

**Homeland in the Imagination: A Comparative Study of Old and New Diaspora Writers**

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**Abstract:**

Through a critical examination, this paper explores the characteristics and classification of the Indian diaspora by citing the observations of various critics. The paper brings to light the diverse perspectives of the new and the old diaspora writers. An attempt has been made to explore the themes of frustration, disillusionment, homesickness and discrimination in diasporic literature. The contrasting and complementary perspectives of old and new diaspora writers are discussed and analysed. The writers of the new diaspora embrace the cosmopolitan world whereas the writers of the old diaspora recall their motherland nostalgically. The characters of the new diasporic writers make attempts to occupy the transnational space. Nowadays, Indian writers in the West are dealing with divergent themes. They cherish in their works, their in-between position as a space of possibilities.

**Keywords:** Migration, Homeland, Displacement, Transcultural, Expatriates

**Introduction**

The Indian diaspora refers to the migration of individuals of Indian origin from the Indian subcontinent. The Indian diaspora currently comprises approximately 11 million individuals. In 'Some Reflections on the Indian Diaspora', Bhikhu Parekh delineates the prominent characteristics of this diaspora, stating, "It is widespread, encompasses over seventy countries, and possesses substantial political and economic influence in numerous regions." (105) The Indian diaspora exhibits considerable diversity, comprising individuals from multiple religions, nearly a dozen castes, and a range of occupations, including labourers, traders, industrialists and professionals.

Parekh is of the view that the Indian diaspora community have encountered disdain due to their physical appearance, practices and customs. They have experienced discrimination in employment and have been rendered insecure. Diverse Indian communities abroad, lacking significant interaction, have experienced distinct developmental trajectories. The intra-diasporic movement among Indians surpasses that of any other diaspora community.

Parekh's insights are invaluable for understanding the history of the Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora holds considerable economic and political influence in countries like the USA and Mauritius. Emmanuel S. Nelson defines the Indian diaspora as the "historical and contemporary presence of people of Indian subcontinent origin in other areas of the world" (Nelson ix). A multitude of individuals are first-generation expatriates who perceive India as their true home, the origin of their upbringing, values, extended families, and deep emotional ties. However, this is not universally applicable to the adaptation of foreign lifestyles. Many diaspora members experience significant dissonance when reconnecting with their former subcontinental culture.

Amitav Ghosh asserts in 'The Diaspora in Indian Culture' that "The Indian diaspora is one of the most important demographic dislocations of modern times" (Ghosh 243). The initial diaspora comprised underprivileged classes, and their return to their homeland transformed into a revered symbol within the diaspora's imaginative landscape of creative writers. The second diaspora resulted from humanity's preference for material wealth, professional achievement, and commercial pursuits. It represented access to advanced technology, communication, and material comforts linked to a luxurious lifestyle.

Nilufer E. Bharucha documents the history of the Indian diaspora. She claims that the Indian diaspora began in the nineteenth century with the first group of indentured labourers sent to Mauritius in the 1830s and has now exceeded one hundred and seventy years in duration. She categorizes the Indian diaspora as: "The Indian Diaspora could be broadly classified as colonial and postcolonial with subcategories within each of these broad divisions. In the colonial category, there was first the labour and then the entrepreneur diaspora. In the postcolonial category, the trajectory of migrations takes on education as well as employment opportunities. Those seeking employment include skilled, semiskilled labour and professionals." (Bharucha 21)

The diaspora authors aim to articulate the experiences of the displaced and dislocated. They articulate the experiences of immigrants. They express the perspectives of their respective communities and nations. Writers from various nations reconstruct their homeland in their literary works. These writers address international themes such as the assertion of feminine identity, cross-cultural encounters, and East-West interactions through migration. Diasporic writers have examined diverse literary genres, including fiction, memoirs, fictional narratives, and poetry. Fiction constitutes their most significant contribution. Diasporic writings are typically characterized by a feeling of estrangement from the homeland. Their works embody an unwavering pursuit of native cultural heritage alongside a desire for integration into a foreign culture.

### **The Old and the New Voice of the Diaspora**

Sudesh Mishra, the author of the essay "From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora," differentiates between the traditional (Sugar) and contemporary (Masala) diasporic movements. He asserts that the earlier diasporic authors concentrate on the "threshold zone of interacting subjectivities that characterise the migrant experience. "He posits that the new diaspora "can be identified through its conscious occupation of border zones, exemplified by the uneasy interaction between gender, class, ethnicity and nation-states" (Mishra 285).

He categorizes the Indian diaspora into two groups: the old and the new. The ancient diaspora comprises the Shamsi merchants in East Africa and the girmityas. British colonial rulers transported indentured labourers from India to Fiji. They were transported to labour on Fiji's sugarcane plantations. The contemporary diaspora comprises individuals who have emigrated to foreign nations as representatives of nationalism and in pursuit of enhanced opportunities overseas. He states that:

“This distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasant to non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam and Guyana roughly between the years 1830 and 1917; and the other the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centres such as Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain. We must modify this assertion to include, under the category of ‘old’, for instance, the Shamsi merchants who commenced settling along the coast of East Africa in the nineteenth century and Surat’s traders, who followed the girmityas (indentured labourers) to Fiji after 1879; and those from privileged or comprador classes who found themselves drawn to imperial London, sometimes as emissaries for nationalists, sometimes as seekers of a sound ‘Oxbridge education, sometimes driven simply by an implanted nostalgia.” (Mishra 276)

The classification has been referred to by other critics as 'forced diaspora' and 'voluntary diaspora.' Scholar Vinay Lal has characterised them as a “diaspora of labour” in contrast to a “diaspora of longing” in the Introduction of “Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts” Paranjape categorises the entire South Asian diaspora into two groups. The initial category is designated as "Settler," which pertains to coerced migrations, specifically indentured labour. The second category is "Visitor," which includes “the voluntary migrations of businessmen and professionals who went abroad in search of fortune” (8)

The Indian diaspora has developed a new identity following India's Independence. The Indian diaspora community has attained a prominent status through self-fashioning and growing acceptance in the West. The authors of the girit diaspora employ nostalgia as the organizing principle in their works. Harold Ladoo (Trinidad-Canadian), Subramani (Fiji), Cyril Dabydeen (Guyana-Canada), David Dabydeen (Guyana-England), and Neil Bissoondath (Trinidad-Canada) are notable authors of the girit diaspora. Seepersad Naipaul (1906-53), a second-generation Indo-Trinidadian, represents one of the earliest instances of the old diaspora. His anthology of short stories, titled “Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales”, was initially published in 1943 and subsequently revised and reissued in 1976 as “The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories.” The narratives illustrate the challenges and traumas of the girit or sugar diaspora. It depicts a dislocated community striving to express itself in a foreign territory.

Harold Ladoo (1945-1973) situates his works within the girit diaspora in Fiji. The novel ‘No Pain Like This Body’ (1972) narrates the tale of a rice-cultivating Indo-Trinidadian family that struggles to survive in a community besieged by both internal and external pressures. Subramani (1943) similarly discusses the themes of poverty, alienation, and madness within the girit diaspora in Fiji. The protagonist Dhanpat in his work ‘Sautu’ (The Fantasy Eaters and Other Stories, 1988) acknowledges that “his enclave existence is

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based on a subconscious refusal to accommodate forces, ideas, cultures and histories that angered it.” (Mehrotra, *An Illustrated* 315).

Cybril Dabydeen (1945) occupies a position between the traditional and contemporary diaspora. He discusses "the unfinished men of the girit diaspora" (317). In his recent poetry, he presents a transnational definition of the traditional diaspora undergoing transformation.

Mishra asserts that the historical diaspora encompasses both girit and non-girit writers, as well as individuals from the professional or trading diaspora. They are located in East or South Africa. He asserts that “there exists another group of writers from the old diaspora who neither belong to the comprador class, nor to the girit diaspora, but who share some of their preoccupations in relation to its own geopolitical context” (284).

They articulate their intermediary status as an immigrant. Their works articulate their stance as being "sandwiched between the imperial oppressor and the indigenous oppressed" (284). Mishra references the instance of M.G. Vassanji who embodies this intermediary stance in his writings. Mishra posits that they originate from the professional or trading diaspora and predominantly reside in East or South Africa. Their writings illustrate their intermediary position between the imperial oppressor and the indigenous oppressed, showing admiration for neither. M.G. Vassanji deftly addressed this intermediary position in their writings. M. G. Vassanji (1950) is a diaspora author. He was born in Kenya, reared in Tanzania, and educated in the United States.

He is presently residing in Canada. The novel "The Book of Secrets" by M. G. Vassanji takes place in East Africa. "The Book of Secrets" vividly illustrates the experiences of a fictional East Indian community. Shams, the protagonist, relocates to Dar es Salaam from his native land. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to Indian progenitors. After growing up in Tanzania, East Africa, he immigrated to the United States and eventually settled in Toronto, Canada. He identifies as an East African Canadian of Indian heritage. His works examine the complexities of exile concerning both domicile and identity.

"No New Land" depicts the challenges faced by an Asian family as they abandon their former existence. The family of Nurdin Lalani relocates from Asia to Africa and subsequently to Canada. In Canada, they encounter challenges related to adaptation. The unfounded accusation of raping a Caucasian female in Canada left Nurdin feeling demoralized. He cannot secure a satisfactory job without prior Canadian work experience. His family is incapable of assimilating Canadian culinary practices and the English language. Nurdin's wife loses her position as a receptionist to a Chinese doctor due to her inadequate English pronunciation.

The sombre transition into realms of individuality is a notable characteristic of the historical Indian diaspora. Mishra contends that the novels of earlier diasporic Indian authors such as "Raja Rao, G.V. Desani, Santha Rama Rau, Balachandra Rajan, Nirad Chaudhari, and Ved Mehta" primarily reflect on India and infrequently document their expatriate experiences abroad. The authors of the historical non-girit diaspora articulate the traumas of displacement and connect more profoundly with their homeland in their writings. Mishra contends

that they:  
"tend to engage more intimately with the matribhumi our motherland for their narratives,

primarily because the spatial displacement does not translate into the generational distance, despite the traumas of dislocation, of things falling apart, are no less evident in their works.’ (Mishra 282)

The detachment enables them to attain a lucid understanding of their homeland. Nirad Chandra Chaudhary (1897) identified the influence of Western life and civilization on Indians and the interplay between cultures as the central theme of his writings. “The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian” not only commemorates the Bengali Renaissance of the nineteenth century but also mourns the bygone era.

Ved Prakash Mehta (1934) is a distinguished diasporic author who emigrated to the United States from Bombay. He lost his sight at the age of three, yet he wrote with a profound awareness of his surroundings. He has nostalgically reminisced about his past connections with Mother India, as well as with relatives and friends, in works such as ‘The New India’ (1978), ‘Mamaji’ (1979), and ‘The Photographs of Chachaji’ (1982). As an expatriate, he has maintained himself by perpetually recalling the beauty of the landscape of his native Bengal. His autobiographical works can be categorized into two phases: India-oriented and West-oriented.

The India-oriented phase reflects his childhood, while the West-oriented phase encompasses the Sound-Shadows of the New World (1985). Raja Rao (1908), in his novel ‘Kanthapura’, composed in the French Alps, embodies the diasporic consciousness of a writer in exile. He aspires to encapsulate the revitalized essence of authentic India and forge its contemporary identity. Rao's novel ‘The Serpent and the Rope’ exemplifies notable features of diasporic consciousness. The novel chronicles the journey of expatriate Ramaswamy, who departs from his native South India to pursue historical studies at a French university, ultimately marrying a French woman named Madeline. Following his initial return home for his father's funeral, the couple experiences a growing estrangement. Influenced by his unpleasant experiences in India, both familial and during his visit to Benaras, Ramaswamy struggles to connect with his French wife. His transformed perception of reality manifests in his increasing fascination with Savitri, who, as a rebel and intellectual, epitomizes for the protagonist the spiritual and intellectual essence of Indian womanhood. Santha Rama Rau (1923) examines India from an external perspective, having spent merely two significant years in the country during World War II. Her autobiographical novel ‘Home to India’ (1945) chronicles her awakening amidst the nationalistic struggles against British colonialism. Conversely, contemporary Indian diaspora authors explore “the threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities,” which characterizes the significant experiences of migrants.

Makarand Paranjape asserts: “That instead of worshipping the leftovers and relics of a now inaccessible homeland as the old diaspora of indentured labourers did, the new diaspora of international Indian English writers live close to their market, in the comforts of the suburbia of advanced capital but draw their raw material from the inexhaustible imaginative resources of that messy and disorderly subcontinent that is India.” (Paranjape 252)

The authors of the new diaspora reflect on their homeland with a celebratory tone, while the authors of the old diaspora remember their homeland with nostalgia. The

protagonists of contemporary diasporic authors strive to inhabit the transnational realm. Contemporary Indian authors in the West are exploring varied themes. They value their intermediary position in their works as a realm of potentiality.

The contemporary diaspora is characterized by its deliberate engagement with border zones that elicit dynamic reactions to gender, ethnicity, nation-states, and class. Mishra's enumeration of the new or masala diaspora encompasses authors, including "Bharati Mukherjee (India-United States), Farrukh Dhondy (India-Britain), G.S. Sharat Chandra (India-United States), Agha Shahid Ali (India-United States), Saleem Peeradina (India-United States), Rohinton Mistry (India-Canada), Sujata Bhatt (India-Germany), Pico Iyer (United Kingdom), and Meera Syal (United Kingdom)"

Jasbir Jain offers an insightful analysis of two novels in "Writers of the Indian Diaspora." In his analysis, the two expatriate authors, Ondaatje and Ashis Gupta, "transcending the nostalgia-protest syndrome... establish a 'third space' by distancing themselves from their culture of origin and situating their novels... against the backdrop of the Second World War... (which is perceived as) an endeavour to mitigate polarization and the individual tensions of identity." (Jain 101). Many diasporic authors, such as Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran, Jhumpa Lahiri, Vassanji, and Ashis Gupta, seek to eliminate the hyphen and embrace an augmented identity.

Uma Parameswaran aims to affirm that Indo-Canadian writers residing and composing in Canada are Canadians. Bharati Mukherjee perceives her identity as hyphenated, with the hyphen under erasure, signifying the assimilation of an additional American identity as an Asian American.

### **Conclusion**

The writers of the modern diaspora who have spent their initial years of life in India and then migrated to the land offshore in pursuit of a better future are generally known as first-generation immigrant writers. They have a literal displacement. Through their depiction of immigrant characters in their fiction, they deftly explore the theme of displacement and self-fashioning. Their works are replete with diasporic consciousness. They recall their homeland by using myths of their homeland.

There are two distinct classes of modern diasporic Indian writers. Uma Parameswaran, Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Rao Badami are some writers in this category. There are other writers of the modern diaspora, who have been bred from childhood outside India. Jhumpa Lahiri, Bahadur Tejani and Kiran Desai are some writers of the second generation. They have had an outsider's view of their country of origin. For them, their place of origin is an exotic place. They are generally known as second-generation immigrant writers. They find themselves in between two worlds and project the second-generation characters that are torn between the culture of their native land and the culture of their adopted land. The characters either lose their identity or attain a hybrid identity.

Although the diasporic writing depicts the traumas of alienation, in-betweenness and a sense of longing for the native land, it is about the intermingling of different cultures. It pertains to open spaces rather than confinement. It is the pleasure of dual perception and the anguish of division. The diasporic writers inhabit an intermediary space, a cultural limbo. The diasporic writers embrace the discomfort and the excitement of discovering their new

environment. Diasporic writers transcend cultural, national, and linguistic boundaries, embracing their hybridity without the necessity of a defined space. Rootlessness may entail significant loss and profound yearning, yet it also offers considerable advantages. They transcend not only geographical boundaries but also engage in a cognitive leap that allows them to perceive matters from a global perspective. It facilitates a transcultural perspective on life.

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