



INDIAN DIASPORA AND INDIAN DIASPORIC WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the concept of diaspora laying emphasis on Indian diaspora and its various forms and charting its history from precolonial to modern times. The paper also reflects on the writings that evolved out of such movements and how the ethos of displacement and uprootedness led to anxiety and identity crisis, which is depicted by the writers of the Indian diaspora in their works of fiction and poetry.

Keywords: Migration, Diaspora, Identity crisis, Homeland, Culture

“Diaspora” is a Greek word, derived from the verb diaspeirein, a compound of “dia” (over or through) and “speirein” (to scatter or sow). In its various uses, diaspora has something to do with scattering and dispersal.

In 1991 William Safran constructed a closed conceptual model with multiple criteria in his article “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora*. He lists six taxonomical principles to limit the definitional boundaries around the term diaspora:

the concept of diaspora be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

Robin Cohen in his 1997 *Global Diasporas*, distinguishes between victim, labour, imperial, and trade diasporas. He uses Safran’s model and modifies it to include another dimension to the dispersal, which, according to him, may have been an “expansion” in search of trade or economic opportunities. He further adds,

diasporic communities continue to hold “a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement” and “the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance for pluralism” (26).

Throughout its history, India has received migrants from different places, and has absorbed them along with their cultures, languages, and traditions. This has made Indians adaptable to the cultures and ethnicities abroad. That is perhaps the reason why the Indian diaspora has grown and developed, and now has a significant presence in hundred and ten countries of the world. Rabindranath Tagore says about the Indian civilization that it is “like a banyan tree [that] has shed its beneficent shade away from its own birthplace. . . . India can live and grow by spreading abroad—not the political India, but the ideal India” (qtd. in Jayaram 15). Indian civilization’s growth in the unknown foreign lands has been remarkable, and despite adverse conditions, the Indian diaspora has sustained itself and grown into the third largest diaspora in the world, after the British and the Chinese. The Indian diaspora has a significant economic, cultural, and political presence in a number of countries in the world. It is estimated that besides six million Indian citizens, there are over 20 million people of Indian origin all over the world (India 680). The people of Indian origin form the single largest ethnic community in Fiji, Guyana, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago and

Surinam. They form substantial minority communities in Asian countries like Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and East Africa. They are present in significant numbers in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. As it is visible, “The banyan tree has thrust down roots in soil which is stony, sandy, marshy—and has somehow drawn sustenance from diverse unpromising conditions”. However, in the process it has itself changed. As Tinker adds, “its similarity to the original growth is still there, but it has changed in response to its different environment” (qtd. in Jayaram 15)

Drawn from various regions of India, the Indian diaspora professes varied religions, cultures, castes, and occupations. Having unique sociocultural histories and being subjected to different economic and political situations, the Indians abroad have evolved as distinct diasporic communities. “They are nevertheless Indian as they manifest in varying degrees the survival, persistence or retention of several social patterns and cultural elements whose roots and substance can be traced to India” (Jayaram 17).

Concerning their diasporic experience, the migrants mostly suffer from the trauma of being alienated from their homeland, as also the reminiscences of their past, and the anguish emanating from the loss of home. The behavioural patterns determined by the evolution of ethnicity among diasporic Indians in multi-ethnic polities show a trend towards segregation that further complicates their relationship with their “significant others”. With reference to the complications, involving ethnic relations of Indians in their countries of settlement Tinker raises the following questions:

do the Asians [Indians] create their own difficulties by their own way of life, and by remaining separate from the host society; or do their troubles arise mainly from excess of chauvinism or racism in the country of their adoption? Do they offend because they are, visibly, both pariahs and exploiters in alien societies? Or are they scapegoats, singled out for victimisation because their adopted country (or its government) needs an alibi for poor performance in the national sphere? (qtd. in Jayaram 28)

As the passage suggests, Indians withdraw into their own cultures, relying heavily on the emotional and cultural ties between them and their motherland, and try to insulate themselves from the dominant host group. The most predominant pattern of adaptation found among Indians settled abroad is cultural preservation with economic integration (Pandey 39). The first generation migrants are always concerned with maintaining their social customs and cultural practices. Conscious efforts are made by the first generation diasporic communities to pass their traditions to the future generations. However, the experiences of these cultural elements have been varied in different diasporic situations: some of them have disappeared, some have survived or persisted; others have experienced assimilation, syncretism, or change; and a few elements have sought to be revived. In their attempt to integrate in the host society, while preserving their own cultural heritage the immigrants develop a double identity and their culture becomes a “sandwich culture.”

Another feature of the Indian diaspora is the usage and visibility of their language. Indians have retained their language, wherever they have gone, be it Trinidad, Fiji, UK, or USA. Religion is another factor that has helped them preserve their self-awareness and group cohesion.

Vijay Mishra in his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, classifies the Indian diaspora in two main divisions: the “old” diaspora, which he calls “early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture,” and the “new” diaspora, which he terms “late modern or late capitalist” (2-3). The former comprised the British Imperial movement of indentured and other forms of labour to the colonies while the latter refers to the movement of Indians in the postcolonial scenario. He refers to the old Indian diaspora as the “diaspora of exclusivism” as compared to the “new diaspora of the border (of late modernity or postmodernity)” (256). He further adds that the “old” diaspora has become a part of the “new” in remigrations of Indians from the places of their first migration (3).

Diaspora can be classified on the basis of the causes of migrations: diaspora propelled by colonialism, religious persecution (as in the case of the Jews and Parsees), and political reasons (partition of the Indian subcontinent, political exiles). Along with this, there could be a theme-based categorization. Diaspora can be seen as the classical (the Jews), the pre-modern (caused by colonial forces in 18th or 19th centuries), and the modern (represented by the highflying present generation that deliberately goes by the name of diaspora not as support service agents but as executives and highly specialist academicians). Another category is of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial diaspora, which corresponds with the classical i.e. Jewish diaspora, the traditional diaspora of 18th and 19th century, and the modern diaspora respectively (Singh 225-26). The term “gunny sack” is used for the traditional diaspora, and “rucksack” for the new diaspora. The early migrants travelled to distant lands with memorabilia like a fistful of soil, their religious texts like the *Ramcharitmanas* or *Hanumanchalisa*, “as a mirror” of their identification with their homeland. The gunnysack served as a travelling bag in which they kept these items along with the “girimittiyas”—a distorted Hindi word for ‘agreement’ that the indentured labourers had to sign as a term of contract. The gunnysack, on being opened brought back the memories of their homeland, which became a source of emotional sustenance in their new existence, which was fraught with problems, pressures, loss, anxiety and distress. The migrated “girmityas” had a close bonding among them and created “little Indias” in the colonies. In contrast to this is the postcolonial/modern rucksack diaspora which refers to people for whom diaspora is a choice—a conscious effort to move out of their homeland in search of better places. The element of ‘suffering’ is absent from the rucksack diaspora discourse. Another difference, as Avadhesh Singh points out, is that while there is a possibility of return to the point of departure in the “ruck sack” diaspora there is none in the “gunny sack” diaspora (226).

Writing is rooted in culture. A diasporic writer belongs to two different worlds at the same time and hence experiences the bicultural pulls of both the worlds. The psychological experience of dislocation or sometimes ‘no location’ causes dilemmas and results in fragmented identities. Caught between two cultures, the expatriate writers negotiate a new literary space and transmute their experiences into writing. The fractured psyche of the diasporic writer sheds off its neurosis into his/her writings. Their characters live in the imaginary homelands of the minds. The diasporic writing is characterized by nostalgia and a sense of loss and displacement, a feeling of being straddled between two cultures, an anxiety to belong somewhere, racism, multiculturalism, absorption, assimilation, and representation of experiences of colonization etc. The writer feels a need to communicate, and the very acts of writing and creating become expressions of an individual or communal identity.

Diasporic writers experiment with technique, form, and language in their writings. Their writings are a fertile site of language-contact producing intertextual reverberations that inscribe the interactions between different cultures. There is hybridity in the use of language and intermixing of words from different languages. Sometimes the standard English syntax is dropped in favour of an Indian language pattern.

The approach of writers varies in the expression of their diasporic consciousness in their works. The issues of identity, racism, problems of history, intergenerational conflicts, difficulties in building supportive inter community relations receive different responses from the individual writers. Some writers remain incapacitated in their state of homelessness while some try to put an end to futile nostalgic engagements with the past, and

accept the adopted land. Their works proclaim that assimilation within the host country is the answer to the disillusion of the diasporic condition. Despite such specifications that differ from writer to writer, the discourse of diaspora, as represented in the works of different writers, cannot be categorized in such homogeneous terms, as embodying assimilation, assertion, or rejection. The differences that arise can be assigned to the writers' historical roots, or the various routes that they have followed to their current location. As Makarand Paranjape has argued that, the "old" and the "new" diasporas "produce two different kinds of literatures." According to him, the diasporas construct homelands in "accordance to their own needs and compulsions." In the old diaspora, there is a certain break from the homeland that was enforced by the distances between the motherland and the new land of settlement, slower modes of travel, and a lack of economic means to make frequent journeys. As poverty was the main factor that caused the large-scale movements of the indentured labourers to distant lands, they rarely had enough money to return to their homeland. The physical and the psychological distance were so vast that "the motherland remained frozen in the diasporic imagination as a sort of sacred site or symbol, almost like an idol of memory and imagination" ("Displaced" 9). As Vijay Mishra further elaborates, "for their emotional or spiritual renewal, "the old Indian diaspora replicated the space of India and sacralized the stones and rivers of the new lands" (qtd. in Paranjape, "Displaced" 9). The writings of the old diaspora, as Paranjape says, "are utterly marginalized, [and] they find a new currency when they re-enter the world of discourse via the new diaspora." The new diaspora differs from the old through its access to the motherland. These writers were not forced to leave their homeland, and their relocation to the metropolitan centres was chiefly a decision made for economic gains. "This breeds in them a certain anxiety, if not guilt towards the homeland. . . . The texts of the new diaspora not only describe the motherland, but also justify why it has to be left behind. . . . The narratives of the new diaspora, then, are elaborate and eloquent leave- takings, often elegiac in tone" ("Displaced" 10-11).

The diasporic writers who undergo subsequent migrations from the places where their ancestors had first arrived from India show complex relationships with their original homelands and the lands of their first or second migration. Commenting on the challenges that the twice- migrants create for the existing diaspora theories, Vijay Mishra says:

these unfixed selves, signal a diasporic awareness that cannot be contained within theories of diaspora that neglect to specify historical moments, specific experiences, and differences in historical conditioning. The twice-displaced challenge theories of diaspora which fail to consider the 'differential' and uneven experiences of migration. (158)

In the attempt to comprehend the underlying ethos in their works, the diasporic writers, therefore, should be accorded a differential treatment according to their different migration histories and experiences of migration.

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