

Indian Diaspora Writers, V S Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri: The Cultural Dispersion of Exile

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora Literature is widely known as Expatriate. Irrespective of language, style, literary form and technique, Diaspora literature attracts the readers crossing the borders with stream of consciousness or magic realism or immigrancy or alienation or adaptability of a new land and culture. But for all Diaspora writers nostalgia is similar. Remarkably the works of Indian Diaspora cover all parts of the world. It is a fact that a great deal of Indian writing in English is produced not in India but is widely distributed geographical areas of bond. This paper focuses on two of the Diaspora writers, V S Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri, and their writings which are notable to the readers. The essay takes centre of a structure view of the word "exile" to encompass a range of displaced existence. Displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a disaster. But an important point to note is that, as if the changed atmosphere acts as a stimulant for them, writers in their displaced existence generally tend to excel in their work. The essay then goes on to show that diasporic Indian writing can also be called as the cultural dispersion of exile.

Keywords: Culture, Diaspora, Displacement, Exile, Structure, Tradition

"The diasporic production of cultural meanings occurs in many areas, such as contemporary music, film, theatre and dance, but writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial and ethnic formulations of identity." (Ashcroft 218)

It would be appropriate to examine features and aspects of Diaspora literature in which Indian Writing in English not only contributed greatly but also received international appreciation and admiration in the past few years. It is a globally accepted fact that, since the Independence Diaspora writers set a trend. An attempt to understand the movement of people from India since ancient times to contemporary period says a fascinating story of cultural exchanges that the people of India have with the rest of the world. The Indian classical texts describe about long journeys of saints and monks had undertaken for the spread of knowledge, peace and love. The archeological evidences establish the fact that Indians did travel to other countries for trade during ancient period. Writers of the Indian diaspora have been fairly centre stage in the last two decades primarily because of the theoretical formulations which are now

being generated by the critiquing of their work and the growing interest in cultural studies. Transformation of Language and cultures takes place as they come into contact with other languages and cultures. The word “exile” exist with negative connotations. World literature has plenty of writers whose writings have prospered while they were in exile. Although it would be ridiculous to assume the vice-versa that exiled writers would not have prospered had they not been in exile, the fact in the former statement cannot be denied. In this view Cultural theorists and literary critics are all alike. Questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'nation' are raised by the Diasporic writers. These writers are often preoccupied with Schizophrenia and/or nostalgia 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 discuss the cultural space of the countries of their adoption. The essay address these and many more questions perceptively, critically, and with compassion.

When VS Naipaul won the Nobel Prize (2001), he said: “It is a great tribute to England, my home, and India, the land of my ancestors...” It is a tradition he shares with Jhumpa Lahiri, who was born in London and migrated to America with her Indian-born parents. “While I am American by virtue of the fact that I was raised in this country, I am Indian thanks to the efforts of two individuals,” she said, referring to her parents, in an interview with Newsweek (2006). They have both painted on their heritage as writers. While he is a Nobel laureate and Booker Prize winner, she won America’s prestigious Pulitzer Prize with her very first book, *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000), a collection of short stories. Interestingly, Naipaul’s first “publishable” work, by his own account, was also a short story, called Bogart, though it appeared only in his third book, *Miguel Street*, after the comic novellas, *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*. Even though Lahiri has never written anything comic, but comparisons with Naipaul are inevitable – and not just because of their heritage. Naipaul and Lahiri are autobiographical writers. “I am the sum of all my books,” Naipaul declared during his Nobel Lecture. He did not set out to write about his life and it happened by chance. He was 22 years old, an Oxford graduate working freelance for the BBC when one day while he was pecking away at the typewriter, the words suddenly came to him unbidden. He recalled the experience in his essay, Prologue to an Autobiography, in 1984.

V S Naipaul, born in Changunas, Trinidad (1932) where his maternal grandfather had built an Indian- style large house which provided him the first link with his Indian origin. He was the seventh son of an orthodox Brahmin family, whose ancestral root was in Gorakhpur, a village in Uttar Pradesh, India. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul asserts that for him India was a far off dream because he knew nothing about his ancestral roots. But later he came to know about his family history. His grandfather came to Trinidad as a child with his mother who was an indenture labourer in the sugar cane fields in Trinidad and he was trained to be a Pundit so as to follow the family tradition. Naipaul’s father Seepersad Naipaul was also trained to be a Pundit, but he never wished to be a pundit and therefore he took a job of sign painting at the beginning of his career. This job took him to the Lion- House at Chaguanas where he met Miss Droaptie,

whom he married and settled down with her family. Later Seepersad Naipaul became a journalist and wrote articles to the 'Trinidad Guardian'. After the birth of V.S. Naipaul he left 'Trinidad Guardian' and did various jobs, staying in his wife's family or with his uncle who was a rich man. He himself being a poor, belonged to the agricultural labourer class, lived and changed his life in half-independence and half esteem between these two powerful families. Naipaul writes; "Chaguanas was in the heart of the sugar area and the Indian area of Trinidad. It was where my mother's family was established. Contract labour was far behind them; they were big landowners" (*Finding the Centre*, 1985:34). In 1935, Naipaul's father joined in 'Guardian' as a city reporter. At that time they moved to Port of Spain and lived in a house owned by Naipaul's grandmother. There, most of the time Naipaul's father kept himself away from home. The life and the personality of his father remained mysterious to Naipaul.

Naipaul's father wanted his son to be a writer, but Naipaul realized that their colonial land could not be able to provide him this opportunity. Therefore, he moved from Trinidad to Oxford taking a scholarship and actively engaged there with his literary writings. Naipaul utilized his formative years in England for thorough study and for inculcating his own literary practices. After the B.A. degree in literature from the Oxford University, Naipaul took broadcasting as his career. At that time he was engaged in several activities like editing a literary programme for B.B.C., publishing book reviews, wrote features for several magazines and journals. Without these professional assignments Naipaul would not find tranquility because there was a deep agony within him to find his own literary voice and his own identity as a writer. He again stresses his determination to become a writer as no other occupation could make him free from his traumatic condition. His state of mind and his search for identity find an open expression in *Finding the Center*: "On this floor, the B.B.C. had set aside a room for people like me 'freelancers'- to me then not a word suggesting freedom and velour, but suggesting only people on the fringe of mighty enterprise, depressed and suppliant class" (*Finding the Centre*, 1985:143). With this confusion in his mind he arrived in London and got on to a real take off as a writer. In its freelancers' room, working with his typewriter, he launched on his writing that pursuit his numerous memories back home in Port of Spain. However, his problem was not solved because the reviewers had regarded his writings as bizarre and fantasies when all the time he thought he was realistic in his description of Trinidad. The greatest obstacle for him was that he was from colonial background and no one considered him as British. His problem as a colonial writer in an alien land however made him a genuine writer because of his thematic aspect that created an impression of its being 'exotic' and became a fully fledged writer and during the span of his 60 years he had produced fiction, nonfiction, travelogues and autobiographical essays. His literary works have been well known worldwide as he has won several awards and has received recognizable praise from literary critics for the high excellence achieved in his fiction. In exploring the societies and culture, Naipaul is able to build a place for himself in the diaspora English literature. His deep understanding of the situation facilitates him to present his diasporic ambivalence not only in his fiction but also in his travelogues.

As a writer Naipaul has a splendid image and voice that arise from his rootless, fluid and insecure socio-cultural background. He was never at ease with the subjugated identity and his agony and restlessness is quite obvious when he narrates his childhood memories through his works like *Finding the Centre*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*. The geographical separation in the countryside of Trinidad brings these Indian immigrants in such a position that they could hardly come in contact with the outside world. As a stranded Indian born in exile, Naipaul was bound to create literature in order to forge alternative identity for those stranded migrants. In such worrying situation, Naipaul was desperate for his own identity and an indefinite fear hunted him from the very beginning of his life. For him the historical past of his family and community became a part of darkness and also an imaginary homeland. There is no denying the fact that Naipaul's creativeness has flourished voluminously to the mainstream of British fiction. For him, London remained the land of his literary practices, but on the other hand it is his journey through countries including India and Trinidad which provide him sources for his literary writings. His literature originated from his own odd situations and experience in different countries such as Caribbean Island, England, Africa, Europe, Pakistan and other Islamic countries while being separated from his family and he constantly challenged the received wisdom of time with the problems of the people who belong to the marginalized societies, reflecting the background of the Caribbean island from where he has departed and shifted to live in the cosmopolitan country. Carrying with him three conflicting identity- Indian, Trinidadian and British, Naipaul never stopped to have his association with India, the ancestral homeland and Trinidad, his birth place even though there is no desire for return. Naipaul's multiple heritages allow him to present the experiences of living with multiple culture and identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri published her debut in 1999, *Interpreter of Maladies*, winning the Pulitzer Prize. Lahiri was able to share with the world her first book, a collection of nine stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, published in 1999. The work's depth-driven plots allowed glimpses into the lives of characters both in India and the States. *Interpreter of Maladies* won an array of honors, including the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Hemingway Award. In 2003, Lahiri came up with *The Namesake*, a novel that followed the lives, perspectives and changing family ties of the Gangulis, an Indian couple in an arranged marriage who was relocated to America. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and often writes of her own experiences and of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. To explain the details of immigrant psychology and behavior Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases. The fact that the distinction between human cultures is man-made is what Jhumpa Lahiri probably means to explore through her work. Her writing is characterized by her "simple" language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America who have to find the way between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Her abilities to convey the oldest cultural conflicts in the most immediate fashion and to accomplish the voices of many different characters are among the unique qualities that have captured the attention of a wide audience.

Born in London, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island as a young child with her Bengali parents. Even though her family lived in the US for more than thirty years, Lahiri observes: “The way my parents explain it to me is that they have spent their immigrant lives feeling as if they are on a river with a foot in two different boats,” she relates. “Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction, and my parents are always torn between the two. They are always hanging, literally straddling two worlds.” She has experienced that her parents preserve a sense of emotional exile and she herself grew up with conflicting expectations. It is very much interesting that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants and that she also crosses borders when she migrates from England, her birth place to the U.S.A. and became an American citizen. In the *Namesake*, Lahiri’s experiences of growing up as a child of immigrants bear a resemblance to that of her protagonist, Gogol Ganguly. Immigration became blessing in disguise for her as that makes her a Diaspora writer. In the *Namesake*, she reflects on the Indian Diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the discrepancy of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of Diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri makes her characters very humble and down to earth as well. She belongs to the second generation of Indian Diaspora whose ongoing quest for identity never seems to end.

V. S. Naipaul is one of those expatriate writers who tended to develop his diasporic sensibility by encountering a new world of hope, culture shock and desire for bringing a settled and secured identity. They are marvellous storytellers, eloquent witnesses to the Indian diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri may like to be plain and simple, but she knows how to strike a chord with the readers. The evaluation of Naipaul’s and Lahiri’s diasporic sensibility along with other diasporic writers explores a different conception of diaspora. The immigrant suffers from discrimination and prejudices on account of various psychological factors that affect them and it may even affect the host society. These traumas very often lead to create group favoritism in search of social identity and social influences like mass media. In this postcolonial era, the writers who live as expatriates in metropolitan countries and contribute to the literature, show their exile status, constant travels, displacements, rootlessness and homelessness. The consciousness of diaspora forces them to experience the cultural and social disorder even though they acquire citizenship and home in abroad. This condition is true to V S Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri who inherited the seeds of diasporic ambivalence from their birth. V S Naipaul was one of the most acknowledged literary figures of the contemporary world who had experienced for long life in terms of an ‘exilic’. Naipaul and Lahiri, both took writing as their sole profession and their creative writings become the live record of their progress as writers. Their sensibility is increasingly enriched by the personal experiences as a displaced and exile persons.

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