

The Quest for Roots : Diasporic Experience in the Novels of Indian Diaspora

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In the modern scenario, 'diaspora' is viewed as a term carrying many interpretations. The diasporic experience today projects an experience of many overlapping. When we talk of the diasporas as being transnationals it implies the multiple geographical spaces inhabited by them. People living outside their homelands in some way try and maintain a connection with their homeland through history, culture and tradition that they religiously edify in their host lands. They look back from the outside, not letting go off the baggage that they carried when they first left their native shores. The diasporic view their hostland or adopted land as a temporary stopover destination and hence are not able to establish an emotional bonding with the new land.

"Even in the age of communication, the place where your history and heritage is, and where may be your childhood was, when you are taken away from there it is bound to do something to your psyche and personality. This is an increasing documented but also imaginatively, creatively reconstructed for it to be understood." (Sareen)

The above line by S.K. Sareen brings from *Home Everywhere: The Consciousness of Diasporic Belonging*, about the fact that it is home which gives birth to the sense and feeling of homelessness, rootlessness and homesickness. Home is the main reason behind any diasporic

experience. If a person has no home then there is no question of his being alienated anywhere. It is in the home where a person's roots are fixed and a person without a home has no place to live in and has no survival with true existence. Migrated and dispersed people not only experience their physical journey but have a sweet and bitter effect on their psyche with the sense of retrieving memories of their original home.

Life is said to be an endless journey, and 'home, it has been said, is not necessarily where one belongs but the place where one starts from.'" *In The New Parochialism: Homeland in the writing of Indian Diaspora* Jasbir Jain avers that "the word 'Home' no longer signifies a 'given', it does not necessarily connote a sense of 'belonging', instead it increasingly foregrounds a personal choice which the individual has exercised, and 'home' and 'homeland' are for all practical purposes separable units. Uma Chaudhary enlists the inherent oppositional tendency in the construction of homeland associated with the Diaspora people who travel far away for their homeland in search of a better life when she says: "the realist discourse of home relies on a long standing conceptual structure in which two figures are balanced and constructed as opposite: the figures of belonging and exile. 'Home' here signifies the nation, cultural values, social values and spiritual

values; home represents the nation and its principles. Above all 'home' signifies one's roots, of existence'. Home often keeps both the terms 'homelessness' and 'homesickness' together, and during exile both the endless feelings stand inseparable to each other.

It is the 'Diaspora' which comprises the history of slavery, indentured labour, the material aspects of migrant labour and livelihood, along with abstract notions like homelessness, homesickness, memory, nostalgia and melancholy. Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, remarks that "„ although the Únhomely" is paradigmatic colonial and post colonial condition, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiates the powers of culture differences in a range of trans-historical sites."

In case of failure in adjustment and location in abroad or other province with inhabit culture ethics, a dispersed or migrated person reaches at the state of dilemma whether he has managed himself to escape from his original culture or has made him able to locate him in new culture atmosphere. His dilemma gives birth to the abstract notions of homelessness and homesickness, because neither one is able to escape from one's original culture nor can one locate oneself in that cultural atmosphere where one is residing currently. Gorffrey Hartman is right when he writes in *The fateful Question of Culture* that 'homelessness is always a curse.⁶' Thus, dislocated circumstances are often reflected in exile literature. Atanu Bhattacharya is of the view in *Everything is there: Relocating the Diasporic Space in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies* that "it is no 'dislocatedness' that defines the Diaspora, but the 'locatedness'. He further emphasizes that

the Diaspora is undoubtedly the space of overlapping boundaries. But these boundaries do not necessarily lead to politics of heredity; therefore, it constitutes a politics of segregation, an innate ability in the diasporic individual to reclaim his identity as well as construct the other that gives stability to his self.

Different critics give different descriptions of Diaspora to signify Indian Culture and its location and dislocation abroad.

Diaspora basically used to refer to the dispersion of Jews after the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. In modern times, however, the term is applied to describe any group of people who are so dispersed. Harsha Patadia finds one of the reasons of dispersion and migration in multiculturalism in *Migration and Relational Balancing between the Cultures* when she says, 'One of the reasons for the want of better life, education, stable economy or attraction of materialistic life.'⁸

But living in multicultural society and being characterized by and ethnic identity, the Indian communities abroad are required to negotiate the problem of ethnicity. They have to experience ethnic discrimination that causes a great dislocation of mind and heart. Stendra Nandan avers in *The Diasporic Consciousness: From Biswas to Biswasghat.* "Interrogating Post-colonialism Theory, Text and Context" that "The Modern Indian Diaspora- the huge migration from the subcontinent that most important demographic dislocation of modern times: it now represents an important force in world culture."⁹

Post-colonialism brought an historical period where multicultural and cultural discrimination and cultural dislocation issues concerning were highlighted along with the sense of hybridity, alienation, identity "a sense of

rootlessness and the longing to search for some centres of shelter which writers and critics such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldua, Theodore Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Derek Wallell Deleuze,, Guattari, V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie have contributed a lot to describe diaspora as a multidisciplinary field and later emphasized its cultural perspectives. The contemporary Indian diasporic writers, such as V.S. Naipaul, Haqif Kureishi, Michael Ondaatje, Uma Paremswami, Meena Alexander, Bharti Mikhherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Gloria Anzaldua, Arunima Sinha, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amitav Ghosh, Hari Kunzru, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kavita Deswani, Sara Sulegi, Agha Shahid Ali and Salman Rushdie explore the themes of culture consciousness, rootlessness, alienation, homelessness and dislocation in their works. Novelists like Naipaul, Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri have made a mark while residing abroad.

The modern Diaspora Indian writers can be grouped into two distinct classes. One class comprises of those who have spent a part of their life in India and have carried the baggage of their native land offshore. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee, were all born in India and became permanent residents of foreign countries. The other class comprises those who have been bred since childhood outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an exotic place of their origin; V.S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri were born abroad, and nevertheless, they do not remain untouched to their origin. N. Sharda Iyer in *A House for Mr. Biswas: A Study of Cultural Predicament* remarks., "East Indian by descent,

Trinidadian by birth, English by virtue of his Oxford education , Naipaul has given credence to inheriting something of his insecurities of the transplanted colonial with an ambiguous identity. The Indian background has become part of mixed culture."

For the present research paper the works by three male and two female writers of Indian Diaspora have been selected with aim to study their perception of distinct diasporic experience. The works selected are V.S. Naipaul's *Magic Seeds*, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, Chitra Banerjee's *One Amazing Thing* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*.

One of the male diasporic writers, V.S. Naipaul has gone through expatriate experience in his real life. He is imbedded with pain of his displacement. Therefore, he reflects and social conflict in *A House for Mr. Biswas*; expatriate sensibility in his non-fictional works *The Middle Passage* , *The Area of Darkness*, and *India: A Wounded Civilization*. Rootlessness, alienation and psychological defences in status, power and sex in *The Mimic Man*; memory and the myth of origin and disorientation of identity, sensibility and sensuality in *Half a Life*. However, V.S. Naipaul takes up more serious issues relating to Trinidad in his two novels *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Both the books depict the microcosm of Hindu Immigrants with multicultural phenomenon. *A Bend in the River* and *Guerillas* take up the theme of post-colonial scenario in Africa. In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul continues with the theme of homelessness.

Born in 1932, the Nobel prize winner in 2001, V.S. Naipaul is a basically from Uttar Pradesh. Through his experience in displacement he

wonderfully inculcates all these issues in his works. V.S. Patel in Naipaul's *Half a Life: A Study in Diasporic Experience*. "Interpreting Indian Diasporic Experience" says "In the diasporic literature, the dislocation and consequent loss of identity have been popular themes and Naipaul is apparently a champion of his issue."

Naipaul's vivid description of the different castes of prisoners reveals much about Indian society as a whole. The protagonist Willie Experiences in *Magic Seeds* are significant, he sees the revolutionaries as people reluctant to let go of old ideas about home and country. Willie also notices that some guerrillas experience the same displacement as himself, finding in their futile war a sense of purpose. Others are motivated by the thing as inane a sexual frustration, or as significant as childhood beating or lifelong suffering due to the machination of upper class. Therefore, Willie brought the issue of identity, sense of alienation and exile though his endless journey in various countries. But it is Patel who compares Willie with albatross in "The Ancient Mariner" and brings out the theme as "the Loss of Identity, Sense of Alienation and exile is the lot of missed cross breed, unpedigreed class.. the stigma of being a second rate citizen keeps Willie preoccupied like the Albatross in "The Ancient Mariner" around the Ancient Mariner's neck."

Another male diasporic novelist who plays significant role to promote concepts like identity crisis, cultural dislocation and exile, Amitav Ghosh is that literary figure who evokes "post colonial situations and cultural dislocation."¹⁴ Born on 1956 in Calcutta, Ghosh is an Indian Bengali writer. He was educated at the Doon School, Delhi University and Oxford University. At present, he is living with his wife in New York. His Novels *The*

Hungary Tide and Shadow Lines inculcate the themes of partition and freedom, violence, futility of drawing lines across a nation to form two nations, agony of displacement, and a sense of alienation in the adopted land and the constant dream of return to one's land. Thus, Amitav Ghosh from his commencement in writing novels rightly depicts with variety of themes. His *In An Antique Land* is a travel book which explores incompatible difference between the culture of the writer and the Egyptians. It could be called historical novel. His first novel *The Circle of Reason* comprises motifs and metaphor with journey motif as the author himself has travelled from England to Delhi and later to Egypt and England. *The Calcutta Chromosomes* has some leading themes, such as , disappearance and discovery, sense of space and time, theme of quest and so on. K.K. Parekh in *The Theme of Quest in The Calcutta Chromosome,* "The Fiction of Amitav Ghosh" says that "it seems that the author is very well rooted in his own culture-the Indian. The novel, also explores the cyclic time concept and hence the treatment of time is also the Indian one."

The Glass Palace highlights unexpected relationships across counties and cultures, political and ethical issues, exploitation, the dehumanizing effects of racism and dispossession, struggle for love and death, and cultural dislocation which not only the king, the queen and Rrajumar Raha faced but the other minor characters also remain untouched to this. Amitav Ghosh's fiction is *Sea of Poppies* was published in 2008. It is a historical novel that unfolds in north India and the Bay of Bengal in 1838 on the eve of the British attack on the Chinese ports known as the first opium war. In this novel, Ghosh dramatizes two great economic themes of the nineteenth century, the cultivation

of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for Chinese market and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugarcane for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. Thus some of the issues on diasporic experiences through the indentured labour and its close association with home and homelessness, identity crisis and dogmatic influence in the Indian society are elaborately described through the main characters like Deeti, Benjamin Burnham, Neel Rattan Haldar etc.

Along with Naipaul and Ghosh, a Parsi novelist Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay, plays a very vital role in depicting diasporic experience through his novels. He is a diasporic writer of the South Asian origin in Canada like Uma Parameshwaram, Himani Banerjee, Tasmin Latha and others. Sumita Pal in *In search of Roots Parsi Fiction* states that "Rohinton Mistry... successfully evokes a sense of loss and nostalgia in the immigrant's experience and the alienation of Parsis in India. He reflects the hope of a person of merging into the culture of the adopted land and the concealed desire to go back to their Native Land."

His *Such a Long Journey* focuses on the Parsi community in India with its customs and beliefs. The novel highlights the communal life of Parsis in Post independent India. Various issues such as corruption in high places, minority complexes, social disorder, turmoil in social political scenario have been vividly depicted, "Rohinton Mistry is not only to fight for a cultural territory but also to create distinct identity of their own."

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry focuses on the history of his homeland, his community, his family and reveals his diasporic consciousness

tremendously. During the recent decade, several Parsi writers like Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and others, beside Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Meher Pestonji, Keki Daruwalla, have emerged as significant writers of Parsi literature.

The novel *Family Matters* explores the problems faced by an average middle class Nariman's family. It contains many details of the Parsi Practices, rituals, intolerances and great dilemmas among India's Parsis, Persian descended Zoroastrians, to wider concerns of corruption and communalism. By associating Mistry's traits of being a diasporic writer with Salman Rushdie, it is remarked that, "Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of 23. This imaginary homeland something of a literal capital within South Asian diasporic writing today has inevitably led to comparisons with Salman Rushdie, another Bombay born author now based abroad. *Critical Perspective*. ([http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/\[pst/Canada/literature/mistry/takha/html](http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/[pst/Canada/literature/mistry/takha/html)]).

Among Indian women diasporic writers, the youngest Kiran Desai, the daughter of great Indian woman novelist Anita Desai, has made a remarkable landmark in the field of Indian diasporic writing with her award winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. She was awarded Booker Prize in the year 2006 as well as the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award in the same year. Born in Chandigarh, she spent her childhood in Pune and Mumbai. She moved to England at the age of fourteen. After one year her family moved to US and she studied at Hollins University and the Columbia University.

Her *The Inheritance of Loss* has won international applause. In one of the reviews, Pankaj Mishra says, "Although it focuses on the fate of a few powerless individuals, Kiran Desai's extraordinary new novel manages to explore, with intimacy and insight just about every contemporary international issue: globalization, multiculturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence, despite being set in the mid 1980's it seems the best kind of post-9/11 novel." *The Inheritance of Loss*, a historical novel, is set in the times of Indo-Nepal insurgency. It is essentially the story of the judge, Jhemubhai Patel and Sai and orphaned granddaughter of the retired judge in Kalimpong. It is partly set in India and USA. She is westernized Indian brought up by English nuns. Along with Sai and her grandfather, Gyan and Biju are the other protagonists who suffer with dislocation and homesickness. Gyan joins a Nepalese insurgent movement that demands its own homeland. He is the guy whom Sai falls in love with. Biju the son of a cook has been sent to America, as an illegal immigrant who works in hellish kitchen one after another. He is exploited, poor, terribly lonely and homesick. He struggles even for his survival. Thus, the novel is a composition of diasporic experience faced by various characters.

Some of the leading themes as horror of alienation and despair, issues of racism, dislocation, assimilation and post-colonialism, sense of fear and oppression and comment on class, nationality and identity find expression in this novel.

Besides Kiran Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakurnai does not remain untouched in promoting Diasporic writing through her tremendous novels. She was born in India, she left

Calcutta in 1976 and came to the United States. She completed her Master Degree from Dayta University and PhD from the University of California. Divkurnai currently teaches at "University of Houston". She lives in Houston with her husband Murthy and his two sons. Her first book of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* won many awards. Her other published novels are *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, and *The Vine of Desire*. She has written three books for children, *Neela: victory Song*, *The couch Bearer*, and *The Mirror of Fine and Dreaming*. *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* is her latest book of short stories featuring tales set in India and America. The stories explore the transformations of personal landscapes real and imagined brought about by the choices men and women make at every stage of their lives.

The latest novel *One Amazing Thing* (2010) is a tremendous fictional work written in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*' style. This novel encircles nice characters who are customers in Indian visa office in an unnamed American city. An upper Muslim American named Tariq struggles with the fallout of 9/11. A graduate student suffers from intricacies in love. An afro-American ex-Soldier who is searching for deliverance or redemption. A Chinese grandmother with her secret past and two- visa worker having an adulterous affair play significant role as they struggle for their survival. These psychologically and emotionally stressed people decide to tell their life stories. Each tells one amazing thing that has never been told before. These stories consist romance, marriage, family matters, political upheaval and self-discovery predicting human experiences.

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