

Diasporic Literature: Questioning the Issues of Identity

Dr. Gurpreet Kaur

*Assistant Professor, Post Graduate Department of English
Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Khalsa College, Anandpur Sahib (PB), India.*

Abstract

Literature is abundant with various forms of dislocations, such as exile, diaspora and migration in the context of Post-colonialism. Basically, Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. Diasporic literature can be said to be an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys are undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Some scholars conceive of diaspora as an identified group characterized by specific social relationships despite their dispersal. Under the generalized rubric of Diasporas, this paper will engage its readers with some selected writings of Indo-Canadian diasporic writers like, Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, and M. G. Vassanji. The purpose of this paper is to give an account of not only how Diasporas consider themselves but in how their identity is created, defined and recorded. The manifold challenges that the Indian diaspora faces is evident through the enormous amount of literature that comes from them. These writers through their works are presenting their 'an out of India or away from India experience'.

Language and cultures are transformed as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. Diasporic writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation'. Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia are often the preoccupations of these writers as they seek to locate themselves in new cultures. It becomes important to question the nature of their relationship with the work of writers and literatures of the country of their origin and to examine the different strategies they adopt in order to negotiate the cultural space of the countries of their adoption.

The present use of the term Indian Diaspora, particularly when it refers to Indo-Canadian writers, is loaded with confusion. Its overuse conflicts with words like immigrant, visitor, racial minorities, ethnic groups, refugee, new Canadian, workers, expatriates, travellers, and other categories. Robin Cohen describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who 'acknowledge that "the old country"-a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions' (ix, *Global Diasporas: AN Introduction*, UCL Press, 1997), It is a sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another.

There is a section of literature produced by diasporas such as Buchi Emecheta, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi, Bharti Mukherjee, Caryl Phillips and Ben Zephaniah. Some other writers of academics are Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah, Rey Chow, Carole Boyce Davies, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. These writers have explored the experience of migrancy and diaspora life and possibilities and problems associated with the experience.

Neil Bissoondath is a Caribbean writer who like some other writers thought could achieve literary potential by leaving their native lands and making North America his native land. He was a novelist, short-story writer, essayist (b at Arima, Trinidad and Tobago 19 Apr 1955). He attended St Mary's College in Port of Spain before emigrating to Canada in 1973, when he became a student at York University (BA 1977). After graduating, he began teaching English as a second language and French in Toronto. Bissoondath began writing

short stories in the late seventies, and attended the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1983. He credits his uncle, author V.S. Naipaul, for providing inspiration. Bissoondath's first book, a collection of short stories called *Digging Up the Mountains* (1985), deals with feelings of cultural alienation, exile and domestic upheaval - themes he has continued to explore in his other writings. The book was a commercial and critical success, enabling Bissoondath to leave teaching for a number of years and devote himself to writing full-time. In 1995 he relocated to Québec City, where he teaches Creative Writing at Université Laval.

Bissoondath published a second collection of short stories, *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*, in 1990. Most of his fiction has taken the form of novels, beginning with *A Casual Brutality* (1988), set in the fictional Caribbean republic of Casaquemada. *The Innocence of Age* (1993) is the story of intergenerational tensions in an increasingly racist Toronto. Bissoondath's novels often focus on characters confronting their respective pasts. The protagonist in Governor General's Award nominee *The Worlds Within Her* (1998) returns to her Caribbean birthplace in order to deliver her mother's ashes. In *Doing the Heart Good* (2002), an elderly anglophone Montrealer reevaluates his life after losing his possessions to an arsonist. *The Unyielding Clamour of the Night* (2005) deals with a young schoolteacher who leaves a privileged upbringing to encounter political, religious, and racial unrest in a fictional island state modelled on Sri Lanka.

Bissoondath's most controversial and best-selling book is *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994, rev. 2002). In this nonfiction work, Bissoondath criticizes the 1971 multiculturalism Act for emphasizing differences rather than similarities amongst the country's various ethnic groups. He argues that the country's multicultural policies, though well-intentioned, have only encouraged the isolation and stereotyping of cultural groups.

Acclaimed writer, Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on July 3, 1952. A member of the Parsi religious community in India, he completed an undergraduate degree in mathematics and economics at the University of Bombay. In 1975 he moved to Canada, where he lived in Toronto and worked for a bank. Mistry eventually returned to university, finishing a degree in English and philosophy in 1984 at the University of Toronto. It was while he was a university student in Canada that he began to write and publish fiction. His first two published short stories won the Hart House Literary Prize (1983 and 1984), and another story won the *Canadian Fiction Magazine* contributor's prize in 1985. Those three stories, with eight others, became his first book, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987). This collection of linked short stories concerns the inhabitants of an apartment compound in Bombay. One of the stories, "Squatter," consists of tall tales told by the compound's local storyteller; one tale concerns Savukshaw, a heroic cricket player and tiger hunter, and the other concerns Sarosh, a Parsi who immigrates to Canada but returns to India when he cannot learn how to use a Western toilet. In another story, "Swimming Lessons," a young man connects the residents of his Canadian apartment to the family and residents in the Bombay apartment he has left behind.

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), brought him national and international recognition. The book concerns an ordinary man who becomes involved in the politics surrounding the Bangladesh separatist movement in India and Pakistan. In Canada the book won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and the W.H. Smith *Books in Canada* First Novel Award. It also won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and was a finalist for Britain's Booker Prize. In 1998 *Such a Long Journey* was made into a feature film by Sooni Taraporevala (screenplay) and Sturla Gunnarsson (director).

Mistry's subsequent novels have achieved the same level of recognition as his first. His second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), concerns four people from Bombay who struggle with family and work against the backdrop of the political unrest in India during the mid-1970s. The book won Canada's Giller Prize, the Commonwealth Writers Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. It was nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was a finalist for the Booker Prize.

Family Matters (2002) won the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize for Fiction, the Canadian Authors Association's MOSAID Technologies Inc. Award for Fiction, and the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book; it was nominated for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *Family Matters* describes the members of a blended family who are trying to cope with the failing health of their father. In the meantime, the father relives his past, a past beset by thwarted love and crushing social strictures.

Mistry's fiction deploys a precise writing style and a sensitivity to the humour and horror of life to communicate deep compassion for human beings. His writing concerns people who try to find self-worth while dealing with painful family dynamics and difficult social and political constraints. His work also addresses immigration, especially immigration to Canada, and the difficulty immigrants face in a society that recognizes their cultural differences and yet cannot embrace those differences as being part of itself.

Uma Parameswaran -- poet, playwright, and short-story writer -- was born in Madras and grew up in Jabalpur, India. Parameswaran read extensively drawing motivation from epic poetry and Greek theater through her schooling and during the India-China war of 1962. Receiving the Smith-Mundt Fulbright Scholarship, Parameswaran moved to the United States to study American Literature at Indiana University earning her MA in Creative Writing. She completed her Ph.D. in English at Michigan State University in 1972. Currently she is a professor of English at The University of Winnipeg. Since settling in Canada, Parameswaran has devoted much of her writing and efforts in the literary field to creating an identifiable South Asian Canadian diaspora.

In 1962, while still in India, Parameswaran wrote "Sons Must Die," a play centered on the Partition of 1947. Other plays followed: "Meera" in 1971, "Sita's Promise" in 1981, "Dear Deedi, My Sister" in 1989 (first prize in the Caribe play writing contest, 1989) and "Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees" in 1998. They were collected into *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* and published in 1998 as a part of the South Asian Canadian Literature Series (SACLIT), of which Parameswaran is the general editor. Parameswaran's volume of poetry, *Trishanku and Other Writings* (1987) is also included in the SACLIT series.

What Was Always Hers, a collection of short stories and winner of the 1999 New Muse Award and the Canadian Authors Association 2000 Jubilee Award for Best Short Stories, is Parameswaran's latest work of fiction. The volume contains the stories "What Was Always Hers," "Maru and the M.M. Syndrome," "Darkest Before Dawn," "How We Won Olympic Gold," and "The Icicle."

M.G. Vassanji, writer, editor (b at Nairobi, Kenya 30 May 1950). M.G. Vassanji grew up in Kenya and Tanzania, and was educated at MIT and the University of Pennsylvania. Having immigrated to Canada in 1978 with a Ph.D in nuclear physics, Vassanji began writing fiction while teaching at the University Of Toronto. In 1981 Vassanji co-founded and began editing the literary magazine *The Toronto South Asian Review* (later renamed *The Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad*). His first novel, the elliptical and richly allusive *The Gunny*

Sack (1989), was named a regional winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book (Africa). Turning to writing full time, Vassanji followed this initial success with *No New Land* (1990), a novel about African-Asian emigrants in Toronto. His next publication was *Uhuru Street* (1992), a powerful collection of linked short stories set in East Africa.

The Book of Secrets (1993) established Vassanji as an important voice in Canadian literature. Awarded the inaugural Scotiabank Giller prize for fiction, it won both critical and popular acclaim. *The Book of Secrets* is representative of Vassanji's gift for storytelling. Loosely structured around one man's quest to trace the enigmatic family history he believes lies concealed in the pages of a colonial diary, the novel evolves into an increasingly elusive book of secrets. Determined to explore questions that remain in the end unanswerable, the narrator finds his search for order leading him to ponder the legacies of colonialism, war, prejudice, and religious intolerance.

Vassanji returned to the subject and themes of immigration in his 1999 novel *Amriika*. Like Vassanji himself, Ramji, the Asian-African protagonist, moves from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to Cambridge, Massachusetts. At college, Ramji is inadvertently caught up in and overwhelmed by 1960s political activism and radical protest. M.G. Vassanji has observed about his characters, "I tell stories about marginalized people. All writers do, whether the people in question be a family of Jews in New York or a farming community in Saskatchewan."

In 2003 M.G. Vassanji became the first writer to win a second Scotiabank Giller prize. *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* is set in Kenya, and opens during the 1950s Mau Mau uprising. Vikram Lall is eight years old at that time, and the nation's complicated, turbulent history is reflected in his childhood relationships with British and African children. The story follows Lall's career as a corrupted civil servant and his eventual immigration to Canada. As in all of Vassanji's works, history and biography, the political and the personal, are inextricable here.

M.G. Vassanji published a second collection of short fiction in 2005, titled *When She Was Queen*. The stories are set in Asia, Africa, and North America, and their characters likewise move from place to place. Asked about his own sense of national identity, Vassanji observed, "In my heart I am still very much an African, but I have lived in Canada for a long time and it feels like home. At some point in your life you realise there are several homes."

Vassanji's 2007 novel, *The Assassin's Song*, also addresses the spiritual turmoil of a life lived between East and West. Shifting in time and perspective, the novel provides a deep historical context to contemporary protagonist Karsan Dargawalla's divided loyalties: his duty to his inherited place as guardian of an ancient shrine, and his desire to pursue scholarship in America. Vassanji adroitly explores the continued weight of tradition in a modern world. The novel was shortlisted for the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Award for Fiction, and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize.

Vassanji also works in other genres. He published *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* in 2008. Described by Vassanji as "part memoir and confession, part travelogue and history," the book traces the author's many travels in India as he explores his cultural heritage. In 2009 Vassanji published a biography of Mordecai Richler. A documentary about his own life, titled *The In-Between World of M.G. Vassanji*, premiered in 2006. M.G. Vassanji was made a Member of the Order of Canada in 2005. He lives in Toronto.

Finally, the Indo-Canadian diasporic migrants are playing an important role in the continuing process of reshaping their identity. Their writings imply a more sensitive understanding of the themes of plurality and equality. Their purpose is to give a record of

'an away from India experience'. It is certain that the authors are actively taking part in imagining new diasporic identities.

REFERENCES

1. Nelson, Emmanuel S. *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. NewYork: Greenwood Press, 1992.
2. Parmeswaran, Uma. "Ganga in the Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature." In *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*. M.G. Vassanji ed. Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1985.
3. ----. "Literature of the Indian Diaspora in Canada: An Overview." In *SACLIT: An Introduction to South-Asian-Canadian Literature*. Madras: East West, 1996: 3-30.
4. Vassanji, M.G., ed. *A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature*. Toronto: TSAR Publicatoins, 1985.