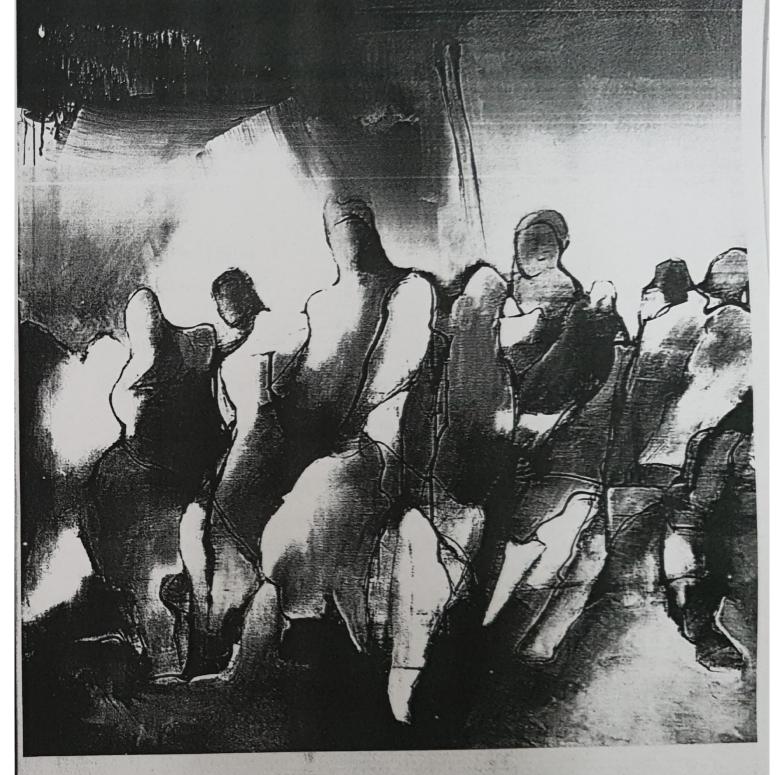
EDITED BY
Nandini C Sen





Through the Diasporic Lens

Volume II

16 • Through the Diasporic Lens

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Contents 11 Foreword Christel Devadawson 15 Acknowledgements 21 Introduction Nandini C Sen FROM THE AUTHOR OF JAHAJIN, A NOVEL 33 1. The Keepers of the Jahaji Past Peggy Mohan LITERATURE AND DIASPORA 2. Naipaul's New World: Postcolonial Modernity 45 and the Enigma of Belated Space Baidik Bhattacharya 3. Role of the Mother Tongue in Writing of the Indian Diaspora: An Analysis of Dolonchnapaye Phul 82 Phuteche by Ketaki Kushari Dyson Ananya Dutta 4. Living at the Margins: A Study of Selected 94 Works of Shanta Acharaya Anjali Singh 5. Identity and Alienation in the Writings of Indian Diaspora: An Analysis of V.S. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas and Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake 105 Anu Sugathan

18	Through the Diasporic Lens	
(b. Discourse of Resistance in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance Neenu Kumar	116
7	. Exploring New Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Thrity Umrigar's If Today Be Sweet Nitesh Narnolia and Mousam	135
8	Nostalgic Literature of Indian Diaspora P.K. Pandia	144
9	"The Hundred-tongued Pseudo-poem, the Noem': Language and the Politics of the Other in Paul Celan's Poetry Srinjoyee Dutta	154
10	D. The Rigid Village Space and the Anonymous City: The Diaspora-Mediated Dalit Self in Premchand's and Ajay Navaria's Short Stories Vandana	169
11	The Uprooted Shooting New Roots: Mooting Alienation and Hybridity as Diasporic Challenges in Gods Without Men, The Namesake and Unaccustomed Earth Shivani Jha	179
THE]	NDIAN DIASPORA IN SOUTH AFRICA	
12	Challenges Facing Hindus and Hinduism in Post-Apartheid South Africa Brij Maharaj	193
13	. Indian South Africans, Diaspora Memories and the 'Common Social' as benchmarks for Collective Action Bobby Luthra Sinha	222

CHILDREN AND THE DIASPORA	
14. Children's Voices: An Insight into the Identities of Children of Diaspora Rekha Sapra	241
15. Investigating Identities of Children in Diaspora in Born Confused by Tanuja Desai Hidier and Queen of Dreams by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Tanushri Banerjee	251
DISPARATE GLOBAL DIASPORAS	
16. "A Long Look Homeward": Ideas of Time and Space in Tibet Museum Swati Chawla	267
17. Two States: Meo Diaspora in Pakistan Abhay Chawla	284
18. The Indo-Caribbean Identity and Dialectics of Diaspora and Home Deepkumar J.Trivedi	298
 Shifting Trends over the Decades: Diaspora in India's Foreign Policy Niranjan Marjani 	312
 Beyond Loss of Culture and Home: Reading Narratives from Jewish Diasporas of India Anshu Kujur 	327
 Parsee Imaginary Homelands: Locating Self and Community in Times of Globalisation Kalika Shah 	341
Contributors	
Index	

Contents • 19

The Indo-Caribbean Identity and Dialectics of Diaspora and Home

Deepkumar J.Trivedi

Diaspora and Home: The Dialectics

Diaspora may be approached as a cultural production, in both the senses of social construction and creative performance. The formation of diasporas is an on-going process wherein cultural identity is actively claimed through the articulation of home. As such, diaspora is not the objective result of dispersal through any sign of migration from an already constituted cultural centre as much as the dual process of identification of the cultural centre and its dispersal. That is, through diaspora, home is recognised. This is not to Say that no other sense of home may be articulated besides that of the diasporic experience. However, for those engaged in the production of diasporic identity, the familiarity of home is organised and reorganised particularly through this experience. Thus, any sense of the naturalness of diaspora as well as home must be brought into reckoning with that of their artificiality. Hall (1988: 30, his emphases), in recognising "the black experience as a diaspora experience", refers to black cultural practices of representation as "the process of cultural Diaspora-isation (to coin an ugly term)". Gilroy (1993: 198), in tracing the revision of modernity in black

political culture, furthermore suggests that the concept of diaspora may be understood as "a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics". For the appreciation of diaspora as a style of identity formation that works through the twin cultural productions of diaspora and home. The process of cultural production by no means negates what may be called the experience of living in diaspora or living at home; rather, it is only through the cultural practices of representation that experience is constituted and thus endowed with meaning. The dialectics of diaspora and home, then, surely refers to that complex series of relationships between and among those living in diaspora and those living at home. In many circumstances, communication between those in diaspora and those at home may seem to be strained beyond the possibility of mutual negotiation. However, the relationship between diaspora and home must be maintained; often, the more tenuous the bond, the more tenacious is its claim. For not only is the notion of home crucial to the understanding of diaspora, but the idea of diaspora is instrumental in the construction of home.

Appadurai (1993) discusses diaspora as an alternative social formation to the nation-state, Rey Chow (1993) as a position of privilege of the postcolonial intellectual, Paul Gilroy (1993) as a transnational perspective challenging both nationalism and racialism or ethnic absolutism, Stuart Hall (1988; 1990; 1991) as a production of cultural identity marked by the doubleness of similarity and difference and Wiam Safran (1991) as a consciousness based in the myth of return to the homeland. Furthermore, Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1994) posit the deterritorialised nation-state as a form of postcolonial nationalism in contrast to diaspora. Through these various uses and refusals of the term, the theoretical implications of diaspora are contested.

Diaspora constitutes an old and even traditional style of historically conceptualising new and ever changing circumstances. Furthermore, while this style has been highly refined in certain cultural traditions, it is not necessarily culturally specific in the multiculturalist sense, that is, peculiar to certain ethnic groups; rather, as a set of cultural practices, this style is always receptive to collaboration and innovation.

Diasporic identity is based on historical rupture. Yet modern identity is also based on a sense of historical rupture. The proliferation of diasporic identities in current political discourse, may be theorised not simply as an exhibitionist display of the diversity of cultures in the mosaic sense but more saliently as a radical disruption of linear temporal historicity altogether One such diasporic formation is that of the Indo-Caribbean identity. Indo-Caribbean identity is specifically diasporic in that the history of migration from India as well as from the Caribbean is crucial to this construction of cultural identity; indeed, it is the Caribbean diaspora rather than the Caribbean where the term Indo-Caribbean is most popular. As such, Indo-Caribbean identity is doubly diasporic, founded on the two movements of colonial indentureship and neocolonial migration; the first of these movements is historically figured as the Kala Pani, or crossing of the dark waters, upon the retrospective occasion of the second movement. The emergence of this Indo-Caribbean identity is crucially linked to the cultural production of the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian diasporas and informed by the encounters between these and other diasporas in the metropolitan cities of Europe and North America.

India's Counter-Invention

The story is one of the strangest stories in any period of history. The individual facts are known. But no one has ever put them together and drawn to them the attention they deserve. Today the emancipation of Africa is one of the outstanding events of contemporary history. Between the wars when this emancipation was being prepared the unquestioned leaders of the movement in every public sphere, in Africa itself in Europe and in the United States, were not Africans but West Indians.

- C.L.R. James (1963: 396)

While the contributions of diasporic Africans to the invention of Africa are being theoretically interrogated by diasporic and continental Africans, the role of diasporic Indians in the invention of India is hardly even recognised, let alone critically theorised. Neither the most radical of trends in South Asian historiography, as discussed in the work of the Subaltern Studies group, nor the most internationalist of perspectives in the newly emerging scholarship by diasporic Indians, as discussed in the work of Seecharan, have sufficiently considered the complexity of the dialectics of diaspora and home. Clem Seecharan takes the Indian diaspora particularly in British Guiana as the focus of his India and the Shaping of the Indo-Guianese Imagination 1890s-1920s (1993). In theorising the construction of India in the imagination of early Indo-Guyanese intellectuals, Seecharan begins his historical sketch with the work of European scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who inaugurated Indology, the study of classical Indian civilisation, and the subsequent Hindu renaissance in India in the nineteenth century. He traces the influence of European scholars, such as William Jones and Max Mueller, on Indian reformers, such as Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayananda, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. He goes on to describe the interest of the earliest Indo-Guyanese intellectuals in the work of both these European

scholars and Indian reformers. Seecharan also describes the effects of World War I and the Amritsar massacre on the development of Indian nationalism. He further analyses the popular deification of Gandhi and the cultural resurgence in the 1920s among Indians in British Guiana and considers the possibilities and limitations of Indian identity politics in Guyana.

Seecharan's work is certainly significant not only to the historiography of the Indian nationalist movement but also to that fragment of the Indian diaspora. Rather than simply assuming the natural existence of Indian identity in the diaspora, he elucidates clearly the international process of cultural identification in Europe, India and the Caribbean. However, in the relationship between the Indian diaspora and home, Seecharan characterises the diaspora as rather passive. Indo-Guyanese identity is transformed by Indian nationalism, but Indians in colonial India are not affected at all by Indians in Guyana. Similarly, in the relationship between Europeans and Indians, the influence of the British and German Indologists on the Indian reformers and nationalists is dominant. While Seecharan perceives the importance of international relationships in the development of Indo-Guyanese identity, he does not attend to the complexity of these relationships. In his work, ideas seem to flow only in one direction, from Europeans to Indians to Indo-Guyanese. Of the Caribbean, James (1963: 416) has rather daringly written, "The East Indian has become as West Indian as all the other expatriates".

The Indo-Caribbean Identity

Indo-Caribbean identity is a diasporic production. This particular configuration of cultural identity has recently emerged through a historical process in which the creative collaboration between the Indo-Caribbean diaspora and home has been instrumental. As such, this Indo-Caribbean identity is doubly diasporic. For those living in the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, largely in the metropolitan cities of Europe and North America, claim two diasporic homes - India and the Caribbean. Indo-Caribbean diasporic identity is thus based on two movements, the first signifying the colonial institution of Indian indentureship in the Caribbean during the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the second the neocolonial institution of the Caribbean migration to Europe and North America after World War II until the present. The dialectics of diaspora and home become even more complicated in this sense of double diaspora.

The First Movement: Indo

I don't think that I declare myself to be allied to the subaltern. The subaltern is all that is not elite but the trouble with those kinds of names is that if you have any kind of political interest you name it in the hope that the name will disappear. Thai's what class consciousness is in the interest of: the class disappearing. What politically we want to see is that the name would not be possible. So what I'm interested in is seeing ourselves as namers of the subaltern. If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern anymore.

- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990: 158)

Conventional histories of indentureship maintain that the system was instituted by the British imperial government under the pressure of the colonial sugar planters, immediately following the abolition of slavery in the mid-thirties of the nineteenth century. While it was temporarily suspended largely due to the protests of the British humanitarians in the late thirties of that century, it was finally abolished by the Government of India in response to the agitation of the Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century. Thus, the history of

It is conventionally argued that the history of the Indian campaign for the abolition of indenture demonstrates that the Indian nationalists were the only political interest whose utmost concern consistently proved to be the welfare of the indentured labourers. However, the Indian nationalists were engaged in a complex debate involving an international array of interests, drawing inspiration, encouragement and provocation from various individuals, groups, organisations and institutions. The representation of the indentured labourers by the Indian nationalists may be problematised in tracing the historical development of the interconnected notions of race, class, gender and territoriality through the successive phases of the campaign for the abolition of indenture in India.

Although the figure of the indentured labourer was crucial to the development of anticolonial nationalism, the Indian nationalists eventually decided that neither the system of indenture nor the prerogatives of the transient Indian labourers could conform to their agenda. While the possibility of agency for the indentured labourers was deferred through nationalist

discourse, their gendering was fixed through the rhetorical strategy in the abolition campaign of characterising indentureship as 'the slavery of Indian men and the prostitution of Indian women. Furthermore, the allegation of immorality particularly among the indentured women became the determining factor in the final stages of the abolition campaign. The successive campaign for the total prohibition of labour emigration as pursued by the Indian nationalists further secured their own class privileges and complied with the interests of the Indian capitalists. Moreover, the characterisation of diasporic Indians as uncultured was developed through this campaign. The indentured labourers, meanwhile, remained largely excluded from these important political debates.

The Second Movement: Caribbean

The recent emergence of a distinctively Indo-Caribbean identity marks a significant shift in the diasporic consciousness of those who claim, and as I argue even those who disclaim, this cultural identity. Since the period of indenture ship, Indians in the Caribbean have commonly both been called and have called themselves East Indian; however, only as lately as these past two decades, this term has fallen out of popularity. In a succession of sorts, the term Indo-Caribbean has now come into usage. Although this term is far from being unanimously accepted, it seems to be gaining popularity particularly in the Caribbean diaspora. As such, the East Indian constitutes the diasporic identity of those outside of India but within the Caribbean, while Indo-Caribbean constitutes the diasporic identity of those outside of both India and the Caribbean but within the metropolitan cities of Europe and North America. In this sense, then, Indo-Caribbean identity is doubly diasporic, based on the two historical movements of colonial indentureship and

neocolonial migration. The emergence of Indo-Caribbean identity may be historically traced through this canonisation of Indo-Caribbean cultural texts.

In presenting an emergent Indo-Caribbean canon, the books which many Indo-Caribbean people collect as markers of their identity, those that commemorate important events in Indo-Caribbean history, those that invariably find their place on the book tables of Indo-Caribbean community functions. This canon is not limited to works by Indo-Caribbean people; indeed, many works by non-Indo-Caribbean people are quite central to it, including Hugh Tinker's A New System of Slave?(1974) and some essays. The canon does not contain just any work by the Indo-Caribbean people; Neil Bissoondath's Selling Illusions (1994. for example, is not included in it, certainly much to pleasure of the author. There are also many works which well might have but, for various reasons, have not been incorporated into the canon; for instance, Indians in the Caribbean (1987) edited by I.J. Bahadur Singh, a collection of many otherwise publically unavailable essays from the conferences on East Indians in the Caribbean held at the University of West Indies in Trinidad, was only published in India and seems to be poorly distributed on the international market. Then there are those works such as Walton Look Lai's Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar (1993) which may be in the process of becoming incorporated into the canon.

The social creation of the East Indian in the Caribbean was certainly not the sole prerogative of the colonial or Creole West Indian. The historical emergence of the East Indian identity was not simply an imposition by a dominant West Indian society on an already culturally constituted group but rather a dialectical construction in which those who claimed this identity actively participated. The East Indian in the Caribbean is a diasporic identity, based on the historical rupture of indentureship. The temporal and spatial movement of indentureship is the foundation around which the East Indian identity is formed: though constantly engaged in the ongoing process of negotiation.

Yet this cultural process of 'diasporaisation' is rarely theorised in the historical work on East Indians in the Caribbean. In an exceptional article, Haraksingh (1988) thoroughly deals with the "internal process of adjustment within the Indian community of Trinidad" (113). He, too, claims that this is "a subject which has not been a significant area of interest since the overall preference is usually for a discussion located within the context of the larger national framework" (113) - that is, East Indian diasporic identity is often criticised as a separatist ethnic assertion but rarely qualified as an integrative creation of cultural community.

The Politics of the Diasporic: The Academic Production

Within diasporic cultural politics, there are many contradictions and tensions both between and among those in diaspora and those at home concerning the very constitution of diasporic culture. The political interests of the diaspora are often set in an antagonistic relationship with the political interests of home as, respectively, the claim of authority over cultural representation as a metropolitan privilege is jettisoned through the deferral to the innocence of political oppression in a marginal homeland. While to some degree this may be a productive dilemma particularly for the academics in diaspora to sustain, the limitations of such a theoretical model for effective political intervention are quite dangerous, whether in diaspora or at home.

Aijaz Ahmad (1992), in a broad review of recent trends in literary theory, critiques current practices of metropolitan academic production in the context of the international political shift to the ideological Right. He powerfully registers his concerns with the unseeming intersection of "Third-Worldist nationalism" (10) and poststructuralism as well as the characteristic elision of Marxist praxis particularly in postcolonial theory and literature.

While Ahmad's historical and international contextualisation of current academic production is quite astute and his critiques of influential Leftist and postcolonial critics and writers, including Jameson, Said and Rushdie, are rigorous and exhaustive if not somewhat exhausting, some of his own theoretical presumptions and propositions are rather troublesome.

Ahmad establishes a practically undifferentiated category of immigrant metropolitan academics (including, by the way, graduate students). He resorts to such categorisation despite his own sympathetic recognition that "many [migrants] have been propelled by need, others motivated by ambition, yet others driven away by persecution...[and] in many cases need and ambition have become ambiguously and inextricably linked" (86), even conceding that no "uniform political choice [is] necessarily immanent in the act of immigration as such" (ibid). Ahmad goes on to disassociate himself from this category of immigrant metropolitan academics by establishing another category of 'us'. Who specifically is included in this category of 'us' is uncertain or at least variable. Ahmad variously emphasizes such terms as 'us' and 'our when it seems that he is referring to Indian academics. For Ahmad, there is a divide between 'us' and, presumably, 'them'. While such a semantic division may be

grammatically unavoidable, the theoretical significance of this divide must be understood in Ahmad's work.

Less theoretically rigorous and rhetorically combative than Ahmad, Miyoshi presents a historical and international contextualisation of corporate investment after World War II as well as current academic production. Miyoshi argues that academics are becoming incorporated into the transnational class of professionals. In theorising the politics of diasporic academic production, then, the concept of cultural brokerage as posited by Rey Chow (1993) may be usefully employed.

In conclusion, returning to the traumatic historical ruptures of slavery and indentureship, those original movements through which Afro- and Indo-Caribbean diasporic histories are respectively constituted, the problematics of diasporic identity and academic production may be confronted in the cultural context of the Indo-Caribbean commemoration of history. In recent formulations of the Indo-Caribbean history, there is a recurrent concern with the resemblance of indentureship to slavery. While concessions are usually allowed for cultural specificity, indentureship is regularly paralleled with slavery. Thus, the Afro- and Indo-Caribbean experiences are constituted as discrete yet replicable histories. The historical formulation of indentureship as slavery effects the meaning of Indianness in the Indo-Caribbean identity. For, despite the problematisation of the British humanitarian antislavery movement in critical histories of slavery, the argument on indentureship as slavery relies upon the unqualified support of the Indian nationalist campaign for the abolition of indenture.

Recently, the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the Indians in Guyana, also marking the Indian arrival in the Caribbean, was celebrated in 1988, while the hundred and

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