



THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL CREED AND INCONGRUITY IN THE NOVELS : SALMAN RUSHDIE

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ABSTRACT

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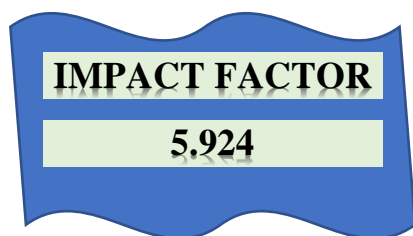
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The Indian diaspora in time spans a period from the 1830s to the present time and in space covers over a 100 countries. There are over 25 million Indians in diaspora today and it is the largest diaspora after the Chinese one. Included in this diaspora are those who were displaced in the 19th century in the colonial period when they were taken as indentured labour to other British and even French colonies. They were transported across the Kala Paani, the black waters of the oceans, in ships and by self-definition call themselves the 'jahajis' today. By the end of the 20th century the term 'diasporic' in the context of Indians had expanded to include the 'cyber coolies', i.e., IT professionals who hefting their laptops on their shoulders also crossed the Kala Paani, but this time in jets rather than in jahajis, to work as 'outsourced labour' in companies around the world which need their expertise.

I. Cultural Creed Definition and Aptness in today's world

Intermingled in these categories are also the professional and academic diasporas, which began also in the colonial period and continue to this day. To problematize matters further we now have a breed of global Indians who set up shops big and small-around the world and trade in commodities, small and heavy industries and buy and sell huge corporations. These include the Tatas, the Ambanis, the Mittals, the Bhatias and many others who in real and virtual spaces live and trade across borders. The global Indian is basically an economic creature who might have roots and homes in many countries around the world.

Keywords: Diaspora, labour, countries, shoulders, colonial





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However, it is the transnational Indians who also like the global Indians live across borders and are of greater interest to diaspora scholars as they are the ones who exhibit diasporic traits that span a wider spectrum than that offered by the global Indians. It is the transnational jet-setting, country-hopping Indians who set up homes, albeit temporary and partake of the spaces of the more settled older diasporics, in those spaces. They are the ones who also like the older diasporics, more often than not, politicize and problematize their lives in literature and cinema. They are also the ones who have one passport, but in sequential order, more than one residence permits, in more than one country. The more rooted NRI diaspora might still for various reasons cling to their Indian passports but have a residence permit, a green card, in only one country. They too are celebrated in cinema and literature by those of their own kind.

It is, in my opinion, quite interesting and even necessary to try and categorize these different Indian diasporas, at least for the sake of academic and research rigour as some researchers when confronted with a variety of diasporic Indians tend to collapse them all into one catch-all category the Indian diasporic. This then becomes as hegemonic and misleading as the other umbrella term, now much critiqued if not reviled - I refer to the term 'postcolonial'.

It is important to find the right definitions and categories for the diaspora, it is also essential to historically contextualize these diasporas. The jahaji or indentured diaspora had begun when the British Empire had spread its tentacles around the globe and the red stain of imperialism had leaked into diverse land masses. Indian labourers and then entrepreneurs followed the Union Jack from the Caribbean islands to Fiji and from Canada to South Africa. Thus were established 'little Indias', now inhabited by second and third generation persons of Indian origins who the Indian Government today calls Pravasi Bharatiyas. Among this group are also the diasporics of more recent postcolonial origins. The Indian diapsora today is larger than the entire population of some nation-states. As India is a multicultural, multilingual, multiracial and multi-religious country. The Indian diaspora too displays all these traits. It speaks different languages Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, etc., and worships at different altars - Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian.

India celebrated the first Pravasi Bharatiya Divas on 9th January 2003 - 9th January in 1915 being the day on which one of India's most celebrated diasporics had returned home after more than 21 years in South Africa, the reference being to Mahatma Gandhi. This celebration has now become an annual feature. It is instructive to note here that it is not mere nostalgia that has inspired the mandarins in Delhi to celebrate the Indian diaspora. As Lord Meghnand Desai has said, 'its hard-headed business sense' ('Big Fight',



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NDTV 24x7, 10 January 2004) that has probably driven the Indian Government machinery in the direction of granting PIO and OCI cards to these Pravasi Bharatiyas.

This diasporic population has political and socio-economic importance, not only in their new lands but also in India, due to the direct and indirect economic investments they make here. The diasporic Indians have been performing another important role - they have been imaging India to the world. Being away from the land of their ancestors, they have experienced the loss of self, by writing of this experience they hope to regain this self. However, this exercise often comes into conflict with the more rooted Indians and their perceptions of India.

The earlier generation of diasporic Indian writers included men like V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel laureate in literature, who has had and continues to have a rather stormy relationship with the land of his ancestors. The more recent among the writers of the Indian diaspora are Salman Rushdie, M.G Vassanji, Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry, among many others. They too are alternately lauded and reviled in their ancestral homeland. This marks not just the ambivalent relationships these writers have with the motherland but also the feelings of acceptance and rejection manifested towards them by India herself. This is not surprising as prodigal sons or daughters are often resented for their betrayal of their parental home - by having left it - as they are loved for sometimes returning to it or displaying a continuous attachment to it despite the thousands of kilometres and the long years that stretch between their old and new worlds.

As for the fact that the diasporic Indians located as they are in the West and hence have easy access to the Western publishing houses and media, often becomes a matter of concern regarding their imaging of India. There is a feeling in the old homeland that their imaging of India is often not the one contemporary India might want projected to the world. The matter of the diasporic time warp is raised in this context and at times even their very right to the history of the old land., As Rushdie has put it, "the migrant is at times resented for having fulfilled the dream that the stay-at-homers have also dreamt - 'they have flown'. So when this migrant, this diasporic person writes about his/her old land there are shouts of 'Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! Poacher! Pirate! ... You with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?" To this charge the diasporic writer might reply, "Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commission's map out the territories?"¹

The colonial Indian diaspora had its predecessors in the pre- colonial Indian diasporas which may be called the 'maritime diaspora' and the 'caravan diaspora'. The former originated from around the eastern and western coasts of India and spread out to countries across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. This



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was a trading diaspora, which also carried with it Indian culture and religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and dates back at least 2,000 years. The caravan routes which went from the northwest of India to Central Asia and from there to Europe, resulted in the caravan diaspora. The caravan trade routes were active from the 13th to the 16th century A.D. and like the maritime diaspora, spread Indian culture, religions, languages and peoples across trajectories.²

India was colonized by European countries such as Portugal, England, France, the Netherlands beginning the 16th century. The colonial Indian diaspora, however, began only in the 1830s, and is mainly restricted to British India, although the French too transported labour from its Indian possessions to other parts of its empire. The British colonial Indian diaspora, sometimes forcibly and at times voluntarily, dispersed a sizeable chunk of Indian peoples throughout its other imperial outposts.³ This diaspora was sparked off by the official end of slavery in the British Empire, when Indian peasants were transported to the Caribbean and the Fiji islands to fill the gaping holes in the workforce on sugar plantations there. Indian labour was also used to construct railways and roads in Africa and to work in the rubber and tea plantations in Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Robin Cohen³ calls this the 'labour diaspora'. This diaspora was meant to replace slavery with cheap labour from the colonies. However, there was a difference between the indentured labour from the colonies and the black slaves.

The indentured labourers could not be bought or sold like the slaves and at the end of their contract period had to be given a free/sponsored passage back home or given an opportunity to be re-indentured with a promise to be set free at the end of their renewed indentures. Though as V.S. Naipauls has noted, very few of the Indians taken to the Caribbean took the passage back home - for most Indians the journey to Trinidad 'had been final'. It is possible that after having lost caste by crossing the ocean - Kaala Pani, the black water the mainly Hindu indentured labourers would have been reluctant to return home and live as outcastes in their villages.

Although for the indentured labour diaspora return home was almost always impossible and the new land became 'home', the notion of 'homeland' that was nurtured from generation to generation was always India. For the indentured labour diaspora which did not have access to modern transport and technology and which was more often than not illiterate, the one 'memory text' they had was the Ramayana that someone in the transported group had carried with him to the new land. The Ramayana with its tale of Ram in exile struck an obvious chord in the breasts of the transported labourers, who saw themselves in exile like Ram, banished from their homelands due to reasons ranging from poverty, to caste atrocities, to indebtedness and to widowhood in the case of the women. Banished they were but as the critic Brij Lal has said they retained not just the values taught by the Ramayana, loyalty, obedience, fealty but also often re-created a



version of India their own imaginary homeland in the new socio-economic, cultural and political order, through which they continued to perceive Indias even after more than a hundred years. Also in this diaspora there was despair at their reduced social situation and the ignominy of having to bear the tag of 'coolie'.

The tradition of expression of longing for the lost homeland one could argue is a leitmotif virtually with this diaspora of Indian indentured labour now available as not merely a memory text with the present generation of its descendants. A veritable example may be found in the contemporary Fijian poet Sudesh Mishra who uses the Bidesia tradition, associated with longing for the beloved in Indian literatures, to express a longing for the lost homeland in his.

The Time is Out of Joint (2002), 'The monsoon clouds are gathered, O Rama/But in which place dwells the stranger?' This diasporic perception of the homeland is what Uma Parmeswaran calls 'diaspora consciousness' and this is usually nurtured through the generations by various modes - oral family histories, Indian religious texts, Indian myths, literary texts and now cinema and television. The result thus is a hyphenated identity the diasporics have carried with them down the years in distant new lands.⁴ This nostalgia is an underscoring trope that is indissolubly linked, affixed, entrenched with the image of India, which through the passage of time successive generation/descendants been re- imaged, cast, moulded and planted like a flag in the new country. The point is this consciousness though expresses itself differently and is more, or less immediate, depending on generational difference and distancing in time.

The forced diaspora was followed by voluntary migrations to these countries by small-time entrepreneurs who followed the imperial flag in search of trade. This marks the transformation of the constitution of the Indian diaspora from labour to the petty bourgeoisie. After the end of Empire, the Africanization programmes of several countries on the African continent and the covert and overt racism practised in the Caribbean islands, led large sections of Indians there to once again migrate, this time to either the 'mother' country Britain or to Canada In this context, it would be worthwhile to note that the story of race in the original sense is the Manichean opposition of Black and White, analyzed by Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. 10 In India the brown races occupied the position of the Blacks, although they were often called the natives as well.⁵

In the African/Caribbean spaces the opposition was between the White colonizers and the Africans/Afro-Caribbeans. The diasporic brown Black races complicated the situation and were in time treated as colonial elite by the Europeans and hence earned the ire of the Blacks, who thought of them as colonial stooges. This situation was compounded by the economic power the Indian diasporic people began to acquire. This after decolonization led first to discrimination and then, as in Uganda, to expulsion of the descendants of



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the indentured Indian labourers and traders. The expelled Indians and those who voluntarily left the African/Caribbean countries, once again did not exercise the option to return to India. The reasons this time being materialistic rather than related to caste.

The postcolonial Indian diaspora, which began in the late 1940s, has its own ways of re-creating, re-imagining the homeland. This diaspora of the 1940s though anticipating the later postcolonial diasporas, has a point of contiguity in labour, this time though as a result of the massive military and civilian casualties during the Second World War. However, the need for such labour was this time at the erstwhile colonial centre, rather than at its peripheries.

At first it was skilled and semi-skilled labourers from India who went to Britain but they were soon followed in the 1950s and 60s by professionals, especially doctors and nurses, that Britain needed for its newly inaugurated utopian project of the National Health Service, which marks the beginnings of the postcolonial Indian diaspora. This postcolonial diaspora took yet another turn in the 1970s with a large number of Indian students flocking to American universities and then staying on to make America their new home. This diasporic location was soon augmented by newer locations such as Canada (which of course also has its older Indian diaspora).

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