



## POETICS OF EXILE: VOICES FROM THE INDIAN DIASPORA

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**Abstract:** Diasporic literature relates to its homeland through the dialectics of longing and belonging: of the feeling of being uprooted and marginalized. This predicament of all diaspora, who find themselves in a racist, alienating and strange environment, pleads to belong to a more receptive, friendly and equitable land of resettlement. People of Indian Origin, living in over seventy countries,<sup>1</sup> have contributed immensely in making the world as we see it today. They have not only survived, but prospered and constitute “an important force in the world culture”. V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, to mention a few, are some major voices of the Indian diaspora.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, marginalised, homeland, relocation, alienation, longing

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### Introduction

Migration and displacement, over the ages, has been an inherent feature of human existence. In 538 BC the Jews, the original diaspora, were banished from their homeland and led by Moses into Jerusalem. The Indian diaspora spread throughout the world in over 70 countries, began as indentured labour at the time of the British rule. Encapsulated in their fond memories, homeland for them was an idealistic place. The next generation of immigrants were professionals in search of greener pastures. Today, however, the very nature and experience of the word “exile” has undergone a change, following the demographic upheavals and revolution in communications.

Settlers who are twice removed from their homeland view the word “home”, “belonging” and “identity” differently. They speak in different “voices”, which has led to a rich, varied and complex literary expression/output. This paper proposes to examine some of these “voices”, which are even diverse in nature.

The dialectics of longing and belonging weave a timeless pattern, shifting continuously leading to acculturation; a “hybrid” identity, where the need for a geographically defined sense of “home” becomes unnecessary. The affirmation of cultural and ethnic “otherness” which leads to diversity and marginalization, a feeling of homelessness, is the other aspect of the same dialectic.

It is this turbulent streams of thoughts, experiences and voices that produce Diasporic literature. The quest of the Diaspora for a home, an identity, a sense of belonging, recognition and acceptance, is a constant urge. For them it is important to preserve the identity of their different cultures or else the need to cry out, to express, will cease to exist.

This cross fertilization or hybridization of cultures, linguistic challenges and their impact on the sensibilities and psyche of the Diasporic Indian is a matter of great academic concern/interest, leading towards a fruitful area of research.

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### Analysis

*How he survived them they could never understand.  
Had they not beggared him themselves to prove  
They could not live without their dogmas and their land?...  
But envying him even that, they plunged right through him  
Into a land of mirrors without time or space  
And all they had to strike now was the human face.*<sup>2</sup>

This is a passionate articulation of the Diaspora angst expressed by W.H. Auden in his famous poem 'The Diaspora'. It expresses the universal predicament of the exile, the Jews foremost, who some thousands of years ago in the year 538 B.C.<sup>3</sup> were led out of their native land by Moses. Succeeding generations of Diaspora, who found themselves in a racist, alienating environment; have time and again expressed similar yearnings.

Later the European conquerors spread throughout the world, colonizing and settling in, for instance, Africa and Asia, and sending forth natives of these lands, eg. Indians and Africans, as indentured labourers to places like Australia, Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius and South America. These uprooted individuals came to be known as the Diaspora of the first space. Fond memories of their homelands as an idealistic place remained encapsulated within their minds as their parched souls writhed with agony and yearned to return to their place of origin.

*"He is brought from India and kept on the coolie lines to work on the plantations....He can only go to another 'coolie' line....he cannot go back to his village."*<sup>4</sup>

The anguish of being in an alien land is poignantly felt and expressed in these words of Neelkanta Aiyer. The inevitable destiny of man and his hunger for identity is also expressed by K. S. Maniam in his novel entitled 'In a Far Country':

*"One land's grass dies. Another's jungle is cool and full of fruits. Like bats we come to the fruit trees. Then we are caught in the net."*<sup>5</sup>

The independence of the commonwealth nations led to the immigration of professionals in search of greener pastures. These affluent upwardly progressive professionals came to be known as the Diaspora of the second space. The diversity and the plurality of their cultures—aspects of post-modern society—have a special significance as they promote attention to the radical otherness of various cultures.

Today the great demographic upheavals of the last few decades and an unprecedented growth of the technologies of communication, multi media and cyber technology have changed the very nature and experience of the word 'exile'. Besides, there are many settlers now who are twice removed from the country of their origin. They may regard 'home' and 'homeland' as separate units. Take for instance, Vassanji's protagonist Ramji in his novel 'Amriika' for whom 'home' is Africa, where he grew up while 'homeland' is India. Such settlers are called the Diaspora of the third space.

The Diaspora, therefore, is like an eternal wanderer who, having drifted away from the paradise of his home is homeless in his own home country and is in exile, a stranger in the country he has migrated to. So the word "Home" no longer signifies any sense of belonging. It has become a personal choice which the individual has exercised. The question, therefore, of identity is a matter of choice taken on a daily basis between cultural heritage, on one hand, and citizenship on the other. "*Citizenship for me today is a piece of paper*", says M.F. Hussain, the famous ninety- five years old painter, who while living in exile says in an interview, "*Whether I paint in New York, Paris or Doha, I will always be Indian.*"<sup>6</sup> The lack of the need for a geographically defined sense of 'home' appears to be a universal artistic expression of the culmination of centuries of Diaspora experience.

People of Indian origin are presently living in countries spread across continents—from Surinam to Singapore and from Canada to Australia. Their contribution in making the world as

we see it today is immense. Yet they have borne the brunt of injustice, oppression and racism next only to the Africans. They have not only survived, but have also prospered. They constitute 'an important force' not only in 'world culture' as Amitav Ghosh opines, but also 'within the culture of the Indian subcontinent'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Indian Diaspora has acquired significance in several ways – the new national and cultural consciousness, the NRI factor dominating economic and professional spheres as well as a sizable world class literary production during the last few decades. The Diaspora, as we understand it in the modern sense, straddles two different cultures, existing simultaneously in two histories and two socio- economic realities. This is the Diaspora which has produced a varied and richly complex literary expression in many voices.

I would like to venture and examine here some of these 'voices', their representative works, for the simple reason that this brief article cannot cover the wide panorama of Diaspora literature. V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Nirad C. Choudhury, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai and K.S. Maniam are some of the selected few writers.

To begin with, V.S. Naipaul in 'A House for Mr. Biswas' deals with the hero's search for his capacity to love and accept responsibility. This search is articulated by the metaphor of the building of a house, which symbolizes self- respect and growth in the face of displacement and the aftermath of colonialism. However, one can hear in the voice of Mr. Biswas a malign influence of an excessive sense of insecurity converted into an urge – forceful, egotistical and subjective self- expression. The resultant self- imprisonment and despair cannot go unnoticed.

Most Diaspora people return to their homeland in a metaphorical sense. In his novel 'Finding the Centre'(1984), Naipaul cites his own experience of an imagined, distant India for the images of which he received a certain supportive philosophy. Naipaul's obsession with the idea of India, his disenchantment, when confronted with ground realities is quite similar to that of Rushdie's egotistic Salim Sinai in 1981 in his novel 'Midnight's Children'. The diasporic writer is not subjected to the daily onslaughts of raw reality. The narratives of the Diaspora are framed by distant memory and motivated by the desire to construct their own reality.

Salman Rushdie in his trend- setting novel 'Midnight's Children' uses magic realism to depict an imaginary homeland - the India of his mind. To counter the conditions of anarchy and uncertainty prevailing in India during the emergency he renders very real homelands both imaginary and unreal. The recurrent themes of migrancy and the writer's freedom to challenge authority appear hauntingly in all his works. His view is that modern day migrants must negotiate or choose selectively from the values of both cultures—the 'native' and the 'adopted'—and create a 'new', 'hybrid' identity.<sup>8</sup> Despite this emphasis on hybrid identity, in almost all his fiction Salman Rushdie prefers to return to Bombay in a nostalgic look backwards—a predominant feature of the Diaspora. In his novel *Shame* (1983), based in Pakistan, the narrator is an expatriate who returns to Pakistan for an extended visit. An outsider, who is also a cultural insider, he gives a perspective on the corruption and shamelessness among the ruling elite. *Shame*, therefore, is depicted on two levels. On the one hand, i.e. on the national level, it is embodied in the thinly veiled caricatures of Zia ul Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and on the other, the domestic level. It is expressed through the shameless oppression of women. The *Satanic Verses* (1988), meant to give voice and fictional flesh to immigrant culture was also an attempt to explore the nature of divine revelation embodied in the Koran, from the point of view of a secular person. It depicts the life of immigrants from formerly colonized third world countries now living in Britain. Immigrants respond in their own ways including absolute refusal to get transformed. Chamcha comes to England with contempt for Indians and a desire to adopt English ways. But when he suffers racial violence, he decides to become just a human being, goes back to Bombay and is reunited with his dying and, until then, estranged father/ Fatherland. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) is once again about exile, love, and loss. Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara meet each other on her arrival from New York as a refugee. They love and marry but eventually Vina

disappears one day, leaving Ormus doomed like Orpheus to search for her. The search for the nostalgic past is symbolic and typical of all expatriate yearnings in the novels of Rushdie.

Much before being recognized as a Diaspora writer Nirad C. Choudhury castigated everything Indian. The tone of his description about Kishoreganj, his native village, in 'The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian' (1951) is one of detachment. He speaks dismissively of all the building, describing them as a patch of white and brown mushrooms. He praises the British rule in India describing them as in 'Continent of Circe'(1967) and admires the Englishman for his general non- attachment to money in 'A Passage to England'(1959). But in 'Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse' the gradual disillusionment of a veteran Diaspora is visible. This change of mind, a common trait of the Diaspora, is witnessed even in W. H. Auden who migrated from England to America, was converted from Protestant to Roman Catholic and from a political writer he became a religious writer. Dr. Shyam S. Aggarwal in his critique on the book writes: "*Choudhury like W.H. Auden in 1940 is anguished and confused. It's about being unable to be English anymore.*" England had made him; his epitaph now could well be "*England unmade me*"

Amitav Ghosh, another Indian voice, pre-eminently presents history in a fictional mode. The views of this "humane historian" are heard at best in his novel 'In an Antique Land'(1992), in which he reveals the common traits of the peoples of two "antique" lands – India and Egypt. It shows how intimately linked different cultures and religions are, although modern history and politics divide them into watertight compartments. His novels are not about conflict and are set in the east. To mention a few, 'Circle of Reason' (1986) is based in the Arab world ( Al Ghazira and Algeria ) , 'The Shadow Lines'(1988) in Bangladesh ( pre-Partition Dhaka, Calcutta and London ) , 'In an Antique Land'(1992) in India and Egypt, 'The Calcutta Chromosome'(1996) in India, 'The Glass Palace'(2000) in Burma, and 'Sea of Poppies'(2008) in Mauritius ( India and Indians shipped to Mauritius ) —the saga of Indian Diaspora itself.

The feeling of alienation, the anxiety of being a foreigner is well expressed in Kiran Desai's 'Inheritance of Loss' (2006). She records the story of the perennial outsider, witnessing what it feels like to be trapped between the world of those who belong and those who are irretrievably alien. Desai's novel reads like a work bordering on the recurrent theme of longing—a characteristic trait of Diaspora literature. Longing is perhaps what the characters in the 'Inheritance of Loss' do the best. They long for home, long for love, long for acceptance--yet rarely are they skilled at achieving any of the above. The hostility between Sai's grandfather, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, a retired, Western-educated judge and his wife, whom he tries to colonize by instructing her to take off the absurd trinkets and showing annoyance at the tinkle-tonk of her bangles, becomes globally proportioned. They belonged more to the emotion of anger and hatred than to themselves. The reason why Jemu accepts Sai so willingly is because she is a lot like him, a Westernized Indian, an estranged Indian living in India. Desai tries to trace the pattern of the loss of inheritance or rather the inheritance of loss, loss as an emotional location, a sentiment shared by the characters continually torn and split by their interactions with the modern world. Desai seems to conclude that there are no safe places anymore— no place like home.

Zulkifli in K.S. Maniam's 'Haunting the Tiger' is of the opinion that Muthu cannot have a sense of belonging in Malaysia unless he gets "*into the tiger's stripes and spirits*", meaning in other words, that what marginalizes him are "*the clothes you wear and the thoughts you think*". To Muthu these are "*just clothes and ideas*" and he would rather be a chameleon. K.S. Maniam in his essay 'Writing from the Fringe of a Multi- cultural Society' says that "*this sense of homelessness in a land you have always treated as your home gives you... the courage of the chameleon, rather than the reassuring and circumscribing strength of the tiger, to continually and creatively discover the marvelous... nature of your origins.*"<sup>9</sup>

It is in fact this very inability of the Diaspora to amalgamate culturally and emotionally to their place of abode that produces ever- new and interesting voices in Diaspora writing.

According to Homi Bhabha hybridization is not a superimposition of one culture on another but a merger, a fusion. Uma Parmeswaran has beautifully expressed this:

*“Every immigrant transplants part of his native land to the new country, and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees his native river in the river that runs in his adopted place; not Ganga as the Assiniboine or Assiniboine as the Ganga, ....., but Ganga in Assiniboine which implies a flowing into, a merger that enriches the river.”<sup>10</sup>*

Yet it is perhaps the turbulence in the stream that produces good literature. For the Diaspora is still seeking—seeking a home, a sense of belonging ; seeking to understand and be understood; seeking to accept and be accepted as they are; seeking an identity which is recognized and respected; seeking to draw parallels which identify the commonality between cultures while, at the same time, respecting the cultural otherness. If this turbulence subsides and the peace of acceptance descends on the Diaspora; if the pulls of two different cultures merge into hybridization, then perhaps, the need to express, to cry out, will no longer exist, resulting in the loss of a sizable output of Diaspora literature.

The question of self and identity, the importance or relevance of one’s ethnic or cultural identity vis-à-vis the national identity of the host nation looms large over the psyche of the Diasporic Indian. The manner in which cross- fertilization of cultures impact their sensibilities and the linguistic challenges they face and how they confront and resolve them is of great concern to the creative writer. It is, therefore, of great academic interest—a fruitful area of research.

In the end one cannot but sway to the sentiments of longing – a veiled plea for belonging to a more receptive, friendly and less alienating environment so that the poet Lakshmi Gill’s bones can find not just a place to rest, but the peace that comes with homecoming in her poem ‘The Geography of Voice 50’ :

*“I cannot die here, on the streets  
Of Moncton, I tell myself over and over---  
People wouldn’t know where to send my body  
I cannot die here in this country  
Where would I be buried? ..... ”<sup>11</sup>*

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