

## The Voice of the Global Indians: The Significance of New Indian Diaspora Literature

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### Abstract

*Diaspora literature occupies a prominent place in Indian English literature today. Immigration has given wider opportunities to the Indian writers to express their experience and anguish in a new land. Indian diaspora literature has acquired an increasing significance in the contemporary world literature and it is one of the most discussed topics in the current intellectual debates all over the world. In the recent years, several researches have been done on the works of the Indian Diasporic writers who are settled all over the world. Twentieth century has provided wider panorama for the Indian immigrants to exercise a great impact on the culture, society and history of the 'new land'. At the same time, they nostalgically recall the custom, culture, language and people of their mother land. Some of the gifted Indian settlers began to record the life and longings of the immigrants effectively in their writings. Indian English literature includes diasporic literature as a major genre today. The study of diasporic literature gives an opportunity for the native Indians and settlers abroad to understand what is to be an Indian in a foreign land. This research papers analyses the challenges experienced and the opportunities obtained by the Indian settlers in a foreign land and how they are recorded in the contemporary Indian English Literature.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Challenges, Opportunities, Multiculturalism, Class order, Hybridity*

The word 'diaspora' refers to the scattering of Jews after their captivity in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C. The term originates from the Greek word 'diaspeirein'. It is derived from the two words 'dia' which means "about, across" and 'speirein' meaning "to scatter, sow". Originally it is found in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible ("Deuteronomy" xxviii). While this specific historical sense is still used modern-day definitions of the Jewish diaspora can refer to the displacement of Jews at other times during their history, especially after the Holocaust in the 20th century. The term can also refer generally to Jews living today outside of Israel. The New Testament refers it to the body of Christians living outside Palestine.

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The term ‘diaspora’ also has been applied to the similar experiences of other people who have been forced from their homelands. It has a rich meaning today encompassing different kinds of migration. As William Safran notably argued, “. . . diaspora was deployed as ‘a metaphoric designation’ to describe different categories of people – ‘expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities . . .’” (qtd. in Cohen 1). In his illustrious work *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Robin Cohen categorises them as victim diaspora, labour diaspora, imperial diaspora, trade diaspora and deterritorialized diaspora.

The trans-Atlantic passage of Africans under the slave trade of the 17th to 19th centuries is called the African diaspora. Apart from the slave trade, African diaspora includes South Africans who immigrated to the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada for various reasons. Another notable diaspora is the dispersion of the Armenians due to the invasion of various colonising groups including the Medes, the Islamic arms, the Seljuk and the Russians. The above mentioned are forced migrations and hence they are called victim diaspora.

The World Wars made the Southeast Asians disperse to different continents. The South Asian diaspora is one of the largest migrations in the history of the world. Poverty was the main reason for their emigration. They immigrated to countries like South Africa, Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica, Fiji, Mauritius, Singapore and Malaysia. This includes a large number of Indians who left British India dreaming of a better future. This is termed as labour diaspora.

Imperial diaspora refers to the emigration of the British to various parts of the world including Asia, Africa, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Rhodesia and the United States of America. As Cohen points out, “But the bulk of British emigrants left because new opportunities – land and work to be blunt – were available in greater measure than in the British Isles” (69). Trade diaspora refers to the Chinese and Lebanese migration. Cohen describes them as “a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed communities” (83). Deterritorialized diaspora refers to the ethnic, religious and historical experiences of the Caribbeans, the Parsis, the Sindhis and the Sikhs.

Apart from this, there are several other reasons for migrations across the globe. The ancient Greeks had spread their culture, religion and language to different parts of the world. They conquered Sicily, Southern Italy, Northern Libya, Southern Spain, and Southern France and established their States there. They colonised Asia and Africa under the rule of Alexander the great. They did not aim to settle in these lands of conquest yet later period provided them fame and comfort to make them their home land.

In the present century, the meaning of diaspora can be used to refer not only to a group of people migrating from a country or region but also to some aspect of their culture. To quote James Procter, “In postcolonial studies, ‘diaspora’ can appear both as naming a geographical phenomenon – the traversal of physical terrain by an individual or a group – as well as a theoretical concept: a way of thinking, or of representing the world”

(151). The aesthetics of ‘new diaspora’ begins from the colonial experience of the people who for want of opportunities of employment at home or due to exploitation by the coloniser, shift to another country. Transcending boundaries is an ongoing process and its scale has become complex and ambivalent in the contemporary world since “many social groups want to reach in and reach out, to be simultaneously ethnic and transnational, local and cosmopolitan, to have a comfort zone and a questing impulse” (Cohen 17-18). Diasporic experience is not to be equated with mere transnational movements. Transnationalism is related to the forces of global capitalism whereas diaspora addresses the migration and the displacement of people. In the words of Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, diasporic experience indicates the “more positive fertility of dispersion, dissemination and the scattering of seeds” (4).

Indian diasporic literature has the worldwide context today. It has become a forum for expressing the emotional and psychic consequences of immigrant experiences. The writers of Indian diaspora realistically portray this state of existence. Their writings are also called as ‘expatriate writings’ or ‘immigrant writings’. ‘Immigrant’, ‘exile’ and ‘refugee’ are words often linked with diaspora. ‘Immigrant’ refers to the location, a new land and physical movement. Many Indian soldiers were taken to different countries to fight in the World Wars I and II in the beginning years. India contributed a big chunk of soldiers to the British to fight for their sake. There were also few people who migrated to neighbouring countries due to the

partition of India. Attia Hosain, a muslim writer, moved to London in 1947 because she could not choose to stay between Pakistan and India. Soon many people started immigrating to Western countries in search of employment, business, education and expertise.

Indians have contributed a great deal to the making of the world as it is seen today. Abolition of slave trade gave opportunity to the South Asians especially Indians to contribute to the building of the colonial world. As Makarand Paranjape states,

Indian coolies and workers toiled not just on plantations, but cleared forests, built roads and railways, worked on construction sites and in industries. Indian soldiers served ably in the two wars, many thousands of them perishing in battlefields far away from home. Indian blue collar workers helped rebuild Europe after World War II; their labour is one of the major causes of the greening and prosperity of the Middle East”. (2)

In the later decades Indians brought a great revolution in science, technology, education and entertainment of the Western World. Diaspora literature effectively talks about the contribution of Indians to the Western world. The contribution of Indians to the growth of the West is not faithfully acknowledged by the West. At the same time Indian immigrants are mistreated and discriminated in name of nationality, religion, colour and language. Indians suffer oppression, racism and injustice all over the world. Indian diaspora literature deals with this area of migration seriously. The recent works of the Indian diasporic writers bring to light the suppression of Indians, their pangs and anxiety with a

postcolonial awakening.

Gandhi represented the crisis of the Indian immigrants working in the plantations in Africa. His initiatives drew the attention of the world towards the problems and injustice met by these immigrants. He took the leadership in the struggle against the colonial rule in India too. Yet Gandhi was open in welcoming the mutual contribution between the East and the West. Robert Young who is greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, points out his openness in accepting pluralism. Young rightly points out: "Despite his [Gandhi's] denunciation of western modernity of derivative discourse, he freely admitted that he had taken much from western thinkers. . . . Gandhi theorized his diasporic receptivity to other ideas and cultural forms as a combination of rootedness and openness . . . open to the spiritual inheritance of all the great religions of the world" (346-347). Many diasporic writers illustrate this remarkable change of the postcolonial era in their writings. Writers like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipal, Rohinton Mistry and Amitav Ghosh represent the contribution of the East to the growth of the West and vice versa in their works. They strongly suggest that boundaries dividing nations are imaginary and they could be dissolved to form a unified human society. The works of these writers celebrate hybridity and multiculturalism. At the same time, they provide a strong resistance to 'centrality' and 'cultural hegemony'.

Indian diaspora can be broadly divided into two major categories: the old and the new. The old diaspora speaks about the sufferings of the Indian indentured labourers in the plantations of the British

colonies. The new diaspora talks about immigration across borders in the name of globalisation. Distinguishing both the types Vijay Mishra points out the specific features of both the immigrations:

The old broke off contact with India which, consequently, existed for it as a pure imaginary space of epic plentitude as may be gleaned from the reactions of the older generation of characters in V. S. Naipal's magnificent *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The new is the complex and internally fissured community of Indians, notably in the US, Canada, Britain and Australia, that has been able to keep in contact with India through travel, video, films and digital technology generally. The new occupies a desired space, the dream-world of wealth and western luxury. But it is also the space where a new form of racism (a metaracism) is on the ascendant and where race and ethnicity get dragged into debates about multiculturalism. ("Diaspora and the Art of Impossible Mourning" 26)

Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, V.S. Naipaul, Nirad Chaudri, Amitav Ghosh, Ved Mehta and A.K. Ramanujan have contributed significantly to Diaspora literature. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh are Britain-based Indian writers. V. S. Naipaul has spent his life in West Indies and England. Santha Rama Rau, Anjana Appachana and Bharati Mukherjee are living in the United States of America. Saros Cowasjee and Cyril Dabydeen are the writers residing in Canada.

The diasporic writings of the younger generation writers have substantially

contributed to the development and enrichment of twentieth century literature in English. They have produced a rich harvest of creative writing. Tilottama Rajan, Uma Parameswaran, Ashis Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji are the representative younger generation writers from Canada. Pico Iyer and Gita Mehta are from Britain. Vikram Chandra, Shashi Tharoor, Meena Alexander, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai represent the American-based Indian writers of the younger generation.

Indian diaspora literature pertains to Indian migration, their socio-economic and cultural experiences, experiences of adaptation and assimilation in the host societies. Diaspora literature aims at deconstructing the hegemonic notion which aims at singularity of culture. It celebrates the 'signs of new identity' which is inclusive and open-ended. Crossing the boundaries of nations, cultures, religions and languages, the immigrants of new generation face the challenge of accepting a mosaic culture and hybrid identity. The writers of the new diaspora consistently focus on this new cultural space which includes multiple cultures, nationalities and histories. These writers take the readers beyond the horizons of the newly adopted life to explore "new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1-2).

Indian Diasporic literature deals with the realities of life experienced by Indian immigrants in a new land. It describes their anxieties and achievements. Dislocation, identity crisis, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, alienation, being in-between,

racism, returning to one's roots, multiculturalism, hybridity and negotiation of third space are the major themes of diaspora literature. It has created new dynamic ways of thinking about identity and the notion of rootedness. Migrancy to a new country exposes the migrants and their children to displacement and discontinuity. 'Home' becomes a problematic concept both in the past and in the present. They suffer the pain of living 'in-between'. The recent works of diaspora writers show that new transnational models of identity and belonging are possible for such people. They help the migrants to understand the impartial perceptions of the world and the possibilities for hybrid identities. As McLeod puts it, "A crucial manoeuvre in this line of thought is the refusal to think of cultures as pure or holistic. . . . Instead, culture is regarded as intermingled and manifold" (218).

Multiculturalism is an important theme of diasporic writing since most countries today incorporate a variety of ethnic, religious and cultural diversities. Multiculturalism cherishes diversity where people from different communities forge a common identity without losing their individuality. Many Indian writers have discussed this theme in their recent works. They have pointed out the difficulties encountered by Indians in a multicultural world. At the same time, they suggest the possibility of assimilation and acculturation in the new land.

In spite of the liberty and flexibility enjoyed by the immigrants in the foreign lands in the recent decades, there are controversial issues that make the immigrants feel marginalised and voiceless.



Donna R. Gabaccia and Colin Wayne Leach focus on this problem specifically. As they say, “This American embrace of what is usually called multiculturalism is relatively recent, however. In the past the United States was instead more often praised or criticized for its insistence on transforming the identities of some immigrants . . . while simultaneously seeking to exclude people of African and Asian descent from the American nation” (3). As Arjun Appadurai inscribes, “The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (468).

Class order still exists in many multicultural countries and coloured immigrants are the most affected. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee classifies the class order of the US as follows: “Within the United States, the term nationality, race and ethnicity are sometimes overlapping but also quite distinct. Given a civic culture, nationality is based on citizenship; race is imposed by the dominant group and is meant to distinguish people of colour with the white majority” (46). Along with the civil right movements, literature produced by the immigrant writers have become a powerful source of voicing out the problems of the immigrants. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee further elaborates the significant role played by the minority movements and literature in this mission: “Given the historical distortions and misrepresentations of Asians in America in mainstream media, most cultural projects produced by Asian Americans and Ameri-Indians perform the important tasks of correcting histories, shaping legacies, creating new cultures, constructing a politics of resistance, and

opening spaces for the forcibly excluded” (47). In their latest works, many Indian writers have meticulously illustrated how the coloured immigrants have been undergoing the poignant experience of humiliating rejection especially after the terrorist attack of the Twin Towers in the United States. They bring out the importance of toleration, understanding and acceptance of one another which will lead to a happy and peaceful future. Celebrating multiculturalism is way to create a positive ambience in a diasporic world and the works of the modern Indian Diasporic writers signify this.

The sense of exile and alienation can be traced in most diasporic fiction. The Indian immigrants battling new worlds and their emotional struggle to find their self-identity are important themes of Indian Diaspora Literature. In the text of the writers of diaspora, the quest for identity in their homeland and the land of their adoption has been a focal point of speculation. Vijay Mishra in his notable work *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* identifies that “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (1).

The new Indian Diaspora Literature depicts the discrimination thrust on the Indian immigrants settled in various countries. It questions the consequences of centrality and power, especially in the wake of transnationalism. The works amply illustrate the attitude of modern Indian immigrants towards race and ethnicity. Having occupied the articulator’s space of the new diaspora, the modern writers register the havoc wrought in human society in the name of racial discrimination

very effectively in their works. They demand the Western world to give serious consideration to the sufferings of the Indian Immigrants. On the one hand, they discuss the exploitation met by the Indian Immigrants as fellow immigrants with compassion. On the other hand, their works act as catalysts for creating a new space for immigrants which stimulates adaption and assimilation. Thus Indian Diaspora Literature plays a significant role in voicing out problems of Indian immigrants. At the same time it has given wider opportunities for the young scholars and researchers to do innovative, impactful and socially relevant research.

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