II
THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS OF MULTICULTURALISM AND INDIANNESS

Since the objective of the thesis is to highlight and map Indianness and multiculturalism in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, it is expedient to know what the terms ‘Indianness’ and ‘Multiculturalism’ mean, what Indian writing in English is, what the current trends of this literature are. Jhumpa Lahiri falls under the category of Indian English Literature and her works have considerable Indianness as well as the elements of multiculturalism in many respects.

Before theorizing the concept of multiculturalism, the thesis will deal with the idea of Indianness. There is a special reason for that. In doing so one would be able to find the concept of multiculturalism more transparent because Indianness is one of the constituents that form multiculturalism for Indian immigrants. A person, who thinks of Indian English literature, will face the convolution and difficulty in defining it. Why is it Indian? Why is it English? It is generally regarded that it is English literature because it uses English as its medium of expression. However, the question why it is Indian literature is not so simple to be answered unlike in the case of English literature. At the same time, it cannot be said that it is Indian literature because in India, where there are many languages, Indian literature would mean literature in any Indian language. The term ‘Indian English literature’ emphasizes two significant ideas; first, it is a product of English literature since its medium is English and secondly this literature constitutes one of the many streams that join the great ocean called Indian literature, which though written in different languages, has an unmistakable unity. It is a process of Indianzing English language, of transforming and expressing the Indian sensibility into English and thus shaping Indianness in English. S. Subrahmanya Sharma writes that the Indian English literature clothes “the very Indianness in the English tongue - though it has gone into the very system of our life - without making it bizarre. A rapprochement is somehow formed between Indianness and the English language and sometimes vice versa.”1
Thus, Indian English literature refers to the body of writing by writers not only from India but also from outside India who are directly or indirectly related with India, who write in English language but the derivation and essence of whose material is mainly grounded on India. The literature has its germs in Indian history, culture, politics, philosophy, society, ancient literature, religions, etc. and has perceptible and unmistakable unity with literatures in other languages of India.

Indian English literature has a recent history; it is only one and a half centuries old. It goes without doubt that Indian writing in English as a body of literature has arrived in the global marketplace with its own brand name. What is noticeable here is that in spite of its global presence, its conception and formulation cannot be delinked from Indianness, a concept rich and diverse in many ways and carrying many other concepts like history, culture, society, morality, religions. International literary awards like the Booker Prize, the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the Commonwealth Award and many others given to the Indian English writers, are only manifestations of a success of a deeper kind. Literature by Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Bharti Mukharjee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Rohinton Mistry brings high degree confidence for new coming on the scene.

Indian English literature is a blend of continuity and experiments. The history of Indian English literature shows the constant introduction of new themes and techniques with their newfound confidence. Indian English writers have boldly experimented with language and various literary techniques. The obvious example of this is Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, a novel written in verse and magic realism is an alternative name of Salman Rushdie. The most perceptible change is to be found in the use of language by these writers. The contemporary Indian English Writers have made a very evocative use of language by breaking, experimenting and twisting the language. Instead of using the Standard English or American English, they produce Indian English, living English, capable of evoking the aroma of Indian life and spreading the essence of Indianness. With these experiments, there are continuities. One of them is the engagement with history, both national and personal, history of lives, of institutions, family sagas, the
freedom struggle, gender discrimination, the history of socialization and the need to review happenings and roles and to decolonize and deconstruct the knowledge structures legitimized by imperialism and colonialism. It is constantly in search of the hidden layers of meaning of philosophy, literature and historical events, etc.

One important aspect to be noted about Indian English literature is that it includes not only the writers writing from India about India, but also those who are writing from abroad about India. It also includes writings by Indian diaspora. The Indian diasporic writers mainly occupy the contemporary scene in Indian writing in English. It is mainly through the contribution of Indian diasporic writers that Indian literature in English has gained recent recognition. There are some obvious reasons for that. One of the reasons is that the diasporic writers take the characters and themes from the greatest resources of their native culture with the help of their talent, creativity and learning. The diasporic represent themselves to an alien audience and have wider access to readers all over the world. Exchanging one tradition for another, one culture for another and one home for another, the diasporic writer creates and inscribes alternative worlds. The tension between what was and what is, what is past and what is present, what is homeland and what foreign land is and the difference between memory and reality energize and shape the writer’s work. The frequent imaginary slips into history, homeland and memory load them to the recreation and reconstitution of a new world, which is blending of both history and present. Vijay Lakshmi writes,

“Memory, invented or real, helps the writer escape the confines of conformity and creates new literature - a hybrid literature -, which does not conform to any one tradition or culture but creates a new world.”

Thus, a diasporic writer conforms to both traditions, belongs to both worlds and both literatures. Thus, by coining new words by combining English and Hindi or English and Urdu, as Rushdie does, diasporic writers combine two traditions, two cultures, two societies, two ways of life in order to create a new one. This is the product of enrichment of both. It is the product that can be related to both. It is the process of deconstruction and decolonization. By deconstructing and decolonizing the former western knowledge systems,
the writer’s appeal is to a wider audience, especially, not confining only to the literature of one’s country but to the literature of those countries, which are post-colonial and are under the process of decolonization. This means that the Indian diasporic writers are conscious about Indian sensibility, Indian culture, society and history. The idea or the principle of analyzing and understanding complexities of the body of Indian diasporic writing relates the reader to the history. It relates the reader to the Indian festivals, philosophy, customs, religious practices, traditions, literature, politics and culture as well as to the experiences, identity crisis, marginalization and struggle for preservation of Indian culture in foreign countries. The Indian diasporic writing is mainly an articulation by and about the community torn between two cultures: that of the native land and of the received one. It is an attempt to preserve their rich culture and distinct identity by sustaining the Indian languages, religions, rituals, cultural practices and festivals and thus, articulating their creativity and ability through one of the media of expression, literature. Deriving its material and substance and seeking identity in Indian religion and cultural texts such as Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas, the Gita, the Mahabharata, the Satyanarayana Katha, the puranas, the Vedas etc. the Indian diasporic literature has got such a momentum as to become an important body of literature that has distinctive and identifiable consciousness. Indian diasporic literature has enough prowess to claim as the literature of great creativity. It celebrates the nourishing and enriching influence of Indian festivals, familiar and social relationships moral values, spiritual and metaphysical thoughts, folk and classical literature, philosophical ideologies and highly enriched traditions of India. In short, they are conscious of Indianness.

Regarding Indianness in Indian English literature, it can be said that the Indian diasporic writing is now at its excellent height. Jhumpa Lahiri is a diasporic writer and her writings can be categorized under Indian English Literature. As it has already been stated that the objective of the thesis is to highlight Indianness and multiculturalism, the following part of this chapter shall define and theorize Indianness and multiculturalism.

With the interdisciplinary nature of the literature where there has been assimilation of history, politics, psychology, ecology, films, journalism,
geography, etc., the Indian English writing in the hands of writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, M.G. Vassanji, Bharti Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others has earned international reputation. The Indian English literature deals with the effects of colonization on the Indian culture and society which signify the political, social, linguistic and cultural experiences of and changes in colonized society. Decolonization is carried out by the presentation of Indianness. It shows that the western culture is now no more a source of inspiration in respect of material and themes. Indianness has elements, reflecting the variety of life, unity in diversity and a rich civilization. Indian civilization has been enriched by many cultures and mingling spiritual and material aspects of living and is capable of becoming a source of inspiration for others and is of unique importance to make its people proud for its antiquity and its application and relevance in the modern age. It has its deeply thought philosophy, artistic literature and well-organized social institutions. Thus, Indianness is a concept, which is not so simple to define and is multi-faceted like historical, cultural, social, literary, political, etc.

In fact, Indianness is a concept which is the centre of discussion for critics and many have tried to define and theorize it. The controversy in defining Indianness in Indian English literature has contentious and continuing history. Discussions and debates over ‘Indianness’ have often been counter productive, even leading sometimes to cultural intolerance. This debate over ‘Indianness’ is central to the whole question of Indian literature, especially, of Indian English literature because the Indian literature in English will always have to prove its Indian elements.

It is a great challenge to produce Indian English literature that one may call ‘Indian literature’ that has cultural and artistic affinity with Indian literature in other languages. If this is done, it would and must be considered a great achievement and even greater is an achievement when an Indian diasporic writer does it. If the real specimens of Indian literature are to be found in the regional languages of India, the chimera called Indian English literature that is able to prove its internationality with the use of English, must be constructed as an invention of someone, because why it is so will be clear from the opinion of Niharrajan Ray:
Literature is absolutely language-based and language being a cultural phenomenon; it is all but wholly conditioned by its locale and the socio-historical forces that are in operation through the ages in that particular locale. If that be so one may reasonably argue that the literature of a given language will have its own specific character of form and style, images and symbols, menaces and associations etc.

Understanding and defining Indianness needs clarification of certain issues. With the basic question “What is Indianness?” lays other questions for the proper understanding of Indian English literature, particularly written by Diaspora. The questions are: What is India? What it means to be an Indian? Where should one look for Indianness? Is one to seek only for Indianness in Indian writing in English? Can Indian writing in English be evaluated only by the quality and intensity of Indianness? Can one disregard Indianness in Indian English literature to analyze it? What does Indianness stand for Diaspora? What are the reasons for the construction of Indianness by diaspora in their writings? What are the objectives of representing Indianness in Indian diasporic literature in English? What connects Diaspora with India? These are the questions, which a researcher will face when s/he is interpreting and analyzing a work by Indian Diaspora. The debate over the problem of defining Indianness is not of recent origin. Many critics have tried to solve the problem.

Historically, the searching for Indianness is generally regarded to have started with P. Lal and his group who in about early 1960s based their critical comments on its presence. Critics like T.D. Brunton and Raji Narasimhan consider the question largely related to an awareness of nationalism and patriotic pride. Brunton writes,

“It is still frequently assumed that a novel in English by an Indian can only be justified if it is Indian in some peculiar and essential fashion.”

Reflecting the same view, Raji Narasimhan argues in Sensibility Under Stress that it was not for the presence of totally valid literary grounds,

“One would be tempted to conclude that the onus on the English writer to reflect Indianness was overdone nationalism.”

For her, Indianness is little more than the creative blending of Indian concepts and the English language: a cross breed in other words. Brunton gives his own definition of Indianness:
“It will depict analytically the quick and spirit of Indian society – by showing the individual whose experience is Indian culture. But it will be free of fake profundity, Orientalism and lush scene-painting.”

According to David McCutchion, questions such as the following stem from a crisis of identity on the part of the writers and critics: “What does the novel tell us about India? What do we know about India? What do we know about India? Are the metaphors taken from Indian life and nature?”

Niharranjan Ray is of the view that what gives Indian character to Indian literatures is the Indian myth and set of values and attitudes it generated and sustained.

In the *Indianness of Indian Literature*, V.K. Gokak offers a more concrete definition of Indianness. According to him, Indianness is in style and diction, the setting or background colour, the imagery, the literary forms used, etc. He is of the opinion that an Indian is a person who carries with him the entire Indian heritage and not merely a portion of it. An Indian has cultural awareness. The cultural awareness is an indispensable feature of Indianness. He writes,

> “The extent of Indianness of a work of art will depend upon the intensity and manifoldness with which an Indian writer responds to this tradition and recreates it in his own consciousness.”

Gokak regards that diction and style, setting, imagery, etc. are secondary to cultural consciousness which must be Indian essentially. His attention is on the Indian philosophy and spirituality. Along with these elements, the secular aspects of Indian culture must not be overbooked. Verghese makes his own attempt towards a complete definition. He writes:

> “What I mean by Indianness in Indian writing in English is the sum total of the cultural patterns of India and deep seated ideas and ideals –political, economic, secular and spiritual– that constitute the mind of India writing in English, however, the language may seem to dash with a culture for which it is not a natural medium. It is this discord between culture and language that has so far compelled the critic of Indo–English literature.”

In this regard, one cannot forget Srinivas Iyengar who in his authoritative work *Indian Writing in English* also attempts to define Indianness in Indo-English literature in following words,

> “What makes Indo-English Literature an Indian literature is the quality of Indianness- in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment, in the organization of the material, in terms of ‘form’ and in the creative use of language.”
In an attempt to explain Indianness, it can be said that India is a concept rather than a physical map on the globe. The critics theorizing Indianness have emphasized on one or the other aspect of Indianness. This leads to the confusion regarding the true understanding of Indianness. Indianness is all inclusive. It is the concept ‘India’ that lives in everyday life of people who left India during colonialism. The concept ‘India’ still exists even after uncountable political upheavals. Sunil Khilnani writes in his famous book *The Idea of India* that

“No concept of a state, an impersonal public authority with a continuous identity emerged: Kings represented only themselves, never enduring states. It was this arrangement of power that explains the most peculiar characteristic of India’s pre-colonial history: the perpetual instability of political rule, the constant rise and fall of dynasties and empires, combined with the society’s unusual fixity and cultural consistency. Its identity lay not in transient political authority but in the social order.”  

The concept ‘India’ means unity in diversity, which was emphasized by Nehru. Jawaharlal Nehru expanded on antecedence, diversity and essence of India in the following language:

“The diversity of India is tremendous it is obvious; it lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It is fascinating to find how the Bengalese, the Marathas the Gujaratis, the tamils, the Andhras, the Oriyas, the Assamese, theCanarese have retained their peculiar characteristics for hundred of years, have retained their peculiar still more or less the same virtues and failings of which old tradition or record tells us, and yet have been through these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities.”

An Indian is always a part of this diversity, which links him to India. India as a concept is a product of multicultural tradition, a tree that is deeply rooted in its soil but opening its leaves, branches and new roots to every direction. Salman Rushdie admits the secular ideal of Indianness in the following words in *Imaginary Homelands*,

“One of the things I liked, and still like, about India is that it is based on a non-sectarian philosophy. I was not raised in a narrowly Muslim environment; I do not consider Hindu culture to be either alien from me or more important than the Islamic heritage. I believe this has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of comingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience.”

India is a country littered with ruins of many imperial emperors but the symbols that survive and inspire the people are temples, churches and
mosques, which reflect the cultural integrity of the whole nation. The essence of this concept is a sense of decency, a sense of humanity, a commitment to human values and a concern for others. Indian culture, ancient classical and folk literature, philosophy, social organizations, civilization, material and spiritual aspects of way of living and many other things play an important role in understanding of Indianness. Again Salman Rushdie opines regarding plurality in the concept of Indianness thus,

“What, centrally is that idea? It is based on the most obvious and apparent fact about the great subcontinent: multitude. For a nation of seven hundred millions to make any kind of sense, it must base itself firmly on the concept of multiplicity, of plurality and tolerance of devolution and decentralization wherever possible. There can be no one way – religious, cultural or linguistic- of being an Indian; let difference reign.”

Yet other questions, which remain unanswered, are: ‘Is one to seek only Indianness in Indian writing in English?’ ‘Can Indian writing in English be only evaluated by the quality, quantity and intensity of Indianness?’ ‘Can one disregard Indianness in Indian English Literature to analyze it?’ These questions are related with criticising Indian English literature. A writer, according to a general understanding, is designated on the basis of the socio-geographical community and culture to which he belongs and whose ways of life, literature, language, traditions and philosophy he reconstructs and recreates in his writing. Indianness, which suggests an abstract essence of India, is contentious and vexatious issue of the identity and cultural politics of this literature. And this identity and culture cannot easily be ignored. So, the influence of Indian culture and society is natural in Indian writing in English. If one thinks and affirms that literature is a product of society and mirrors the consciousness and sensibility of the country it represents, he should not seek for some other distinctive elements in Indian writing in English. One should not solely rely on English literature in understanding the contexts of Indian English literature. It is surely reasonable to look for those details that point to the presence of a typically Indian culture and society in Indian English literature. One cannot disregard Indianness in analyzing the contexts of Indian writing in English. And, at the same time, finding Indianness only would mean narrowing the critical possibilities of analyzing the literature. In answer to the problem as
to whether or not Indianness should be considered an important criterion for judging the value of a work, it can be opined that it is midway between the two extremes. Verghese opines:

“I do not uphold any literary criterion which bases itself solely on the national distinctiveness of a literature. Such a criterion tends to ignore the literary quality of a work. Moreover, critics will be inclined to look upon the literature of a country as a storehouse of cultural and sociological information pertaining to a people and not as literature.”

Literature comes out of society and writers are responsible in representing the essential elements of a community. Disregard of these representations of Indian culture and society would mean only analyzing technical features of a work like style, form, language, etc. and missing the creative features like tradition, characters, themes, because if one is to trace the development of character, he has to rely on the society in which he inhibits, he has to get an insight into the social circumstances. He cannot evaluate the character keeping aside the social system. So if one disregards Indianness, he would miss the essential elements of the development of the character.

The very idea of interpreting the Indian diasporic literature relates the reader to Indianness. The relation of diaspora to history would make us understand and define the Indianness of diasporic literature. The history is important for diaspora, for both the author and his characters live with history. The diasporic literature has its genesis in consciousness; the consciousness of one’s belonging to India that is history now and now to the received land of struggles and contrary situations. The history is that one belonged to India; the history is that one had distinct traditions and beliefs; the history is that one had rich culture, fully developed and deeply thought philosophy, artistic literature, profound ideologies and a systematic way of life and well organized social institutions. Still they have close affinity with these things. Still the Sanskrit stories in the *Panchatantra* and the epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and in Pali the *Jatakakathas*, the *Brihatkathas* and many others are perennial source of inspiration for them. If history is a fundamental aspect of diaspora, Indianness is a fundamental source of identity for diaspora. An Indian carries about him some idea of the continuity of life and at the same time cultivates in himself the great virtue of detachment, for he knows the reality and meaning of life and understands
that ultimately one lives in the hearts and minds of men and women who live on. His own personal lot is never of paramount importance; hence, many legends of renunciation, sacrifice and self-enforcement play an important role in his life. In times of trial and tribulations, those legends become source of inspiration and survival and enjoy life fully without worrying about any situation one is in. This idea will be clear in the mind of a reader when he finds Satendra Nandan’s narrator who gets the following insights into *The Ramayana* when asked by his grand child why Rama had been sent into exile:

> “Because Kekeyi wanted her own son to be king of Ayodhya ... Valmiki wrote about Ram’s exile, so that we could bear ours ... On the eve of his coronation, Ram was exiled for fourteen years by his selfish stepmother. And I began to understand the myths on which our civilization was founded. Both their potency and impotence.”

In this respect, what Satendra Nandan writes is very significant:

> “The legends of Rama, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed help us to live and bring deeper illuminations into our hearts so that we may not regard our suffering and sacrifices as the greatest. In the lives of great souls we see the realities of the human condition and accept our own. It was not a great for a narrow egoistical identity but a conquest of it so that one attains the larger identity to lose one self to gain a community, to lose one’s community to gain a whole country, the quintessential idea contained in the Atman-Brahman concept.”

The above quotation makes it clear how India is connected with diaspora. Indianness imparts diaspora broadness of soul where one never regards his suffering and poor plight as the greatest. Indianness imparts sense of merging oneself into another without losing the essential goodness but with adopting goodness from other. The history of India shows that India had been invaded by many rulers, but Indians maintained their Indianness and adopted other important qualities of their religion, society and culture. Indians always have a sense of awareness of being an Indian. He is always conscious that he will attain *Moksha* if he cultivates in himself the virtue of detachment and realizes hollowness of *Maya*. He is always clear about his *Karma*. He is always aware about how to live life according to *Dharma*. He is always conscious about purity and pollution of Indian way of life. The last concept, consciousness about violation of Indian way of life, is discussed here with some detail, because this is connected with diaspora. Indians have
a great sense of purity and pollution of soul. One's soul is polluted if he
drinks wine and eats meat and commits sinful offences. By committing such
deeds, one would be led to Narak or hell. Thus, the notion of Narak prevented
them from violation. Brahmins particularly believed that if one crosses
seawaters, he has violated religious norms and would be put out of the caste.
So, many persons, who went to Fiji, South Africa or to any other countries
as indentured labourers, belonged mainly to the lower castes. Due to
economic crisis in India, Brahmins also had to migrate to other countries,
but they concealed their identity and adopted another lower caste identity.
Therefore, the practice of Brahmins declaring themselves to be other than
their own caste was not uncommon. Totaram Sanadhya, an indentured
labourer who campaigned in India for the abolition of indenture in 1914
through his very influential book, Fiji Dvip men mere Ikjis Varsh, was a
Brahmin and changed his caste to meet the economic crisis. In India, it was
unusual for Indians to declare a caste different from their own because caste
is a matter of public knowledge. To prevent this violation and impurity, Fiji-
Indians gathered at mandali, a village–level organization for prayer and
social meeting where Ramleela was performed and bhajans were sung. These
tries to retain their Indianness are best reflected in Fiji-Indian literature
such as Satendra Nandan’s The Wounded Sea and Subramani’s The Fantasy
Eaters.

The Indian diasporic literature is the literature that has identifiable
consciousness: consciousness of the concept of purity and pollution, which
they at their best tried to maintain even in the received land of struggles and
contrary situations, which were forcing them to violate the traditions, the
essence of being Indian and their way of life.

Diaspora is often defined by absence of homeland. Homeland means
‘desh’ in comparison of which all other lands are foreign or ‘Videsh’ in Hindi.
‘Videsh’ is the source of homesickness. Salman Rushdie writes in his
Imaginary Homelands that

“It may be that writers in my positions, exiles or emigrants or
expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to
reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into
pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the
knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our
physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we
will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of our mind.” 18

Since homeland is not available in real sense it exists as an absence in imagination. This absence results into mourning and trauma. It triggers imagination and thus leads to “the creation of its own political myths rather than the real possibility of a return to a homeland, which is the defining characteristic of diasporas.” 19

The absence of homeland results into what Vijay Mishra calls ‘the diasporic imaginary’, which defines homeland in imagination and construct fantasies of homeland. The absence continues because there is no substitution for it in the newly attained object. There is no immediate cure for the condition because the loss is abstract. It cannot be filled by happiness in the ‘Videsh’ as Vijay Mishra believes; it leads to retract into diasporic instrumentalities such as place of worship, church, temple, mosque, etc. Fantasies are constructed about a particular way of life that may be enjoyed by a particular community or race and can be known by traditions, literature, beliefs, superstitions, etc. The enjoyment of homeland by a particular diasporic community or race is therefore imaginary. In this context, Vijay Mishra writes,

“To be able to preserve that loss, the fantasy structures of homeland for Diaspora very often become racist fictions of purity as a fund of jouissance, a joy, a pleasure around which anti-miscegenation narratives of homeland are constructed against the multicultural, miscegenation-prone reality of the nation-states in which Diasporas are located.” 20

Mishra seems to say that this absence is accomplished when Diaspora becomes full participants in a nation-state’s collective history or when they write their great books, it means through literature and use of one’s own language. Thus, the diasporic literature is the construction and production of Indianness in diaspora. Employing the concept of the imagination here is not to suggest that something unreal is being created in Indian diasporic writings, but serves to highlight the process of working out questions of recognition, self-construction, identification and desires for collectivity. It is through Indianness that literature creates affinity of diaspora with India. And it is diasporic literature that brings to forefront the hidden layers of meaning of Indianness. So, from this discussion, it is proved that it is
Indianness that connects diaspora to India, it is their claim of being Indian and it is the source of identity. Therefore, Indianness cannot be disregarded from diasporic writings.

Being a source of identity is one objective of presenting Indianness by diasporic writers. Representing Indianness is the larger process of Indian self-apprehension and self-consciousness. Indianness in literature cannot be regarded only as a concrete thing like setting or the names of characters; it carries with it the concept of philosophy, literature, society, religiousness, beliefs, superstitions, spirit of life, culture and internal character, etc. Here, It is important to quote Satendra Nandan, who writes,

‘Indianness’ to me is a conception rich in diversity, reflecting the variousness of life, both physical and spiritual, and growing out of a civilization that is continually being enriched by the currents of many cultures, old and now. The Indian sensibility – that capacity within us that enables us to react morally and imaginatively to human situations and see what is significant from what is trivial is – conscious of its roots deriving substance from many cultural streams. The striking achievement of the Indian has been his ability to accept, absorb and integrate these into a vital way of life.21

Satendra Nandan’s conception of Indianness is an excellent specimen for the definition of Indianness. The concept of Indianness is multi-faceted like historical, cultural, philosophical, social, literary, political, etc. Indianness is represented in the diasporic writings for evaluating situations and things and gives direction to react in a particular situation in a particular way always with the consciousness of rich heritage.

Coming to the concept of multiculturalism, it should be noted that the term ‘multiculturalism’ consists of multiple meanings in different contexts. The term having been originated and popularized in Canada and Australia in about 1970s, multiculturalism referred to the government policies for imparting equal status to the varied cultural communities for the ease of national governance and reconciliation among various cultural diversities. Multiculturalism is as defined by HarperCollins Dictionary of Sociology ‘the acknowledgement and promotion of cultural pluralism... multiculturalism celebrates and seeks to promote cultural variety, for example minority languages. At the same time it focuses on the unequal relationship of minority to mainstream cultures.’
Multiculturalism is the consequence of a growing realization of the unintended social and cultural pluralism which resulted from large-scale immigration to the countries like America, England, Canada, Australia, etc. It has its deep roots in colonialism. It is built with the principle of values of equality, tolerance and inclusiveness toward migrants of ethnically diverse backgrounds. Its fundamental belief is that all citizens are equal. Multiculturalism confirms that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancient heritage and have a sense of belonging without losing their original identity. Cultural minorities that were once discriminated against may no longer be denied the opportunity to compete on the basis of their relevant skills or qualifications with respect to keeping in mind race, ethnicity, colour, ancestry, religion. It is a movement in these countries which esteems the cultural background of all the diverse groups of people and promotes integration of everyone into a common vessel. Ali Rattansi writes:

“Immigrants were encouraged to ‘integrate’ rather than required to assimilate. This meant that they were to be enabled to retain elements of their ‘home culture’, and ethnic community associations were seen as important vehicles of integration.” 22

Ali Rattansi highlights the element of integration to emphasize that multiculturalism has never been related to the encouragement of separation and segregation but all-inclusiveness and uniformity. He is of the view that

“It has involved the creation of structures in which the incorporation of immigrants and ethnic minorities occurs fairly and with the recognition that the desire of immigrants and minorities to retain the aspects of their cultures is reasonable, and that cultural diversity is itself desirable and benefits the nation in a variety of ways.” 23

Multiculturalism is also referred to as cultural diversity, cultural pluralism, multiethnicity and multiracialism.

Multiculturalism indicates social change and heterogeneity of population. Multiculturalism is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society. It acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural environment which empowers all within the organization or society. Sometimes multiculturalism is misused as assimilation and acculturation.
Assimilation is the process whereby newcomers to society are encouraged to give up their cultural way of life and accommodate as quickly as possible to the values and culture of the host society. It is a one-way process of cultural exchange, in that only the newcomer is expected to absorb in the new cultural system at the expense of giving up one’s unique distinctiveness. The process of assimilation erases the external signs which formerly distinguished the member over the other. When the external signs are erased, the members of the smallest group are said to be assimilated. Assimilation refers to the theory of ‘Melting Pot’ proposed by Israel Zangwill in 1909 who mentioned that America is God’s pot. The idea behind this theory is that racial and ethnic groups should move towards the culture and society of the host, giving up their distinctive heritage along the way. The melting pot is a metaphor for a heterogeneous society becoming more homogeneous, the different elements melting together into a harmonious whole with a common culture. It is particularly used to describe the assimilation of immigrants. But the desirability of assimilation and the melting pot model were challenged by the proponents of multiculturalism, who assert that cultural differences within society are valuable and should be preserved. The proponents of multiculturalism note that assimilation has often been forced and has caused immigrants to have detached ties with family abroad.

Acculturation, equivalent of assimilation, means that one group adapts its culture to the cultural ways of the dominant group, usually through the one-way process of socialization. Another term ‘transculturalization’ being closer in meaning with multiculturalism, indicates the reciprocal process by which two cultures engage themselves in a system of give and take and adaptation to each other’s ways. It is a two-way process of cultural exchange, where the various groups learn from each other, each impacting the other, without totally losing their unique distinctiveness. Multiculturalism is a dynamic concept that can energize the individual into searching for an authentic depiction of self and grouping. The term “Salad Bowl” became popular in the theory of multiculturalism. The Salad Bowl concept describes America as the bowl consisting various ingredients that keep their individual characteristics. The immigrants are not being blended
together in one “pot” and losing their identity, but rather they are transforming American society into multicultural one and still keep their identities. Charles Taylor presents his famous concept of ‘Politics of Recognition’ in the following words,

“A number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need, sometimes the demand, for recognition. The need, it can be argued, is one of the driving forces behind nationalist movements in politics. And the demand comes to the fore in a number of ways in today’s politics, on behalf of minority or “subaltern” groups, in some forms of feminism and in what is today called the politics of “multiculturalism.” The demand for recognition in these latter cases is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition.”

For him, at the heart of the politics of multiculturalism is the demand for recognition and at the heart of that recognition is the subject of diaspora.

Multiculturalism is the way in which cultural and ethnic discrepancies may be accommodated in social, political and economic arrangements. In multicultural societies, particular groups and their cultural forms are designated as worthy of official recognition, protection and possessions. But not all the multicultural societies are successful in accommodating the discrepancies. So Bhikhu Parekh writes,

“In multicultural societies dress often becomes a site of the most heated and intransigent struggles. As a condensed and visible symbol of cultural identity it matters much to the individuals involved, but also for that very reason it arouses all manner of conscious and unconscious fears and resentments within wider society. It would not be too rash to suggest that acceptance of the diversity of dress in a multicultural society is a good indicator of whether or not the latter is at ease with itself.”

Settlement of differences regarding dress, food and customs does not easily and comfortably take place in multicultural societies.

According to Bhikhu Parekh, multiculturalism can be best comprehended neither as a political nor a philosophical school with a distinct theory of man’s place in the world but as a perspective on or a way of viewing human life. Its central insights are three. First, humans are cultural beings. It means that human beings are culturally rooted in the sense that their lives are culturally structured and well organized. Their
social relations are seen in terms of a culturally derived and unique system of meaning and significance. Second, different cultures characterize different systems of meaning and visions of the good life. In a situation, of which diversity and equality are the central characteristics, one’s way of life is likely to be richer if one also enjoys access to others and that a culturally self-contained life is virtually impossible for most human beings in the modern, mobile and interdependent world of globalization. Every culture has something which is lacking in others. So all the cultures are not equally rich or poor but are of equal significance because no culture is wholly insignificant as well as wholly significant. Third, every culture is internally plural and reflects a continuing exchange between its different traditions and aspects of thought. A culture’s relation to itself shapes and is in turn shaped by its relation to others and their internal and external pluralities assume and reinforce each other. Multiculturalism ignores or marginalizes such other great values as human harmony, community, a sense of rootedness, selflessness, deep and self-effacing humility and contentment. So Multiculturalism is directly related to global changes of power, population and culture in the era of globalization and "post-colonialism", as nations around the world established independence with the decline of Western empires. Globalization transformed previously homogeneous countries or regions into complex meeting grounds for different ethnic, racial, religious and national groups which challenged the political and cultural system to accommodate this diversity and created multiculturalism. Many of the previously homogeneous nation-states of Europe then experienced a flow of immigration by people of colour and different cultural and religious beliefs from the areas those nations had once ruled as colonies.

Hybridity is another keyword in the discourse of multiculturalism. Hybridity is a cross between two separate races or cultures. Hybridity means a mixture of something. Though hybridity fundamentally refers the biological mixture, the concept was subsequently employed in linguistics and in multicultural theory in the twentieth century. The concept of hybridity has seriously been discussed amongst the discourses of racism, post-colonialism, multiculturalism and globalization. It refers to the integration of cultural signs and practices from the colonizing and the
colonized cultures. The integration and the adoption of cultural practices can be seen as positive, enriching and dynamic as well as oppressive.

From a multiculturalist perspective the good society esteems the diversity and encourages a creative interchange between its different cultures and their moral visions. Such a society not only respects its members’ rights to their culture and increases their range of choices but also cultivates their powers of self-criticism, self-determination, imagination, intellectual and moral sympathy and contributes to their development and well-being.

Literature that depicts multiculturalism has particular identifiable characteristics. Multicultural Literature is written by and about people who are immigrants from third world countries and who are grouped as minority in countries like America, England, Canada, Australia, etc. Multicultural literature shows distinctions of cultural forms such as traditions, values, beliefs, rites, folktales, myths and legends. It demonstrates the nature of oral language, the role of traditional literature, the role of an audience and the literary style. It compares and analyzes such distinctions in different cultures and comes to findings.

Positive multicultural literature has been used effectively to help readers identify cultural heritages, understand sociological change, respect the values of minority groups, raise aspirations and expand imagination and creativity.

Webster’s New World Encyclopedia defines culture as “the way of life of a particular society or group of people, including patterns of thought, beliefs, behavior, customs, traditions, rituals, dress and language, as well as art, music and literature.” When more than one culture co-exist, the problem arises in an individual’s life while getting inevitably mixed-up with those of others in different spaces. They face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and when there is a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity. They stand baffled and confused, nostalgic and homesick and also struggle to the discourse of power in various forms. The identities of these individuals and communities can neither be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all long to return nor to that country where they settle down in. They, by all means, face the crisis of
fusion or dual identities, which makes their existence all the more difficult because multicultural people belong to two or more cultures. They are insiders as well as outsiders. As a result, there is the creation of partial representation of their world in literature. Salman Rushdie writes

“Fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism, is one way of dealing with these problems. It offers a way of echoing in the form of our work the issues faced by all of us: how to build a new ‘modern’ world out of and old, legend-haunted civilization, an old culture which we have brought into the heart of a newer one. But whatever technical solutions we may find, Indian writers in these islands, like others who have migrated into the north from the south, are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective; because they, we are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of ‘whole sight’.”

Multicultural Literature is based on realism and its subject matter centres around issues related to race, class and gender. It shares some common themes in the writings of authors from many different cultures like discovering personal identity in the society which marks multiculturalism, forming individual and cultural values, familial relationships, childhood games, folklore of the culture, societal pressures: rewards and punishments, religious background, environmental adaptations that resulted from historical factors, socioeconomic changes, contact with other cultural groups and forming personal relationships such as establishing family/marital roles, understanding gender roles, developing friendships and social groups and adapting to roles defined by age. Multicultural literature explores and opposing social injustice and cultural conflicts in the people of different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. Multicultural literature often focuses on the social contexts in the multicultural societies, on the experiences of the people of these societies, on the mixed reception which the minorities may receive in the country of arrival, on experiences of racism and hostility and on the sense of rootlessness and the search for identity which can result from displacement and cultural diversity.

Multicultural literature sustains a strong ethnic group consciousness which is based on a sense of distinctiveness. The sense of collectiveness or communitarianism in multicultural literature relates the diaspora to homeland. Monika Fludernik writes,
“Such a shift from individualism to communitarianism is to some extent paradoxical and regressive. People who have been motivated by the American success-story to leave their frequently repressive home countries in order to test their individual talents and chances abroad are now forced back into the fold of their native communities. If women emigrated in order to be rid of the constraints of paternalistic culture, they now not only encounter discrimination as representatives of the home culture but find themselves additionally caught in the net of an identity politics that frustrates their chances for American assimilation. Diaspora is not only a consequence of globalization; it is itself determined by the effects of globalization. Emigrating to another country no longer allows one to make a clean break with the past; on the contrary one’s ethnic affiliation with all its attendant responsibilities re-emerges – a ghost that has followed the emigrant and catches up with him after arrival. The contemporary scenario of diasporic communities privileges communal collective rights over individual rights, collective identity over private self.” 27

Particularly for Indians, the notion of collectivity is inherent in the culture as India itself is a multicultural nation. Sunil Khilnani writes in this regard,

“From its very earliest days it claimed to speak for the nation and did so by stressing India’s right to collective liberty... Its demands were not for the equal rights of all individuals but that culturally Indians should be at liberty... Liberty was understood not as an individual right but as a nation’s collective right to self-determination.” 28

Diaspora have a troubled relationship with host countries, the relationship which suggests a lack of acceptance of new culture or the possibility that another calamity might befall the group. They have a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement. Thus, multicultural societies make diaspora feel to be at home. Monika Fludernik writes,

“In the present-day diasporas, one encounters utopian visions (we are again with Mishra’s diasporic ‘imaginary’) that promise peaceful existence in a tolerant society, a society in which one’s collective identity can be cherished and preserved despite physical distance from the homeland. These multicultural societies figure as places where one can be at ‘home’ even when not at home.” 29

Monika Fludernik here uses Vijay Mishra’s theory of ‘Diasporic Imaginary’ which has already been discussed. Multicultural literature creates what Benedict Anderson termed ‘Imagined Communities’. To understand the term, one needs the reference of Vijay Mishra’s theory of ‘Diasporic Imaginary’ which means creation of homeland in imagination and
construction fantasies of homeland. As Anderson puts it, a nation is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their nation. Members of the community probably will never know each of the other members face to face; however, they may have similar interests or identify as part of the same nation. Thus, multicultural literature gives shapes to the imagined communities.

From the above discussion it can be noticed that multiculturalism is a complex concept which has many meanings in different contexts. In literature, its theory carries notions of cultural clashes, identity crisis, experiencing inferiority, transculturation, need for recognition and survival depiction of cultural diversity, consequences of hybridity.
References:


14. Ibid., p-44