

Multiculturalism in Mauritian Folk Tales and Short Stories

Dr. Abha Pandey

Head, Department of English,
Govt. Mahakoshal Arts and Commerce
College, Jabalpur
english_dept1@yahoo.co.in

Ashima Pandey

Communicative English,
Gyan Ganga Institute of Technology,
Jabalpur. M. P. India
ashimapandey@rocketmail.com

Abstract: *The term multiculturalism refers to “composite culture” strengthened by multiple streams of thought and values. It describes societies, where social diversity is respected as value. Multiculturalism is the acceptance or promotion of multiple ethnic cultures. Multiculturalists advocate extending equitable status to distinct ethnic and religious groups without promoting any specific community values as central. The policy of multiculturalism is often contrasted with the concepts cultural assimilation and social integration.*

Critical discussion of multiculturalism has been augmented by the increased need for international communication and mutual understanding in the modern world. Multiculturalism is a literary and social ideology that presupposes that all cultural value systems are equally worthy of study. Multiculturalist ideals have influenced literature, art, popular culture, media, education, and legal and social policy. In response to greater globalization, the entire concept of assimilation has been questioned. The image of “melting pot” as a social model for the multiethnic society has changed to a model where unique ethnic identities remain intact and contribute to the greater good.

Multicultural literature can be described as literature that portrays racial or ethnic groups that currently reside in a country. It helps to enhance cross-cultural understanding and respect for individuals. It also accents the contributions that other cultural groups have made to society. There are many criteria that can be used to evaluate multicultural literature such as the portrayal of culture, setting of the past, use of proper language, using offensive language or prejudiced tones. The writers living in multiethnic societies with their multicultural ethos and a deep understanding of socio-cultural and economic realities around them have been successful in transmuting their experiences into writings. The salient features of a multicultural text are their concern to preserve their original culture and identity.

My paper aims at examining the nature of multiculturalism, its features as revealed in literature, particularly in the folk tales and short stories of Mauritian writers of Indian origin to trace their multicultural ethos and marginal psyche. Multiculturalism is a characteristic feature of the island of Maurius . Mauritian society includes people from many different ethnic and religious groups. Mauritian literature is more than two centuries old. The island of Mauritius is home to many languages, and Mauritian literature exists in French, English, Creole and Indian languages. The new generation of writers has expressed persistent concern with structure and more global themes. The writers of different cultural background present a mosaic of literary pieces not only in a variety of languages but also diverse in the depiction of traditional cultural values. The deviations as a result of mingling cultures due to the effect of dominant western culture, dwindling of conventional value system and the emergence of a modern Mauritian society figure in the works of Mauritian writers.

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, Marginalization, Mauritian Literature, Cultural assimilation and integration*

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My paper aims at examining the nature of multiculturalism, its features as revealed in literature, particularly in the folk tales and short stories of Mauritian writers of Indian origin to trace aspects of multiculturalism in their writings.

The word multiculturalism was first used in 1957 to describe Switzerland. Canada first adopted it as a policy in 1971 followed by Australia and U.K. The U.S. and many other countries have not adopted it as a policy but are multicultural in their structure. Canada and Mauritius have long been implementing multicultural policies, to ensure all citizens can maintain their identities, take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Mauritius does not have an official multicultural legislative base but the government fosters the policies that respect diversity and the constitution respects fundamental rights and freedoms of divergent groups. In Mauritius the word multiculturalism has become an integral part of political rhetoric, and an inclusive approach to all cultural groups has facilitated the development of multiculturalism.

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Mauritius is a polyethnic island state with large segment of Indian origin. The other major ethnic categories are of African descent followed by French and Chinese. The Mauritian literature is rich in English, French, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi. Most of Indian writers are at ease both in English and French. Several well-known signatures are to be found in at least three languages. One prolific writer Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal has written about 400 books in English, French, Hindi and Creole. Some of the writers have been translated in Germany, Japanese and Russian.

The Indians in Mauritius living and writing after a century and a half of their migration and settlement in foreign land still show homing instinct. Their writings depict that their cultural roots are deeply embedded in them and are an inherent part of their life. The characters in the stories represent Indian values and find roots in the matrix of Indian culture. Their terrible sufferings, their anguish of being far off from their homeland, the trauma of being aliens and their instinct to remember their roots are well represented in the works of writers like Beeharry Deepchand.C, Bucktawar Ramesh, Dayachand, Anand Muloo, Dhunvir Sadasing etc.

There's a folk tale about the origin of Mauritius. Pahlad Ramsurran in his story "Birth of the Pearl Island" has mentioned about the origin of the island (1-4).

Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, with his brother Laxman, and his consort Sita was in the forest, during his exile for fourteen years. Ravana the king of Lanka, offended due to his sister Shurpnakha and the death of his two brothers Khar and Dushan, hatched a plot with the help of Mareech, the magician. Mareech changed himself into a golden spotted deer and went near Rama's hut. Sita was enticed and she requested Rama to kill the deer. Rama kept chasing the animal that led him away from the hut. At last, Rama shot an arrow and on striking the spotted deer, it changed into Mareech, the magician. While dying, Mareech made a request to Rama: "Give me a boon so that I may hear your name forever." Rama gave him the boon and he died peacefully. When Rama touched the corpse of Mareech, it contracted and changed into pearls. His head, his body, his arms and his limbs, all altered into different sizes of pearls. Rama took them in his hands and said: "He wants to listen to my name forever. He must stay in solitude, because he cannot stay with me. Besides of what use are pearls, diamonds, gems, gold and silver to me?" So thinking, he threw those pearls towards the south. What happened then! The whole atmosphere darkened. A roar of thunder was heard. Fast moving clouds were seen. Huge waves touching the sky rolled in the sea. A cyclonic wind arose and such a torrential rain started falling that it seemed to be the Deluge. But as the pearls fell in the Indian Ocean, the cataclysm stopped. The pearls started growing and took the shape of small and big islands in that part of the Indian Ocean. Following the birth of these islands the sky cleared and a slow wind began blowing. Thousands of years after that incident, trees and plants started growing. By degrees, strange birds and animals came to inhabit them. Thus, in those far off days, the Lemure of Madagascar, the Solitaire of Reunion and Rodrigues and the Dodo of Mauritius were not yet extinct. However human sound was not heard on those islands, and ripe fruits would fall down in the absence of man who could have picked them up. Thus, for a long time, sweet and perfumed breezes blew from those forests, making the surroundings aromatic and that attracted the navigators towards them. Thus, several ages passed by, and when the world was still young some sailors came and landed in Mareech Island. However, there was none among them who knew about Rama, and Mareech was disappointed. However, he had great conviction in Rama's words and went on waiting for the moment when somebody would come from his country. It may be for this reason that the sailors who had first landed here left the island in a week's time. A century later, sailors of another nation came. They stayed for a century, but still Mareech's wish was not granted, for, among the newcomers nobody knew about the valiant Rama. After they left the Island, sailors of a third nation came. They settled in the Island and built many roads and constructed many imposing buildings. But Mareech still had to wait for another century. This time people of a fourth nation came and conquered the Island. Among them some had come from the continent of Rama, and Mareech was delighted. However, it was two and half decades later that the poor people started coming regularly in big numbers from the land of Mareech and Rama. Those poor workers worked in the cane fields from dawn to dusk and in the night, after their meal, they would sit in circles and read and sing the verses from the immortal epic, the Ramayana, which they had brought with them, and derive solace. And thus, Mareech's wish was fulfilled (Ramsurran 1-4).

Their fiction represents their efforts not only to preserve their identity but also to reconstruct it in spite of living in a multiracial, multilingual, poly-ethnic society.

The love of Indo Mauritian writers for their language and their native country is depicted in the lines of a Story titled "An Indian Film Addict" by G. Sewtohul:

We watched Indian films only, never (Kiryoli European or American) films. Why only Indian *filams*? Because the language spoken in Indian *filams* is almost the same as the language we speak at home. As you know Hindi and Bhojpuri are almost the same thing. ... It filled us with happiness. I am happy only in my own language and in my own culture, along my familiar gods and goddesses; unless I get my daily *daal- bhaat*, I always feel hungry. While watching an Indian film I go into a kind of linguistic trance when I hear an actor or an actress using a word or a expression which I have always used since my birth.

Notice the use of “we” and “our” representing the community of the narrator where as ‘you’ and ‘they’ represent ‘others’. As Tzvetan Todorov argues in The Conquest of America, the conquest, colonization, and destruction of indigenous cultures of the Americas set the pattern for much of the colonial history of Western colonialism thereafter. This was tied with the creation of the ‘Other’: that is to say, the creation of the specific social groups who are not ‘I’ or ‘we’, in the writings or discourses about those ‘other people, in that place. He speaks of ‘others’ as belonging to specific social group to which ‘we’ do not belong. He distinguishes these groups as ‘interior’ to the society or ‘exterior’ to the society.

Mauritian writers of Indian origin have tried to encapsulate their experiences in their writings. They have imbibed their present multicultural environment as well as cherished their ancestral memories. Their concern varies from threats of cultural disintegration to the present socio-political and economic problems. The efforts of older generation to bond with their roots and trend in the present generation to break free from everything traditional- all find place in the writings of Indo Mauritian writers.

The story entitled “The Bride” written by Anitah Aujayeb in Mauritian Short Stories deals with fears and apprehensions of Lina regarding Hindu marriages. The *bidai* and the sadness associated with it, heavy hearted bride, half-happy parents and the mixture of joy and sorrow all around bother her so much that she begins despising Hindu marriages. She opts for Christian wedding, much against her parent’s wishes, which in contrast are all fun and laughter with no sorrows attached. At the time of her marriage Lina is all joy walking down the aisle, greeting gathered guests. Then she sees her parents standing a little apart from crowd blessing their daughter in Hindu manner and crying feeling guilty. Their aloofness and pain hurt her so much that she cries uncontrollable thus breaking her life long conviction. Lina turns out to be a typical Indian girl from deep down who finds it difficult to celebrate when her parents were sad. Sentiments overpower her exposing the true character, which is Indian.

Another story entitled Rahul’s Love for the West by Luckeenarainsing Bucktawor in short story collection Some Stories of Mauritian Life contains the idea of returning to the roots. The central character Rahul’s ‘love affair with everything western’ comes to a sudden halt when he is openly rejected, stigmatized and discriminated against in London where he goes for his further studies. Since childhood he has hated everything Indian- Indian films, food and education and has boasted of western virtues. But his beliefs and dreams crumble when while in London he hears words like “hey! f---ing pakis! Hey! dirty rascal, go home!”.

He is astounded and hurt because everywhere he goes he faces discrimination and humiliation because of his skin color. The scenario calls for introspection and he realizes who he truly is and where he actually belongs to-

In order to situate his identity, he reasoned: he was also an Indo Mauritian. His roots went to his ancestors who belonged to Indian culture. *His mind now went to that culture he used to scorn.* India, from where he did indirectly come, had its known Golden age; she has been one of the world’s greatest civilizations, who have evolved her own values, her own philosophy, even when Europe was living in Dark Age. The positive aspects of that venerated culture came one by one to his mind. Why should he slavishly accept, worship everything that was of the west? Western society was itself burdened with ills, which we were inheriting ourselves today, in our Mauritian society.⁷

He realizes that Mauritius in spite of shortcomings and interdivisions (ethnicity) is his home where his *nombril* (navel string) was buried. Thus crave for west transforms itself into love for his country.

The women writers of Mauritius form a class of their own. After a long struggle faced during the last century the Mauritian women have now come out in open with the feelings, aspiration towards a freedom to be themselves and to mould and reshape the world anew. A collection of short stories entitled Mauritian Women’s Writings has become a milestone in the short history of Mauritian publication. The collection brings forth the writers from all ethnic groups each one interpreting situational realities according to her perception. The extent to which there emerges a coherent vision of modern Mauritian society is striking.

The present generation has assimilated well in the cultural diversity and takes pride in being called Mauritian rather than Indo Mauritian. The youth acknowledges its Mauritian identity and has started taking initiatives to preserve it. The story "Modern Mauritius"⁸ by Annabelle AZA draws attention towards the concerns of sensitive present generation of Indo Mauritians regarding serious issues like racism and regionalism creeping up in their society. The three determined higher secondary school girls take up the arduous task of spreading the message of communal harmony and fraternity in their multicultural society. They form 'United We Stand' Club and despite of initial set backs they end up in congregating and stimulating their fellow students to develop the spirit of 'Being Mauritian', which involves acceptance of all cultures and religions.

From the discussion of the folk tales and short stories it is obvious that the Indian community that settled in Mauritius a century and a half ago has well settled and adjusted. With conscious efforts, they have preserved their culture and identity. The deviations from their roots are made by the Indo Mauritians of younger generations but their deep-seated culture brings them back to their roots, proving that the immigrants who moved out of their country have never been able to cut off their navel chord.

Thus, we can conclude that though the model of mosaic has not been adopted officially in Mauritius, it is being followed in spirit. Mauritius postulates sustaining, protecting and promoting the cultural uniqueness of all the individual groups be they Indians, Chinese, Africans or the French or English.

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