The term ‘diaspora’, from the Greek, meaning dispersal, distribution, or spreading has been applied for many years to the worldwide scattering of the Jews; in more recent times it has been applied to a number of ethnic and racial groups living distant from their traditional homelands; and it has been used with particular application to people from the former British India – a result of the colonization though of late one occasionally hears or reads of the African diaspora. When we speak of the Indian diaspora, writers generally refer to persons of Indian birth or ethnicity living abroad (in earlier times often as a result of induced emigration or indenture), but in more recent decades usually by free election and often for economic, artistic, or social advantage. Emmanuel S. Nelson defines the Indian diaspora as the “historical and contemporary presence of people of Indian subcontinental origin in other areas of the world.” Many are first generation expatriates who continue to consider India their true home, the place of their nurture, values, and extended families as well as their deepest sympathies and attachments. However this is not universally the case; accommodated to overseas lifestyles, many members of the diaspora experience a distinct dissonance when reintroduced to their former subcontinental culture. G.S. Sarat Chandra, the noted academic and novelist states in *Sari of the Gods* (1998):

I was twenty-seven when I left India for good. Since then, I’ve steered a new course in my life….Though India is always on my mind, there’s no link that connects the sudden stop my life came to there and my new self. I leaped from one life to another, and in between I left nothing but a vacuum. Only imagination and memory, when I need them, act as my bridges. Thus whenever I go back to India, I’m a stranger wandering almost invisibly in familiar neighborhoods. (232)

Generally speaking, the literature of the Indian diaspora is considered to be that body of writing in English produced by persons who identify themselves as of Indian heritage who are living (or have lived for some time) outside the nation state of India or
Mother India in such places as Australia, Fiji, Trinidad, Guyana and Mauritius, Malaysia and East Africa, or in Western countries such as Canada, the United States and Great Britain. Though the writing of the diasporic Indians is not new, it has of late raised complicated issues which is the in-word or talking point in postcolonial cultural and literary discourses. The formation of Indian diaspora is one of the most significant demographic dislocations of modern times and can be classified according to Sudesh Mishra as the ‘sugar’ and the ‘masala’ diaspora:

There is a distinction to be made between the old and the new diasporas. This distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasants to the non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam, and Guyana, roughly between the years 1830 and 1917; and on the other the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centers such as Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain (276).

This same classification is termed by other critics as forced diaspora and voluntary diaspora. Another critic and scholar Vinay Lal calls it ‘diaspora of labour’ versus ‘diaspora of longing’. For most of the old diasporic writers there is an unease of the dislocated and the deracinated who either from choice or from compulsion have abandoned house/home in the country of their birth for housing/lodging in their adopted country. For instance, Naipaul, originally a third generation immigrant from a ‘branch of Dubes’ of a Brahmin village of Uttar Pradesh who moved to Trinidad expresses a sense of unease on the question of inheritance. In A Way in the World (1994), the narrator comments on the ancestry of the British immigrant mortician Leonard Side/Sayed’s inheritance:

I might say that an ancestor of Leonard Side’s came from the dancing groups of Lucknow, the lewd men who painted their faces and tried to live like women. But that would be only a fragment of his inheritance, a fragment of the truth. We cannot understand all the traits we have inherited. Sometimes we can be strangers to ourselves.

This quote applies to all the first/second/third generation writers who were migrants from compulsion, usually descendants of indentured labourers from India sent to work in the various British colonial plantations. For the migrants from choice, the situation is totally
different. Usually upper-middle class and cosmopolitan, these first and second generation writers live in a kind of cosmopolitan, globalized world where the markers of their borderless state have often to be invented. Apart from fictional example of Thamma who is confused between going and coming home in Dhaka, in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, I am also reminded of a recent experience in an international flight where in between the movie scenes, the screen in front of me showed the image of the plane with an arrow over it that was constantly pointing towards Mecca with the mileage noted in bold below it. This attempt at mooring oneself within the concept of a ‘meta-home’ in a borderless state of existence at about thirty thousand feet height above sea level, according to my analysis is an important feature of contemporary diasporic thought. I am also reminded of the wedding cards that I often receive in Kolkata where the bride’s and groom’s addresses are often mentioned along with their original ‘home town’ in parenthesis. What is interesting is that for most of the time, this ‘meta-home’ is located in erstwhile East Pakistan, or present Bangladesh, places where their fathers, grandfathers, or ancestors hailed from, and which the bride or the groom have never ever visited. These two instances therefore serve to emphasize the desire for roots and belonging in all diasporic sensibilities.

The idea of home as an ambivalent location shows that identities are not fixed but in transition, drawing on different cultural traditions at the same time. It may be tempting to think of identity as destined to end up in one place or another, either returning to its roots or disappearing through partial assimilation in a hermeneutic “fusion” that is possible because of the supposed translatability and commensurability of the different cultures. Caught between a nativist traditionalism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation, according to Homi Bhabha, the migrant culture of the “in-between” dramatizes precisely the activity of cultural untranslatability. These hybrid identities are metaphorically located on borders and boundaries where the world of capitals and of universalistic assumptions is subverted by interpenetration and reversals of different cultures, where subjectivities are shifting, epistemologies are questioned, and homogeneity is replaced by heterogeneity. As Arif Dirlik has put it:
New diasporas have relocated the Self there and the Other here, and consequently borders and boundaries have been confounded. And the flow has become at once homogenizing and heterogenizing; some groups share in common global culture regardless of location while others take refuge in cultural legacies that are far apart from one another as they were at the origin of modernity. (352)

Therefore, the words *exile, diaspora, migration, dislocation, deracination,* and displacement are the leading metaphors used to express not only special disorientation but also ideological and existential fragmentation. Dismantling the binary between the centre and the periphery, diasporicity or nomadism (as Deleuze and Guatteri defined minority literatures on the move), refers, in fact, to a state of mind that manifests itself through strategies of assimilation and resistance within the new cultures. Academically speaking, the diasporic nature of Indian writing in English by the so-called ‘voluntary’ diasporics once again has three visible sections:

a) In the first category falls a writer like Bharati Mukherjee - one who detests the idea of being called the immigrant writer and considers herself mainstream American. Simplistically, she sees expatriates resisting assimilation, immigrants welcoming it. “For me,” she says, “it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration.”

b) In the second category falls the whole group of writers who shuttle between different continents. Within this group, some write about their immigrant experiences, while others physically living there write on the exoticism of their home country or of characters who go as aliens and try to fit into the western world. Sunetra Gupta is a case in point. Born in Calcutta, she now lives in Oxford and her novels *Memories of Rain* and *A Sin of Colour* are set in both Calcutta and Oxford. Living in London, Meera Syal believes that “duality and conflict make you want to express yourself. This is why (her) generation is so outspoken.”

c) The most complicated case is the third category of writers whose origin is India but whose work have no connections as such with the mother country. Bidisha Bandopadhyay (who incidentally never writes her surname) is a second-generation Bengali writer born and brought up in England. Her debut novel *Seahorses* (1997) is an urban pageant about three young British men and is in no way even remotely connected
to India. Another interesting example is that of Abha Dawesar, whose debut novel *The Three of Us* (2003) is not what we usually expect from a twenty-six year old immigrant South Asian woman writer. She creates a story that shrewdly explores sexual dependency from the perspective of a white male investment banker in Manhattan, New York whose affairs range from having sex with his boss as well as his wife, all neatly timed with the help of a mini-planner. In a recent article called “India Away From Home,” Dawesar explains her predicament and raises several pertinent questions that can be applied to many others as well:

My novel was about and in the voice of a young man: Andre Bernard. A white man. A gay man. An American. The book was not of India in any sense of the term. Can I be considered an Indian writer by virtue of my birth alone? Do I remain an Indian writer if I write in the voice of a white American man? Is it my literature that makes me India or my passport? This class of questions will gain in significance as diasporic writing speaks in more and more tongues. (30)

Let us also examine the case of Jhumpa Lahiri whose *Interpreter of Maladies* took the literary world by storm. Bill Buford, the literary editor of *The New Yorker* catapulted her into limelight when he included her in his list of “the twenty best young fiction writers in American today.” Born in London, raised in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and presently living in New York, Jhumpa set some of her stories in Calcutta because of “a necessary combination of distance and intimacy” and in an interview said:

I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor was a former resident - a valuable position, I think, for a writer…. I learnt to observe things as an outsider and yet I also knew that, as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way. In the ways I didn’t seem to belong in the US.

Another young novelist, Kiran Desai, whose debut *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* found extraordinary welcome on both sides of the Atlantic shuttles between New York and Cambridge and even goes off to a remote retreat in Mexico along with her mother for literary inspiration. The way all these novelists’ names are used at random by critics to define Indian Writing in English as well makes things complicated indeed. Also, the question remains whether writers living outside India forfeit the right to comment on behalf of an entire nation or not. An Indian writer abroad is hardly ever looked at as
anything else but an Indian ethnic writer. So it is good that at least some young writers are attempting to do away with stereotypes.

Living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from old and new cultures and homelands. In *Shame* Rushdie generalizes:

> All migrants leave their pasts behind although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes – but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognize them, because it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked among the scorn of strangers upon whom they see the rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging.

Therefore most diasporic writing is suffused with identification consciousness and the problem of living in an alien society. As Rushdie has put it in *Imaginary Homelands*, the position of ‘the exile or immigrant’ is one of ‘profound uncertainties’ (10). The diasporic person is at home neither in the west nor in India and is thus ‘unhomed’ (Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*) in the most essential sense of the term. Thus the concept and interpretation of ‘home’ becomes vital in all kinds of diasporic writing. Tara’s temporary return to Calcutta after seven years in Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter* reveals the polarities of repulsion/attraction to her native home India as also her adopted home America by marriage to the American David Cartwright. Ralph Singh in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, shifting between the West Indies and London, finds ‘home’ nowhere. Gogol Ganguli’s meta-Indian home in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) consists of a Hindu patriarchal home in the interior while externally it looks like any typical American home. According to Sudesh Mishra,

> The movement from Seepersad Naipaul to Meera Syal suggests an important rethinking of the concept of ‘home’ within the diaspora, especially as this occurs against the backdrop of the global shift from the centring or centripedal logic of monopoly capitalism to the decentering or centrifugal logic of transnational capitalism. Whereas for the sugar diaspora ‘home’ signifies an end to itinerant wandering, in putting down the roots, ‘home’ for the masala diaspora is linked to the strategic espousal of rootlessness, to the constant mantling and dismantling of the self in makeshift landscapes (294).
So when diasporic writing tries to reflect real and imagined worlds, once again quoting from Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands*, it “is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been lost.” Thus we find roving, unsettled, alienated people in the fictive world of contemporary diasporic writers yearning for a real or imaginary homeland, a permanent or temporary return. The declared intentions of inclusive cultural translation, of universalization, go sadly awry in created aesthetic constructs. However, this could also be seen as the strength of diasporic texts – that they are incomplete, the fact that they do not claim to offer the ultimate truth – the fact that they deal with alternatives rather than essentials. It is these alternative histories and narratives that Salman Rushdie’s texts have offered from *Midnight’s Children* (1981) down to *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (2003).

The different labels that have been attributed to Indian diasporic writing include “Neither Here Nor There,” the *Trishanku* image from the mythic tale of *The Ramayana* [made popular by writers like Uma Parameswaran and Sujata Bhatt], the ‘Desh-Pardesh syndrome. Moreover, these metaphors express not only spatial disorientation but also ideological and existential fragmentation. Further diasporic writers have variously described themselves as migrants, plural, hybrid, expatriate, immigrant – every individual investing these words with personal and restrictive connotations. In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie extends his perception of migrant writers as endowed with a double/plural, insider/outside perspective, whose hybrid predicament can be universalized into art with a globally accepted theme. In her introduction to *Darkness*, Bharati Mukherjee distinguishes between ‘expatriate’ and ‘immigrant’:

> In my fiction and in my Canadian experience, immigrants were lost souls, put upon and pathetic. Expatriates on the other hand, knew all too well who and what they were, and what foul hate had befallen them. Like V.S. Naipaul in whom I imagined a model, I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation.

The alienated consciousness of the writer using the English language is another important factor. But since the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, after expatriation, immigration to the west, the trauma of uprooting, the diasporic consciousness and the loss of “home” and identity have preoccupied many Indian writing in English. In order to do away with the
false image of projecting India as a land of snake-charmers and princes and elephants, they have started inscribing Indian words without glossary or italicization into the text with a vengeance so to say. This use of heteroglossia leads to a renewed exoticization – practically a re-orientalization – of India in their writing. This commodification of India in the global literary marketplace is most visible in the anti-realistic representation in Rushdie’s later fiction, as well as in the more realistic depictions in Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s works.

The relationship between East and West, both used for metaphors for different ways of life, have also been explored in the writing of most of these writers. Diasporic Indian writers in English have often been criticized of writing for the Western audience in mind and with an eye towards bagging a Booker or a Commonwealth writer’s award – along with their astronomical advance amounts they all seem to try out their luck in this Cinderella syndrome. As Bill Buford, the editor of The New Yorker wryly comments:

…it showed publishers in the West that books by an Indian writer could sell. (In understanding what motivates the makers of literature, as Dr. Johnson knew, it pays to think about pay.)

Closely associated with this phenomenon is media hype. Aggressive marketing blitz, huge advances, book launch parties, rave reviews and other frills have no doubt helped Indian writing in English to hit the market. This hype and media blitzkrieg created by publishers for an Indian writer making it big in the West is rarely witnessed in the case of Indian translations. However, the last decades have witnessed the emergence and widespread acceptance of a class of writers belonging to the anglicized upper middle class. Thematically their writing reflects very little of the Indian middle class ethos, unlike writing in regional languages which are firmly entrenched in ground realities of Indian social life. “They are misappropriating the English language, creating and marketing imaginary homelands” comments a critic. While reviewing contemporary fiction, Nilanjana S. Roy calls Indo-Anglian literature “a Doon School-St. Stephen’s conspiracy.” It is really interesting to note that many of the young writers are all from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi. The writers are not only English speaking, but for most of them, English is their first language. What we perhaps miss in them is that we might not
be able to locate a distinct regional or ethnic identity, for majority of these writers are part of a pan-Indian community.

History, in addition to magic realism, has been the major preoccupation of the recent Indian writer in English. There is a view that many of our contemporary novelists writing in English are overburdened with history and in novelist Sashi Deshpande’s opinion, the novels are so full of details from Indian history that they end up sagging under its weight. One novelist whose novels do not suffer from this excess as alleged by Deshpande is Rohinton Mistry. His *A Fine Balance* attempts to locate the lives of its characters in a historical context, i.e. to suggest that the personal is seen in relation to the general. His *Such a Long Journey* (1996) follows a similar pattern and explores into areas of human experience that were hitherto only tangentially touched upon. Amitav Ghosh is another novelist who explores the relationships between historical processes and human destiny. In his novel *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh successfully interweaves personal history with a nation’s destiny giving us a poignant story of the partition. The recurrent theme of comparing ‘home’ culture with that of the ‘new’ world where the diasporic writer is settled is found in a lot of diasporic writing. This is often defined as a new form of cultural imperialism. Another direct result of the globalized world is found the way novels are set in a contemporary deterritorialized world spanning different continents. Thus the characters in Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* or Sunetra Gupta’s *Moonlight into Marzipan*, elude a sort of cosmopolitan identity that is usually not found in Indian English fiction in general.

In an essay entitled “The Historical Formation of Indian English Literature” (2003), Vinay Dharwadker mentions how migrant and itinerant writers have energized Indian writing in English in most of its historical phases: Din Muhammad and Rammohan Roy at the inception; Toru Dutt and Mannmohan Ghose before the close of the nineteenth century; Sarojini Naidu, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and G.V. Desani in the later colonial period; and Nirad Chaudhuri, Ved Mehta, Santha Rama Rau, Aubrey Menen, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla, and A.K. Ramanujan, among others, in the early postcolonial decades.
Despite such precedents, however, the literary-cultural output of the contemporary
diaspora has metamorphosed the inner kinetics of Indian English literature on an
unprecedented scale. He further stresses on how in the last few decades of the 20th
century, the very centers of Indian English literary culture appear to have migrated from
the subcontinent, as writers if the Indian diaspora – particularly in Great Britain and
North America – have rapidly and increasingly come to dominate the international
literary marketplace in the English language.

Before winding up, it has to be mentioned, reiterating Dhadwadker’s idea, that the
diaspora has perceptibly modified the four primary zones of contact that have provided a
social framework for Indian English literary culture since the late eighteenth century, the
principal change being that the zones are now geographically located overseas. First, in
its foreign setting, the zones now brings Indian professionals into contact with people of
many more races and nationalities than it did in the colonial period on the subcontinent,
absorbing them into a radically multicultural and multilingual international white-collar
workforce. It also attracts much higher number of educated Indian women into a wider
array of professions than before, especially in North America, which has contributed
generally as well as concretely to the growth and dissemination of Indian women’s
writing and intellectual work across international borders. Well-educated, professionally
successful, and financially secure diasporic and itinerant Indians in the zones of
employment abroad currently constitute networks of a few million Anglicized,
Europeanized, or Westernized men and women scattered around the globe. This
fragmented yet interlinked community has produced many of the newest authors of
Indian origin in English, besides serving as an extensive, enthusiastic international
readership for contemporary Indian-English writing.

Secondly, the zone of marriage and family has altered a lot in its internal structure
resulting in varied interracial and intercultural social-sexual relations, has left its mark in
the racial, cultural and sexual aspects of diasporic Indian-English writing. Interracial
marriage in the diaspora mediates the work, for instance, of Bharati Mukherjee, Meena
Alexander and Sujata Bhatt, among women writers, and of Salman Rushdie and Amitav
Ghosh, among male writers, and its sexual and familial boundaries are ruptured by the thematization, for example, of homosexuality in Agha Sahid Ali’s poetry, of bisexuality in Vikram Seth’s poetry and fiction, and of lesbian identity and queer politics in Suniti Namjoshi’s verse and prose.

Thirdly, many of the Indian-English writers in the diaspora come from non-Christian background and continue to occupy a remarkable spectrum of identities and backgrounds in relation to religion. Though broadly secular in content and perspective – the sheer diversity of the religious backgrounds of its authors – and hence also of their related ethnic, linguistic, regional, and cultural origins on the subcontinent – constitutes one of the greatest strengths and source of fascination of this literature. We have several Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Parsi writers representing India in the diaspora.

Fourthly, the zone that has expanded the most in scope and effect in the diaspora is that of intercultural friendship and social relations that has proved vital for the maintenance of the Indian component in a culturally ambidextrous, cosmopolitan identity. This division of cultural loyalties has contributed once again to the extensive revision of two key features of Indian writing in English. It has altered their conceptions of what constitutes their Indianness vis-à-vis the East-West encounter and done away with the earlier formulations offered by Kipling, Forster and Raja Rao. Also, shifting away from the bookish Oxbridge norm of writing, the English language used by the Indian writers in the diaspora have moved towards a plethora of national, international, colloquial, generic, and experimental styles.

Finally, Indian immigrants and their descendents in different parts of the world differ from each other in their attitudes towards and actual connections with India resulting in a corresponding spectrum of conceptions of India, Indian religions and cultures, and especially of Indianness that is directly related to the psycho-social effects of displacement and dislocation.
Looking at the present day scenario, one can conclude by stating that diasporic Indian writing in English is in a state of good health and flourishing as never before but it still requires an expert’s eye to judiciously segregate the wheat from the chaff. Also, though it is impossible to predict how Indian writing in English will be defined just ten years from now it can be certainly stated that canonical Anglo Saxon literature is already threatened with this onrush and literary flowering of India and the harbingers of 21st century literature will be a new breed of writers whose origins are from this part of the de-colonized world irrespective of which part of the world they are actually residing now. No wonder Routledge put in an advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement* to this effect: “God help the English Novel! Send in serious manuscripts on fiction!”

**Works Cited**


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