



# Diasporic Sensibility in Indian English Novels

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**ABSTRACT:** Community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic and consequent bonding are referred to as Diaspora or Expatriate. Etymologically 'Diaspora' was used for the dispersal of Jews, when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. The term Diaspora, therefore, implies neither a forced eviction nor a deliberate rejection from one's motherland. There is no connotation of permanent or obligatory leave taking. The word Expatriate has assumed importance as a legitimate literary term in commonwealth literature. The term deals with many connotations like Diaspora, emigration, nationality, ethnicity, marginality, hybridity, etc. It means the strong feelings about the country of origin for the migrants of first generation. While for the second generation the ties and bonding with the homeland gradually gets replaced by the adopted alien country. As the second generation is born and brought up in that adopted foreign atmosphere they feel that as if their own. There exists a distinction between immigrant culture and ethnic culture and identity, because certain elements constitutes markers of identity likewise, food, clothes, language retention, religion, music, dance, customs of individual community, rites, traditions etc. These characteristics can be retained, discarded or adopted differently at different point of time and places but the feeling of oneness and a tug of roots always persist even after several years and sometimes centuries.

**KEYWORDS:** diasporic, English, novels, sensibility, literature, ethnic, culture, centuries, nationality

## I. INTRODUCTION

An expatriate focuses on the native country that has been left behind. The expatriate dwells on the 'Ex' status of the past, while the immigrant celebrates his presents in the new country. Expatriate sensibility is a widespread phenomenon in this century and George Steiner describes the expatriate writer as "the unctemporary everyman." Salman Rushdie has described the term 'exile' synonymously for emigrants and expatriates. According to Rushdie, "Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to lookback [...]" [But when we look back, because of our "physical attention" from India, we] "create fiction" [...] "imaginary homelands, India of the mind" . It refers to that; imagination plays a major role in recalling memories of the homeland. Indian expatriate writers in the recent years have created a unique form of literature which carries dual sensibility: mingling or differentiating past and present. Surely, the sense of homelessness and nostalgia for the loss of Home is one of the most important themes in such literatures.[1,2] A similar explanation has been given by Homi Bhabha: "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only realize their horizons in the mind's eye" . Arjun Appadurai speaks at length about the imagination as a "social practice", referring to the imaginary as 'a constructed landscape of collective aspirations [which is] the key component of a new global order' , the new global order that the immigrant, after dislocation, is now a part of. The title of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, presents the role of imagination and its effect on the mind of an immigrant that is being exiled is a mental state, the feeling of being a misfit in a particular given, a reject, and an outcaste. This is where the question of difference and otherness comes, the feeling of being alienated and rootless. An expatriate writer clings to the ethnic identity when he undergoes with the trauma of rejection in an alien culture. As Vinay Kirpal observes "Revival of ethnicity makes bearable to some extent the marginal shadowy existence of these migrants in the new world" . An expatriate author who lives away from his homeland aims mainly at his homeland and past, in his works. Therefore an expatriate Indian writer living abroad aims at Indianness. His sensibility as a diasporic writer forces him to select Indian sensibility as his theme in his works. A number of Indian writers in English have received international recognition. Their works are well received in the world. They have created a unique form of literature with new themes and diverse techniques in their works which have identification with the new culture, place and people. To understand the expatriate sensibility it is necessary to understand the psychology of artists in the recently liberated Third World Countries who are striving to find out a new identity.[3,4] The expatriate sensibility of the writer can select any theme related to his country, historical background, political and social life or his own personal experiences. Search for identity and clash of cultures are the popular themes in the contemporary fictional works. As Rushdie sees it, "The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles...we are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslim who eat pork" .A statement like this can be made, only by one who has actually crossed borders



and is confronted by the representations of his or her choice, assailed by guilt, for whatever reason, and wonders whether the choice made was really worth it. Such is the pain that the immigrant must bear, the 'sense of loss', the need to reclaim.

Prof. Kapil Kapoor talks about two fold structure of Indian Diaspora that is out of India Diaspora and Into- India Diaspora. Defining the nature of the Diasporic self as 'Viksipta', divided or fragmented, he grounds his argument in the Indian theoretical perspectives of Buddhist Yogacara, Patanjali and Bharat Muni. Apart from defining diaspora, his address represents 'dislocation' which varies on reasons and facts of experience, and formulates psychograph of the diasporic consciousness of various types of migrants.[5,6]

Prof. Jasbir Jain on the other hand opines that Diaspora is not merely a scattering or a dispersion but an experience determined by who travels, where, how, and under what circumstances. Past (homeland) and Present (the land of adaptation), crop up between the imaginary and real. Loneliness, isolation and 'ghettoisation' go hand in hand with success, affluence and recognition. Self is constituted through the multiple pasts co-existing in the present. She observes that the condition of isolation and separation, the state of schizophrenia and frustration provides a background for the sense of identity. Dr. Jain further talks about the two aspects of the diasporic experiences –positive and negative. It is positive in the sense that it reflects Indianness, history and identity and negative because it acts like a buffer. In her opinion self is both affected by and affects identity. Self is a deeper core and is constituted of many factors. The 'self' develops after the act of dislocation and it relates to the new environment as it negotiate the past, the cultural inheritance, geographical and historical memories and challenges of present.[7,8]

## II. DISCUSSION

Prof. Paranjape, while theorizing Diaspora in a time of globalization, identifies two categories of diaspora- the doubly privileged and doubly underprivileged. He has a word of caution about Diaspora creativity threatening to submerge native Indian English creativity; diaspora substituting the homeland, and emphasizes the necessity to resist and counter the hegemony of diaspora text. Dwelling upon the structure of dislocation he observes that a Diasporic journey is impossibility with diaspora's two-fold motif of holding on to the old and inviting the new. Theorizing two- dimensional hybridity, away from and towards India, he advocates a synergy of diaspora and homeland and interrogating of diasporic discourse with sharing and difference. Prof. Paranjape concludes with the argument that India is an 'Idea'; the idea of mind and spirit, not a territory only, and an Indian diaspora has a mystic relation

With the homeland. Indians abroad, like Jews, will never be able to forget their homeland or motherland.[9,10]

Diaspora literature or expatriate writing has emerged due to various reasons. Some of the origins that have been discussed in literary histories are enslavement; search for better prospects or exile. Chelva Kanaganayakam divides expatriate writers into two divisions. The first category is the set of people who leave their home countries and whose texts deal with the pain of living in another country. M.G. Vassanji's No New Land and Sam Selvon's Moses Ascending, which deals with the theme of alienation, are cited as examples of this type. The second sect is made up of writers who left their home country voluntarily with a sense of dissatisfaction. Their writing is not easy to define. The problem with their writing is that they do not want to stay and at the same time do not want to leave their country. Some kind of ambivalent attitude will be available in their works. Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth's works are taken as examples of this. In the words of Aronld Itwaru, "this sense of estrangement goes further. It touches upon the very notion of home, the land and place of birth. For that land there, that region, lives in us as memory and dream as nostalgia, romance of reflection, lives in us as different,[...] that to which we think we belong but no longer do" It is generally agreed that most expatriate writing delves into memories and nostalgia of the past and homeland.[11,12]

Moreover it is to be realized that expatriate writing has also been discussed with other nomenclatures such as ethnic writing or a diasporic literature. Both have undergone a number of controversies in recent debates. The term ethnicity is used increasingly from 1960s. It refers "to the fusion of many traits that belongs to the nature of any ethnic group: a composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviors, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties". Ethnic fiction means the literature of cultural differences, which is dynamic and ever changing. "Ethnicity never exists in its 'pure' form because it is always already shaped by the cultural forces surrounding it"



In expatriate writing, in the tales these writers tell, in the stories they narrate, and in the beliefs that form the matrix of their writings, there are two threads being unraveled simultaneously: that of the dominant culture and the ethnic sub-culture; theirs and ours. Sometimes the two strands intermesh so that the one may not be distinguished from the other. As one undergoes cultural or geographical or emotional or psychological displacement, one may go through any or all of these phases. Displacement and Resettlement: the outcome is 'hybrid' evolving sensibilities. "Our identity is at once plural and partial" says Rushdie, "...we straddle two cultures" and so the writer speaks in many voices, in plural tongues. In this context it may be relevant to mention Gloria Anzaldua who's *Borderlands* mentions speaking "a Patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages". Anzaldua refers to the new mestiza consciousness as one of "crossing over", of "perpetual transition", of plural personality. Expatriate writing is characterized by a pluralistic vision: there is a deliberate shuttling between two antipodal worlds, a journeying back and forth between two locales.[13]

A Diaspora writer is a liberated being. He can select 'Puranic' themes or historical background stories or political or social life of the state or the country he belongs to. More often expatriate sensibility aims at the study of author's dilemma in accepting a new culture and tradition. Out of rootlessness the author creates characters, who always suffer. Thus the cultural collision is the major theme of expatriate writers. The list of expatriate or diaspora writers in India is extensive; many writers from various parts of India are settled outside the country and select the themes that are based on Indian context, where as second category of them are born outside India and settled in India. They too select the themes relating to Indian culture, tradition and values.

The cry of intellectual loneliness is illustrated in a number of novels like Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. It is perhaps the first major novel of 'Diaspora', there is a clash of cultures, which is discussed at the philosophical, ideological level. Several other novels that highlight the alienation of individuals within the Indian Diaspora emphasize the psychological side of the individual's disorientation. Loss of identity, alienation, lack of belongingness are themes discussed by expatriate writers. Among other feature associated without deviation to the past are faithfulness to one's own cultural heritage and traditions. Writers like Kamala Markandya and Shanta Rama Rau equipped their works with the culture and tradition that exists in India.

Salman Rushdie himself has tried very often to snap the umbilical cord that binds him to the country of his origin. Take for instance the following passage from *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*:

And so farewell, my country, Don't worry; I won't come knocking at your door. I won't phone you in the middle of night and hang up when you reply. I won't follow you down the street when you step out with some other guy. My home is burned, my parents dead, and those I loved almost gone away. Those whom I still love I must leave behind for good.[14]

"I go -I hunt- alone.

### III. RESULTS

"India, I have swum in your warm waters and run laughing in your mountain meadows. [...] I have eaten your independent salt and drunk your nauseatingly sugary roadside tea. [...] India, my terra infirma, my maelstrom, my cornucopia, my crowd. India my too-muchness, my everything at once, my Hug-me, my fable, my mother, my father and my first great truth.[...]

"India, fount of my imagination, source of my savagery, breaker of my heart.

Goodbye.

He comes back to this source of inspiration every time. He cannot write unless it is about India. Take, for instance any of his works, his latest work *Shalimar the Clown*, is again focused on India- this time Kashmir, the state to which the author belonged. "There are two movements in my writing- home and away, going back to India and away from it," he



says. This back and forth pendulum like motion is found in most expatriate writing with the writer caught between the past and the present.

The trauma of being exiled in an alien land is also reflected in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Man*. His characters depict a sense of missing world. In *The Mimic Man* he presents his diagnosis of the circumscribed individual caught in cultural ethos. The action of protagonist and his disillusionment colours the tone of the novel. The protagonist feels himself to be spectral, disintegrated, pointless and fluid. Disorder, emptiness, and forlornness become part of his existence in the materialistic society of Isabella. Therefore, he craves for his roots, his homeland. As most of his works reflect his personal trauma and feelings which confirms that his characters are complete replica of his own alienated self.

On the other hand to quote Vasant A. Shahane, Ruth Praver Jhabvala is an outsider-insider. She may seem as an outsider-insider from European point of view, but in Indian artistic context she appears an insider-outsider. She is essentially a European writer who has lived in India and given to her experience of life, society and culture in this country an artistic expression. [15,16]

She has explored and explained the themes of expatriate sensibility in India and about marriages between Indian and European families. She minutely studied the impact of India on European expatriates. Her preoccupation with India confers on her a distinguished position in the world of Indian English literature. She is a Polish-Jew expatriate first in Britain and then in India and now in New York. India seems to be her theme as well as obsession. Her awareness of Indian life establishes the Indianness of her fiction. The problem of expatriates,

their psychological turmoil and cultural schizophrenia are dealt with an insight and understanding in Jhabvala's fiction.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, another eminent Diaspora writer was born in India but now lives in California. She has her roots in Bengal but has seen the new dimensions of culture by living in America. In her work she deals with the intricacies of human relationships. The characters in her stories are caught up in situations facing the realities of alienation from another country in their own.

Bharti Mukherjee and Geeta Mehta are the expatriate writers of India. They are born in India but settled in America. Bharti Mukherjee shows the extremities of Indian behavior in her works. Even though it is more than two decades since she left India for the American continent, familial ties continue to bind her to the country of her birth. She is clear about where her loyalties lie today and is at pains to emphasize that she is an American writer. Nevertheless, she feels that she belongs to Calcutta, since she was born and brought up there: "The city will remain a habit with me, but as a writer, I have developed entirely in the United States".

Geeta Mehta on the other hand hails from a patriotic family. She has struck her roots in Indian political sphere. Because of the journalistic background she has, her works feature her keen political insight. She attained perfect knowledge about the cultures of three countries. She has also acknowledged various social issues in her works. [17]

*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy has made greatest impression on the readers and critics in the west as well as has made the maximum influence and impression in Delhi. India has always remained an enviable glut of talented writers: what have been much rarer, until recently, are Indian writers who have been properly remunerated for their works. Roy's international, critical and commercial success in 1997 radically changed perceptions of Indian writing in English, and not just in Delhi. Roy's book was immediately recognized as a major literary achievement. It won the Booker and sat at the top of New York Times bestseller list for several months. It brought India home to many readers abroad especially in American markets.

Several efficient writers had of course prepared the ground for this success. Roy could not have happened so successful and well known without V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and others: in particular Rushdie's 1981 masterpiece *Midnight's Children* liberated Indian writing in English from its colonial straitjacket. His claim for English writing, which had long been amicably tolerated as a minor and minority literature, once again raised the questions



about English-in-India. It also gave birth to a new voice, one that was exuberantly cadences, as well as forms that were new to the English novel but deeply rooted in Indian tradition of storytelling. It won the Booker, as did Naipaul's *Bend Sinister*. Then in 1993, Seth produced his massive and magnificent work- *A Suitable Boy*. Rushdie's prediction that "Indians were in a position to conquer English Literature" seemed about to be vindicated.

Nevertheless, the sheer scale of this diaspora of India does not remain an odd phenomenon. From the 1890s through to the 1930, most English-speaking reader received their notions of India through the mediation of Britain-based writers such as Rudyard Kipling or E.M. Forster. That briefly changed between the 1940s and 1970s with the rise of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali and R.K.Narayan, who were deeply rooted in the soil and air of Indian land in which they were born and brought up and about which they were writing. By 1980s, London again became the place of meditation with the rise of writers like Rushdie and the like – expect that New York (the residence of, Ghosh, Geeta Mehta and Jhumpa Lahiri), Toronto (Mistry and Michael Ondaatje) and even Rural Wiltshire (home to Naipaul and Seth) how had to be added to the major centers of Indian writing in English.[18]

Eminent writers like Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth etc. are the products of this phenomenon. And to a very extent they are responsible for India's reputation and spreading its cultural and traditional values on the global level. Their personal experiences of loss and sorrow, love and longing have contributed a new dimension to literature. Always at the core of expatriate writing is the 'Mother Country', the country left behind is evoked with a measure of regret. As Rushdie puts it, "India, my terra infirma, my maelstrom, my cornucopia, my crowd. India my too- muchness, my everything at once, my Hug-me, my fable, my mother, my father and my first great truth [...]" remains an unignorable presence in all these diverse works by expatriate writers.

When we look at various expatriate writers and their works, we come to acknowledge that 'Nostalgia' and 'Pull of home' is very important theme around which their ideas lingers and circulates. Everything that relates them to their land affects them, and influences them. The traditions, customs, family values, cultural and community rites, relatives, memories every minute detail affects them being away from their home. Memories of past, of the lost homeland configures the main theme of expatriate literature. The memories evoked are of bygone times, places and people as they were when the writer experienced them, not as they are now, at this point of time when they may be very vastly changed. These memories are now coloured by nostalgic imagination.

In the fictional world of diasporic writers we have, thus, different worlds jostling each other, real world and the imaginary. The demarcating lines are faint: the two spheres blend and merge. At the core of most expatriate writing by writers of Indian origin is "the haunting presence of India- and the anguish of personal loss it represents". There is what has been called a "homing desire", the wish to return home to milestones left behind, remembered landmarks in one's personal history, but, where exactly is "home"? Avtar Brah would like to see "home" as a "mystic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin' [19]

The feeling of Nostalgia, alienation and yearning for 'Home' varies from person to person therefore varies from writer to writer when we talk of expatriate literature. Unlike all the above expatriate writers Hari Kunzru (author of *The Impressionist* and *Transmission*), for instance is dismissive of the nostalgic writing that many writers of Indian diaspora usually indulge in. For Kunzru, India is simply a country where his relatives live and where he comes occasionally for a holiday or to attend family weddings.

There is another author who has a different view point regarding dislocation in an alien land, Agha Shahid Ali, who taught creative writing at the University of Massachusetts, claimed that he did not feel that dislocation or personality even though it influenced his thinking or personality even though it influenced his writing. He felt that he was able to absorb both experiences, Indian and American, and yet he remained aware of an acute sense of loss and nostalgia for a world, a country irretrievably lost: "I remember even as a kid having terrible sense of things vanishing, things all over the world ending, civilization vanishing, people dying [...]" so I'm nostalgic for a moment even right when it is happening because I'm so aware it is going to end" (qtd Melwani 1). In a case like this one may detect an acute anxiety syndrome- the desperate feeling of being somewhere





Such anxiety for belonging, however, is not so obvious in the works of Shashi Tharoo who lived away from India all his adult age of life, now holds a plum post in the United States, and visits India frequently. His idea of home is India- even though he has led a nomadic life he is emphatic about it. The uncertain suspension between different worlds, the despair of the uprootedness is not for him. And yet, when he composes a work like *The Great Indian Novel*, what he is engaged in is the conscious evocation of the Mahabharata, albeit in

a parodic form. Shashi Tharoo's works gives evidence of the writer's fascination with the great Indian epic in the manner that he plays with it and distorts it in the retelling. It is astonishing, and much too clever to be simply dismissed as just another instance of a writer being influenced by myths and archetypes. Despite all disclaimers to the contrary, it bespeaks the need to go back in time and space, to grope for one's emotional and cultural roots, to ascertain that the umbilical cord has not yet been served.[17]

Shauna Singh Baldwin, second- generation expatriate, who lives in Wisconsin, has been much in the news over the last few years for her books (*What the Body Remembers* and *English Lessons* and other stories), is of the opinion that....

It doesn't really matter if we are Indians writing about a recent memory or immigrants stuck in a past version of India or Indo- Canadian writing about a mythic Homeland. What matters is that most diasporic writers write about India and Indians with love instead of contempt, offering glimpses of a complex active people with high aspirations. Through our writing, we have certainly reinterpreted India for ourselves, revisited it and taken our readers with us.

The expatriate writer, it is argued that, remains in what may be called a state of animated suspension, insecure in his new environment, uncertain of his affiliations and his roots. Bharti Mukherjee claims to work optimistically towards "assimilation" but this assimilation is not an easy process as one is "housed", "unhoused", and "re-housed" (Mukherjee's words), uprooted and re-rooted in an alien land. It remains a three-way relationship, the country of origin- the writer- and the adopted country. Like 'Trishanku'- she and other writers, too, remain in a state of suspension between different worlds- the one left behind, the one desired and the one obtained. For the expatriate writers, therefore, home is an uncertain territory they must discover for themselves somewhere in-between two geographical locales, somewhere within Trishanku's space.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Interpreting the whole content it could be said that "authentic and effective" Indian Fiction can be written by either the diasporic or the rooted writers -a point of view that can be, and has been, frequently contested and on which a debate can never be decisive. Both diasporic and rooted writers have elaborated and concentrated in their works on their 'Motherland' but the difference lies only on one point that diasporic writer is talking about a home which is lost and a thing of bygone time while rooted writer is talking about a place which is inherently his own, with which he belongs and in which he is flourishing; A place where one is free to do anything and everything.

Returning to the initial argument of this analysis what exactly comes under the rubric of "expatriate writing from India" at a time when diaspora literature seems very popular and when it seems very fashionable to label all kinds of writing as diasporic or expatriate? There is no demarcating line separating the diasporic literature from the rest. While there is no denying that literature cannot be compartmentalized into water-tight categories.[18]

What is important is need to be aware of the distinction between the literary endeavours of those who stayed at home and those who left to seek opportunities. The latter group has given us that which we can call today as expatriate writing or expatriate literature. There may be dispute regarding the nature and composition of this category but we cannot deny its existence. It is an inseparable part of Indian writing in English. Expatriate writing is an off-shoot of globalization, of mass migration, of diaspora: however we choose to view it, it has reduced the gap between different worlds, bridged vast oceanic distance between East and West, and also provided the necessary angst that inspires much literature of today.



One's affiliation to the homeland plays an important role in creating one's psychological and social ambience. An attachment with homeland might be seen as an important strategic point even in the formation of one's identity. Though in the present era, especially after the Second World War, there have been frequent displacements across

borders; an association with one's native land is something that forms a part of the individuality of the displaced. It is known that 'home' connotes security, love, care and a sense of belonging above all. It is inextricably connected with one's identity-whether one defines that identity by belonging to a 'home' or losing a 'home'. For the migrants or the 'diasporics', home perhaps is attained only through imagination.

The diasporic tension is not only spatial (torn between nation/cultures) but also temporal (split between the past and the present). Homi Bhabha has also underlined the pain involved in the act of remembering; remembering is never a quite act of introspection or retrospection. It is painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.[19]

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