



Diaspora and the Indian Diasporic Writers



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The term **Diaspora** was originally applied to a nation or part of a nation separated from its own state or territory and dispersed among other nations but preserving its national culture. It is said that Magna Graccia constituted a Greek diaspora in the ancient Roman Empire.' Diaspora' was, however used "to describe the sections of Jews scattered in the ancient Greco-Roman world and later to designate Jewish dispersion throughout the world in the 2500 years of the Babylonian captivity. Diaspora has its equivalents in the Hebrew words **galuth** (exile) and **golah** (the exiled).

'Diaspora' as a metaphor in literary criticism has generated a good deal of speculation which covers at the surface level experiences of the immigrated people and "ethnic communities". For some critics, it embodies "dispersal, collective memory, a sense of alienation, sanctity of the ancient homeland and a belief in its restoration, definition of the self in terms of identification with the homeland. It is clear from this remark that this term is extremely complex having many connotations. In literary criticism the term involves "the experiences of migration, expatriate workers, refugees, exiles, immigrants and ethnic communities."

Latest in the term 'diaspora' is the idea or event of 'displacement' which brings about an encounter with alien people and their culture. There may be 'displacement' of an individual



or the migration of a population or a section of a social group. The historical event of migration does not end with physical 'displacement'; it includes the struggle for survival in the host country. Of all the problems that such dislocation brings forth, it is the problem of cultural identity without which an honourable survival cannot be imagined. Even those who are engaged in the evaluation of the diasporic saga of survival have to answer the questions related to socio cultural dislocations. By and large, 'diaspora' signifies voluntary movement from one country to another. Irrespective of the purpose of expatriation or immigration, there is a longing, lingering look behind. Not to speak of all the educated immigrants, even the working class men and women are invariably nostalgic. Much of home sickness and longing for the past times, are the early states of the mind but with the passage of time and with success in the new found land, these thoughts evaporate. Nostalgia becomes strength and in the transformation of the individual, it plays a vital role. Finding himself in a melting pot, the individual attains a level of maturity that could have never materialized without immigration. He/she knows well that a movement from one society to another forces him/her "to locate himself/herself in relation to the centre". In order to be a part of the rational humanity, the immigrants change it into a power to strengthen their will to struggle, to find and never to yield.

Alienation and ***cynicism*** are the facets of the immigrant's consciousness. In recent post-colonial studies especially of diasporic writing with its implications of ***marginality*** and ***otherness*** emphasize expatriate consciousness at the centre. It is generally believed that no one today is purely one thing because imperialism brought about a mixture of cultures and identities on a ***global*** scale and this classical belief denies both ***marginality*** and ***otherness***. These are inventions of shallow minded intellectuals and politicians. When labels like Indian or British or American are followed into actual experience, they are quickly left behind. No doubt, the diaspora forms 'the other echoes' without which the music of the white garden is incomplete today. The following observation is suggestive of what the future course of action and thought should be when individuals keep on moving from one cultural entity to another.



Most of the forgoing facets of the diasporic existence are negative but the brighter side of the coin requires a brief reference. Religious, political or racial persecutions drove immigrants to the different parts of the world where they could have freedom from oppression. The earlier immigrants to America for instance, believed that they could breathe in free air and could achieve prosperity and happiness. For them Ellis Island was a symbol of fulfillment. Initially, the diaspora yearned for freedom and prosperity but with the passage of time the purpose of immigration changed as educational and economic motives became dominant. Once they reached the land of their dreams, they developed the attitude of assimilation, adaptation and integration with the new society. Almost all immigrants are gifted with the spirit of adventure without which no moment to the foreign shores can be imagined.

Diasporic literature came into existence with the settlement of expatriates and immigrants in an alien country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but its precise beginning is shrouded in the mist of history. It is, however possible to trace the history of the Indian diaspora, living in over forty four countries of the world today. Traders and cultural agencies had started visiting alien lands much before the mass movement of Indians under British rule to the newly created colonies. The Caribbean, witnessed Indian settlements in 1838 and the Fiji Islands became the home of some South Indian families in 1879. They are known as the founding fathers of the Indian diaspora. They brought to these countries their language, literature and philosophy of life, other things besides and dedicated themselves to the task of building their adopted country. This cultural awareness was observed in 1888. Naipaul is indebted to Indian thought, penetrating into consciousness and making him what he is today.

Born and brought up in Trinidad Naipaul's frictional works – *The Mystic Masseur (1957)*, *The Sufferage of Evira (1958)*, *The Miguel Street (1959)*, *A House for Mr. Biswas (1961)* and *The Middle Passage* display his indebtedness to India in a variety of ways, enabling



him to win the noble prize in 2001. The early diaspora, represented in the writings of Naipaul, is as luminous in its literature as its exploits are lustrous. During the First World War many Indians sailed to the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Canada in search of modern educational facilities and jobs. In this context a mention of two Calcutta born diasporic writers seems appropriate. They are Nirad C. Choudhuri (b.1892) and Vikram Seth (b.1952). Both of them made London their home and represent the post-independence Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom. Nirad C. Choudhuri in his works ***The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, A Passage to England, Continent of Circe, The Intellectual in India*** and ***To Live or Not to Live*** shows his anxiety for India's transformation into a modern nation while preserving her rich heritage. Choudhuri stresses the problem of survival of intellectuals in India. In both genres of the Indian diasporic literature – autobiography and biography, Choudhuri has reached the point of perfection. Vikram Seth writes with the emotional fervour of Kolkata in his veins, sometimes expressed through poetry. In his nine notable works he wrote three novels and rest is the collections of poetry. His collection of poems includes ***Mappings, All You Who Sleep Tonight***. Seth's ***Tour the Force*** is his first novel. In ***The Golden Gate*** influence of Pushkin is too obvious. ***A Suitable Boy*** set in post-independence India.

The Indian diasporic writers have recorded their new sensibility more impressively in their prose writing and fiction rather than in poetry. As it were, there exists among them some novelists who have produced classic novels like ***The Satanic Verses, Bye-Bye Black Bird, The Glass Palace, A Fine Balance, Interpreter of Maladies and Desirable Daughters***. If Choudhuri stated the literary genres of autobiography and biography in the Indian diasporic literature, V.S Naipaul sets the Indian diasporic sensibility in motion. He introduced travelogues and novels based on the immigrant feelings and emotions. Salman Rushdie's imagination added the genre known as fantasy to the fiction and Vikram Seth enriched it by using poetry for storytelling. Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghose, Jhumpa Lahiri and other novelists have taken different routes to nourish and mature this



new area of human experience. This literature is equally valuable in its poetry in the works of A.k Ramanujan, R. Parth Sarthy, Adil Jussawala, Zulfikaar Ghose, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexandar and others. These writers include thoughts, feelings and emotions of both uprooted individuals and their communities. The emotional life of the diaspora appears to be the most significant aspect of the diaspora, Indian or western.

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