonial enterprise that took hold of the India and the subsequent migration from Europe to India and vice versa. Scotland saw a huge influx of Indian origin people only in the time of Partition. Careful observation of a marriage photo in which the groom proceeds with his father and the relatives puts a point of reference for Bashabi

The father holds summer in his hand
The men wear Nehru's red rosebud
They came before Jinnah claimed their land
Which saw the exodus and the flood.
Here in the land of the wee free
They dominate the country
The groom, a doctor trained on the mainland
Walks garlanded to his wedding band. (21)

The reference here to the myth of Biblical flood could mean a devastated life for the people who left their home for the unknown territory in the Partition of 1947. The following stanza is quite an ironic rendering for those migrants that came also to this far west could resolutely say that they have dominated this society and its economy without having any link or cord of sort of familial bondage to this land.

The poem 'Sindbad at Stornoway' on the other hand suggests a similar theme of migration where in particular the migration of merchants is hinted at, as the speaker says:

Sindbad, the itinerant merchant
Was renewed through time
In the hawker who
Began his journeys
In the land of the Indus

And pushed his boat
 Across the kalapaani
 To the scattered Highland homes
 ...
 Sindbad the sailor
 Has set down his anchor
 At his journey's end
 Blending in with the islanders
 At Stornoway. (19)

This poem as Bashabi herself notes is written in honour of Buta Ahmed, “a door-to-door salesman in the 1930s” who later become an established businessman and “one of the biggest employers in the Isle of Lewis capital” (110). The process of internalising the culture of a new land is presented as well as the hardship of the journey towards creating new ‘home’ as Vijay Agnew, a professor in social-science, mentioned in his book that “memories play a role in the individual’s struggle to construct a social and personal identity in a world in which subjectivity is both fragmented and fractured” (7).

One more aspect of the Indo-Scottish life, the daily engagement of Indians with the Scottish in a very intimate way, is shown in the poem ‘Ashwin and his Scottish Granny’. The poem depicts a little boy Ashwin enjoying his evening with his adopted Granny and his Scottish friend while his parents are not with him. Fraser here portrays the journey of the boy’s parents “From the pink city / Of palaces to this one / Of brown stones” (Fraser, and Rodrigues 45). The poem ‘The Singer on a Scottish Slope’ presents a South-Asian singer who ‘finds a place under the sun’ in the Scottish land and her ‘echoing ragas’ travels across the Scotland.

Apart from the socio-cultural involvement of the people of Indian descent in Scotland, the economic and political presence of the migrants are also noted. In ‘Of Dreamboats and Surfers’ praises the endeavour of Enrique Miralles who was the leader of the team to design the Scottish Parliament. It also represents a group of IT professionals from Indian subcontinent who assisted him in the work. The next poem in this context needs mentioning is the poem ‘The Candidate’ the political contribution of South-Asians is mentioned. It commemorates the Mo Rizvi, the first South-Asian face in the political scene of Scotland. Though he did not win the election but his candidature provides a voice to the marginal migrant communities in Scotland, as the poet says:

Mo Rizvi, Mo Rizvi...
 One brown petal on a cold white bough
 One sharp image in a wide white space
 One lone voice whispering from the margins
 One man’s ballot speaking for his race.

In this game of numbers
His was not to win
But the subaltern had spoken
For an era to begin. (81)

These two poems reflect the active involvement of the migrants in the national interest.

The Assimilation Ideal:

This anthology not only presents a detailed description of history of Indian settlement in Scotland but also celebrates the assimilation of Indians with the Scottish cultural heritage. Park and Burgess in the book *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* mention that,

Assimilation is the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences... Individuals' ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to members of another ethnic group and individuals on both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other critical factors such as social class. (11)

The poem 'The Laird of Lesmahagow', a tribute to Baron Singh who settled in Scotland in 1987 with his Swiss wife, is a representation of adaption and integration into the host society. Fraser mentions:

And is this nationalistic mood
The migrant buys one island
Which he names after the bard
And himself becomes a Scottish laird
Where he sees his garden grow
In the bonnie toon of Lesmahagow. (Fraser, and Rodrigues 41)

The creation of new home as mentioned in the poem reflects the urge of the diasporas for home which is for them "a mythic place to desire ... in this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'" (Brah 188). Therefore, the process of assimilation where "over time the immigrant population eventually" merge "into the culture of the host nation, adopting the customs, behaviour, values, practices and national or collective identity of the host society in place of those from their country of origin" (Liu 64).

(The Perfect Smile: Boys in traditional Scottish Highland dress preparing for celebration)



Fig. 1: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-46291009>



Fig. 2: The Cover Image, Ragas and Reels: Visual and Poetic Stories of Migration and Diaspora / Hermann Rodrigues.

The proposition “Assimilation involved shedding the cultural markers” (Sugiman 49) is negated in the poems like ‘Two boys’, ‘The Doctor at Home’, ‘Black and White’ and ‘The Singer on a Scottish Slope’. In these poems a fine balance of the Indian cultural identity and Scottish essence is projected. The poem ‘The Doctor at Home’ is narration of the cross-cultural engagement where a Bengali lawyer migrated and settled down in the new nation. His daughter followed his path, as the speaker mentions:

His daughter followed
A tradition of Indian
Doctors in Scotland
Taking another
Route than others had taken
From her father’s land. (Fraser, and Rodrigues 39)

The poem ‘Eastern Grace’ describes two people, notably the husband and the wife in their transnational exuberance and into their belief and their lifestyle in the Scottish island. This follows their peculiar journey, the husband working as a Grecian entrepreneur and the owner of an antic shop while the wife moves but takes a strong traditional lineation. However, they do not appear a contradictory marriage rather their immersion of identity into the Gaelic for an assimilation ideal works fine and sociable. The poem celebrates a happy unity in the foreign land while also a poignant cultural representation in the social sphere:

While the Royal Mile movrd through light and dark

Moments with business spaces changing hands,
Their Eastern Crafts remained a constant landmark (33)

Another noticeable aspect in this anthology is the depiction of different cultures in a same stage where the Indian migrants embraces the binary of their existence. The poems like ‘The Hindu Temple in Leith’, ‘Durga Puja in Glasgow’ and ‘The Gurdwara in Leith’ show the amalgamation of Indian culture with the Scottish land.

The titular poem “Ragas and Reels” relinquishes a dance portrayal in which it is to seen a troupe of Bharatanatyam dancers and Scottish reels are being performed in a fusion. This fusion for the diaspora in many ways is symbolic of the unison of two homes, two cultures and the mentality in metaphors

Of hypnotic movement, with precision and verve
Compelling eyes, sharp turns and curves
Mudras like magic, swift wave of hand
Feet beat the tala, challenging the band
The floodlights shower beams, the footlights applaud
This vision of fusion from home to abroad. (61)

Altogether a different enterprise, the poet then talks about the whole journey of the language of English and eventually of literature. Of its being introduced by Macaulay in India and then enlarging its vision with the hand of Forster and Orwell it has totally turned towards a sea change. The poet writes

And with this tide the east now turned
In a counter journey to the west
And at the end of this sojourn
It found the chalice of its quest. (51)

Foretelling the Future:

Bashabi is certain of a futuristic node of the Indian diaspora living in Scotland. People who have come many a year ago finds a voice in this holistic approach with the variety of journey being recorded into one collection. What she also records is that this journey is a ‘counter journey’ and the chalice unlike colonial craze for material sustenance must relegate some higher ideal. The migrants grew up to be a perfect example of both the two culture in one frame as Bashabi opines -

The sense of uncertainty of the first generation has often been replaced by the confidence of second, third and fourth generation, educated from the beginning in Scotland and proud to be Scottish. They speak English with Glaswegian or Edinburgh or Fife accents; some speak Gaelic, having appropriated an island culture; they all have the agility of jugglers, being naturally bilingual (even trilingual), able to keep their plates spinning in the air. The rhythm of Bhangra, the sparkle of Bollywood, the

culinary success of curries, the sophistication of Indian classical music in ragas and tales, the softness of silks and elegance of eastern fabrics and patterns, have seeped into the Scottish consciousness, bringing a new excitement which is no longer inscrutably Oriental, but has the breath of Indian summers, promising blue skies. The younger generation carry two cultures with them, wearing them like distinguished paisley pattern which blends eastern artistry with western expertise. (120)

The visual snapshots that Hermann captures in his photography gets a vivid touch in the hands of Bashabi. The photographs are sometimes crucial to the understanding of the poems although Bashabi's words sometimes overshadows the other counterpart. But altogether the fusion of words and photographs are the strong visuals to pass by. To this accord, the poet ratifies over the singularity of the photographs.

... when it came to the point of recording Scotland as Hermann saw it through it through the small lens, it was not Scotland's lochs, hills and glens, her heritage buildings or proud city skylines that he wanted to capture. What inevitable drew his attention was a 'broon' face in this predominantly white society. Questions followed- why had this particular individual come here and when, how did this community grow and what are its achievements and contribution to Scottish society? And each portrait had a story to tell, intricate in its complexity, while encapsulating the history of whole communities. (119)

Diaspora in representation tend to look towards the candid life details of the people who have often felt trapped in between two or more homes and cultures. Similarly, the literature in this strain relegates issues of home, alienation, nostalgia and other such traits but there has been a less celebratory move towards the gala assimilation. All representation carry personal and cultural meanings and have personal and social effect. Sometimes these meanings are produced through a composer's conscious choice of language and structure and at other times there may be unconscious reproductions of attitudes, beliefs and values in the world. This leads to the potential for different readings of text as representations are questioned and reinterpreted.

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