

# English Literature Reflecting Nostalgia of Indian Diaspora

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## Abstract

The word 'Diaspora' has been derived from the Greek word, implying 'scattering or dispersal.' In other words, it refers to the dispersion of a people from their native land. *Diaspora literature* thus refers to such works that are authored by those who are living away from their native country. It is significant to take into account that Indian diasporic literature may also be defined by its *content*, regardless of where it was authored. It is but natural that Indian diasporic literature reflects nostalgia in it to some extent. Indian diaspora like any other diaspora of the world does not at times assimilate it due to the tendency of the community to maintain its distinctive identity. The literature of the Indian diaspora after the departure of Englishmen from India has got its own characteristics and thus has a distinct recognition. Some prominent Indian diasporic authors are as such: V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, M. G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vijaya Mishra, etc. These have earned name and fame all over the world for their contribution in the field of literature. Among these authors, some have contributed to a social reformation called the Indian indenture diaspora, too. To cite an instance, between 1879 and 1916, England launched a recruitment drive and thus recruited above 60,000 persons to work as indentured laborers in the sugar plantations of Fiji. These laborers had traumatic experiences. Such memory is still fresh in the Indo-Fijian community and their literature reflects this state of mind when they are in nostalgic mood. Obviously, the Indian diasporic authors have made such nasty experiences the basis of their writings.

**Keywords:** Indian, Diaspora, Literature, Nostalgia

## Indian Diasporic Literature & Identity

Indian diasporic literature has made its presence felt all over the world in recent decades. As an Indian, it pleases that the popularity of such literature is on the rise. Indian diasporic literature has been recognized to such an extent that it has also found its place in the curriculums of various prestigious universities all over the world. This fact itself suffices to prove that Indian diasporic literature has come of age. Displaced communities and their settlement elsewhere play a dominant role in it. The whole range of literature comes under the category of Indian diasporic literature from indentured laborers to educated people wishing for a better life in other countries. The sense of rootlessness reflected in nostalgic literature is the basic trait of diasporic writers. The quest for 'home' and the transformation of the identities are an integral part of diasporic discussion and the authors make the delivery of such content quite skillfully.

With the attainment of Independence, the Indian diasporic community became more conscious. It was partly due to the fact that the West gave recognition and acceptance to it. Here this fact should not be overlooked that writers such as Raja Rao became an expatriate even before the independence of India and Nirad C. Chaudhuri stayed all through his life in Britain. The latter's unpleasant views were not generally accepted in India. Indian English literature has now practically gone beyond the barriers and almost merged with the mainstream English literature. Indian authors like

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Naipaul and Rushdie are the chief pillars of this category. They are, for the practical purpose, cosmopolitans. The permanent theme dealt by them is based on the sense of displacement haunted by nostalgia. They deal with a geographical dislocation as well as with a social-cultural sense of displacement nostalgically. Their exilic state has accelerated the sense of displacement deeply seated in nostalgia.

### Salman Rushdie

He is one of the prominent authors contributing diasporic writing. He was born in Mumbai in 1967 but his parents migrated to Pakistan later. He found this decision too hard to welcome. He could never accept this decision of his parents from the core of his heart. The fallout was that he became a no man's land, torn among three countries and yet belonging to none. In his works, he has described his nostalgic experiences in one way or the other. His experiences are varied and at times nasty, bordering on bitterness as well. Time and again his nostalgia urges him to create a world of literature. Rushdie's debut novel *Grimus* highlights alienation and a sense of estrangement. Flapping Eagle, the protagonist acts like an immigrant, newly arrived in a country unlike from his native land. The cultural distinction is also highlighted there. He makes an attempt to merge fully into the culture and values of the host country. But for Rushdie, the wholesale assimilation is not the end result. Rather, he recommends that the migrant negotiate the culture and values of both 'native' and 'adopted' homes, strategically drawing upon each to create a new, hybrid identity.<sup>4</sup>

While Flapping Eagle's problem was rootlessness rooted in nostalgia, Rushdie had inherited diverse experiences. His *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* bring out the ordeal of displacement. The characters are nostalgic in their narration. Although Saleem Sinai, the hero of the novel travels through India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, there is hardly any place for him where he can settle down. They are haunted by nostalgia living in an alien country. The characters of the novel are always on eternal quest, the quest for some 'imaginary homeland.' Thus the English literature of Indian diaspora is in a quest of long-lost homeland with which they want to revive a connection.

*Shame* also narrates the story of an expatriate. The shamelessness and greed of the ruling elite are described here. The speaker acts as an outsider and has some advantages like the long geographical sight with which he describes everything. As Salman Rushdie himself remarks, "Writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties –

that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."<sup>10</sup>

### VS Naipaul

A colossus figure amongst all Indian diasporic authors, he has contributed a lot to the English literature of Indian diaspora. His grandparents were among those indentured labors that were forcibly recruited by the Englishmen. They were sent to serve as plantation laborers in the remote lands during the rule of British Empire. His place of birth is a small town, viz., Chaguanas on the island of Trinidad. However, for a long time he has been living in Britain, amounting to an act of self-imposed exile on his part. Thus the sense of 'homelessness' based on nostalgia comes naturally to him and it is the main thing on which most of his writing is based. *A House for Mr. Biswas* was published in 1961. It won him a lot of laurels. The protagonist of the novel Mohun Biswas is after his father Seepersad Naipaul. There are elements connecting to the memories of Naipaul's childhood throughout the novel. In his struggle to break free from the clutches of the extended Tulsi family, Biswas becomes almost a tragic character. In a bid to mold Biswas's life, Naipaul raised the pitch of the novel to something similar to that of a tragedy. Biswas's quest for a new 'house' is a hunt for belonging, that he is not the 'other', to possess a place in an alien land. The diasporic sensibility of Naipaul comes into full play to give the message. Leon Gottfried aptly remarks, "In a century marked by political upheaval, mass migration (forced and otherwise), colonization, and revolution, it is inevitable that much of modern literature should be a literature of exile. Most poignant within this category is the literature of exiled persons who are displaced or dispossessed, who do not have, never have had, and, by the nature of things, never could have a home against which their condition of exile can be assessed. The writings of VS Naipaul draw upon an experience so entirely based on layered levels of alienation and exile that his works become paradigmatic of the whole genre, and hence of a major current in the twentieth-century life, thought, and, art."<sup>2</sup> Naipaul is also no exception to the fact as cross-culturalism lies at the heart of any diaspora and TA Caribbean, an author of Indian origin living in England, is the prime example of cross-cultural influence. Paranjape states, "The diaspora must have nostalgic experiences based on a cross-cultural or cross-civilization passage. It is only such a crossing that reflects in the unique consciousness of the diasporic literature. Even if voluntary, the passage must involve some significant tension between the source and the target cultures. It is through this displacement and ambivalence that what we consider the diasporic is engendered."<sup>1</sup>

Much of Naipaul's life is described about a young man who has lately come, in the sixties, to England to make his way in the world. Willie Chandran is the protagonist of the novel and he wants to re-invent himself in proper order. Naipaul himself has said about the hero that the protagonist had to "Re-learn everything he knew."<sup>5</sup> The genesis of Willie's problems lies in his cultural displacement. He feels alienated. He finds himself rootless. His sense of alienation comes to the fore in his speech when he leaves Ana, "I can't live your life any more. I want to live my own."<sup>5</sup> In this way, it is quite obvious that Willie, like any other member of a diasporic population leads his life in a way marked by displacement and quest for belongingness.

### Jhumpa Lahiri

Widely acclaimed as a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, she was born in London and later her family shifted to the United States of America. The *Namesake* (2003) narrates the life of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. The cold and callous American society takes Gogol as its victim and he tries utmost to break free from the shackles of Indian traditions in order to gain acceptance by the American world. He is an ABCD – an American Born Confused Desi – who does not have the answer to the question: "Where are you from?" The clash of cultures manifests in the submission of loyalty to both India and America. The first-generation settlers hand down their experiences to the second generation about the homeland, but for them the idea is quite complicated and at times confusing. Indians at home and Americans in public add to the complexity. Even though Ashoke and Ashima tend to cling to their roots, for Gogol and for a lot of people like him it is much easier to accept the American way of life. As Lahiri herself writes, "Although he can understand his mother tongue, and speak it fluently, he cannot read or write it with even modest proficiency. On trips to India, his American-accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives...living with a pet name and a good name, in a place where such distinctions do not exist – surely that was emblematic of the greatest confusion of all."<sup>6</sup>

And again, his sense of dislocation is discernible in the statement, "He knows that deshi, a generic word for "countryman", means "Indian", knows that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as desh. But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India."<sup>6</sup>

Gogol is torn and sandwiched between India and America, between tradition and his individual self and being a second-generation settler in America he feels himself alien. But towards the end of the novel, he realizes his heritage and the value of his Indian identity.

Lahiri has again brought out the same sense of dislocation

in her latest novel *The Lowlands* (2013), through the story of two brothers Subhas and Udayan. The bond between them is broken when Udayan gets involved in the Naxalite movement. Subhas went to United States of America to receive higher studies. But he returned when Udayan was killed in a police encounter and married Gouri, the young, pregnant wife of Udayan. Gauri, while living in Rhode Island never recovered from the guilt of marrying her husband's brother, for deserting the place where her husband died. Their daughter Bela is nostalgic for the native language as she passes a group of Bangladeshi construction workers at the end of her street in Brooklyn. She is filled with the sense of not existing then.

### Amitav Ghosh

One of the iconic authors representing Indian diasporic literature, he shifted to Delhi for higher studies. At present he is living in New York. In 2008, he brought out *Sea of Poppies*, the first part of the famous Ibis trilogy. It describes the period of colonial India nostalgically. The novel has brought out the nostalgic experiences of those indentured laborers. Deetti, the protagonist of the novel, who is destined to die in her husband's funeral pyre is rescued by Kalua. Then both of them elope together only to land in a ship called Ibis, carrying girmitiyas to Mauritius. The description of these people is vividly presented in the book:

The road was crowded with people, a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards. This crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows. It was clear that they had already marched a great distance, for their dhotis, langots and vests were stained with the dust of the road. The sight of the marchers evoked both pity and fear in the local people.<sup>7</sup>

The novel is set in a period when the pre-opium war was on, and the very description of the girmitiyas reminds the fact that they were very poor people, who agreed to the terms of working as laborers in Mauritius in the hope of a rosy future. The origin of the name girmitiya, as Ghosh disclosed in his book: They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' – agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished as if into the netherworld.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, Ghosh's vision takes shape in the historical records of the first generation of laborers, who left their native land never to return again, to settle in a foreign country where they would never again find their true selves. While Ghosh records the historical accounts of the girmitiyas, Jhumpa Lahiri in her novels highlights the crisis of identity and belongingness.

## Others

In British author Divya Mathur's story *Antim Teen Din* (Last Three Days), Maya is the protagonist. While the story centers on Indian culture, the character is European in its bearing. Maya has got only three days left to live. She has important decisions at hand: dividing her sarees and her favorite jewelry among daughters and daughter-in-law, cleaning the house, placing order for her coffin, making sure she is looking good at the time of her death and the like. As she goes about in a mechanical way preparing for her death she learns to live again. Nostalgia and loss are not the exclusive property of Indian diasporic authors. They can be felt by even those living even India. For example, Kashmiri Pandits who have been displaced from Kashmir and now are living in Delhi or elsewhere also can be nostalgic and anything written by them also may be nostalgic.

The Indian diaspora is entering into a far more complex jumble of existence. This was also the dominant opinion at the recently concluded seminar in Toronto, organized to bring together the Hindi diasporic writers of Canada and Britain. The seminar which was organized by Katha UK and Hindi Writers' Guild, discussed various approaches to story writing and the modern idiom. Expressing his views at the event, noted author and general secretary of Katha U.K. Tejinder Sharma underlined the need for the writers of the diaspora to emerge from the morass of nostalgia and assimilate the local concerns. Sharma, in an email interview, put forth that the workshop had a discussion on aspects of writing in view of the writer of a changing social setup. "Today's writer does not just reveal what happened after. He justifies whatever happened, why did it happen? He works hard to show the story rather than narrate it," Sharma says.

## Homelessness Based on Nostalgia as Theme

Admittedly, home and dislocation occur again and again as the central themes in the writings of Indian diasporic writers and the treatment of such a theme is based on nostalgia. Diasporic experience often emerges from memory – a memory of loss, of leaving the home, of not having any soul-connection with the host country and in this way diasporic literature always acts as a kind of bridge between two different cultures. It is an extended form of return. The true essence of diaspora literature is reflected in the remark of Jasbir Jain as he says, home and nation and Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia are the preoccupation of these authors as they seek to locate themselves in the new culture.

The Indian diaspora, which is the second-largest diaspora in the world, with its diversified form and presence is making its presence felt across the globe. The Indian diaspora has got skilled work force in Europe, semi-skilled workforce mainly in the Gulf region and the educated technocrats

of 'Silicon Valley' in developed countries. They are almost everywhere. They are recognized for their creativity and their contributions in the growth of the host countries. It is obviously a saga of their determination and hard work. These ingredients eventually lead them to their success.

## Pravasi Bhartiya Divas

In the recent years the organization of the "Pravasi Bhartiya Divas" (PBD) is a significant event. The Government of India has been organizing PBD since January 2003 every year. It acts as a bridge between countries and strengthens bilateral ties. India and its diaspora can benefit each other in a spirit of mutual interest. "The Indian diaspora is like a mass of variegated strands with differing forms and textures, each with its own needs and expectations."<sup>10</sup> We must feel pride in the achievements of them and it is the apt time for us to stand up and acknowledge it.

## Conclusion

Whenever any author creates literature, it is more or less the elaboration of experiences stored in life. The sources of these experiences may be direct or other ones including parents, acquaintances, friends, etc. Whenever any person decides to leave the native land, this decision is drawn after a lot of pain. In some cases, the decision is related with the survival. Obviously wherever he goes, he carries the experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant. In a good majority of the cases related to Indian diaspora, the experience is unpleasant. Obviously the literature created by the authors belonging to Indian diaspora reflects the nostalgia, narrating subjective experiences. It is also equally a fact that the experiences which are gained after paying high price cannot be easily forgotten. Such experiences are deeply rooted in the psyche of the person. The author creates a world of literature, taking recourse to the experiences gained in his life. The Indian diasporic literature reflects the nostalgic experiences of the authors, as well. However, it will not be fair to oversimplify that there is no difference between the work of the first generation and that of subsequent generations. The intensity of the experience does not remain the same and so the urge to incorporate the nostalgia in the literature also does not remain the same. With the passage of time, the complexion and content of such literature is bound to change. This is universally accepted and this is likely to be applicable on such literature as well.

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