CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

The various meanings of the word ‘diaspora’ give rise to some sort of confusion. The denotative meanings of the term ‘diaspora’ are as under:

1. The movement of a large group of people from their home country to other countries in the world.
2. The spreading of people from a national group or culture to other areas.
3. The movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country.

All above definitions focus on the idea of a movement which talks about the journey of any person(s) from one place to another, one culture to another, one nation to another etc. But the history of this word throws light on the deeper sense of this term. The term ‘diaspora’ is derived from “Greek composite verb dia-and speirein (infinitive), literally meaning ‘to scatter’, ‘to spread’ or ‘to disperse’.” It also suggests “a scattering or sowing of seeds.” In the context of human beings, the ancient Greek thought of the term as expressing an expansion through outward migration and settlement. The term ‘diaspora’ (without capitalization) is used to refer to “any people or ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands, being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing development in their dispersal and culture.”

In the beginning, the term ‘diaspora’ was used by the Ancient Greeks to refer to citizens of a grand city who immigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization to assimilate the territory into the empire. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, the original meaning got lost. The word ‘diapsora’ was used to refer specifically to the population of Jews exiled from Judea in 586 BC by the Babylonians, and from Jerusalem in AD 136 by the Roman Empire. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem led to the
enslavement and displacement of the key military, civil and religious leaders of Judea and their exile in Babylon. This fate was predicted in Deuteronomy, the fifth book of Old Testament which consists of three sermons or speeches delivered to the Israelites by Moses, where in Chapter 28, verse 64, God had warned that anybody who disobeyed His law would be scattered to all ends of the Earth. “The Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the even unto the other end of the earth.”

The Jews left their home voluntarily as migrants, as opposed to those who were forced into slavery by conquerors and known as “galut (state of exile).” After a time this distinction became irrelevant and the term ‘diaspora’ was commonly used for all those who were living outside their homeland either voluntarily or involuntarily. For nearly two millennia, the term ‘diaspora’ had been used to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel, or the cultural development of that population or the population itself. The term ‘diaspora’ was assimilated from Greek into English in the late 20th century and at the same time the interest of scholars to study diaspora with its various names developed. History contains numerous diaspora like events e.g. The Migration Period- “a period of intensified human migration in Europe that occurred from c. 400 to 800 AD” also called Barbarian Invasion, which included several phases, is just one of many. The first phase of Migration Period occurred between AD 300 and 500 which included relocation or displacement of the Goths, Vandals, Franks, Slavic and other German tribes. The second phase between AD 500 and 700 saw more resettlement of Slavic, Turkic and other tribes in Eastern Europe. The last phase saw the coming of the Magyars and the Viking’s expansion out of Scandinavia. Likewise, other Diasporas moved from various parts of the world and humans have participated in it as central figures.

The above phases happened during the Migration Period, but one can ask a question, what is ‘migration’? It denotes: “the movement of large numbers of people, birds or animals from one place to another.” As it is suggested that ‘migration’ and ‘dispersion’ are natural phenomena. “Migration is widely familiar both in the world of plants and the animal kingdom.”
Even human beings are no exception to migration. This human movement, before the establishment of state boundaries or within one’s state is termed ‘migration’. When a person moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work, he becomes a part of ‘human migration’. The existence of ‘human migration’—“a physical movement by humans from one area to another, sometimes over long distance or in large groups”,¹² is seen, as the humans are known to have migrated extensively throughout the history and pre-history e.g. “there are 214 million estimated international migrants in the world today”.¹³ Migration is an important evolutionary force (along with natural selection, genetic drift and mutations). The movement of population in modern times has continued under the form of both voluntary migration within one’s region, country or beyond, and involuntary migration (which includes slave trade, trafficking of human beings and ethnic cleansing). The people who migrate are called ‘migrants’. The unique factor to be kept in mind that migration is not only a physical movement of the people, but also it carries with it socio-cultural baggage including, “(i) a predefined social identity (ii) a set of religious beliefs and practices (iii) a framework of norms and values governing family and kinship organization, and food habit (iv) languages.”¹⁴ The motives to migrate can be either attracting anyone away, known as the ‘pull factors’—higher incomes, lower taxes, better weather, better availability of employment, medical facilities, better behaviour among people, family reasons, political stability and religious tolerance, or the circumstances encouraging a person to leave, known as ‘push factors’—war or other armed conflict, famine and drought, disease, political corruption, disagreement with policies, religious intolerance, natural disasters, discontent with the natives such as frequent harassment, bullying and abuse and lack of employment opportunities, play a pivotal role in migration.

Mostly in developing and underdeveloped countries – the Third World, people feel both the factors and largely become a part of long stream of migration history with a faster flow. The countries having population problem face unemployment, poverty, famine, internal conflicts, dissatisfactory political decisions, political instability, wider gap between rich and poor, malnutrition to
the children, problem of education, depression among youth, violence, terrorism, riots etc. By and large, each result affects everyone who really wants to clutch the essence of life in the prevailing situations which are really against the ‘dream.’ The ‘dream’ remains only a ‘dream’ unless they jump into the flow of migration which leads everyone virtually to the betterment of health, education, employment, standard of living, their identity, etc. The political stability which gives opportunities for higher incomes with lower taxes on business by utilizing lots of untouched infrastructure / resources, that is apparently impossible in one’s own country where resources are less accessible due to uncontrolled population growth. Moreover, with the scientific / technological inventions and under the influence of the ‘globalization’, it’s very easy and desirable to cross the boundaries of states, countries and nations. The concept of ‘global village’ paves the way to all to fulfill their wishes, in the perspectives of the global trends which are ingrained by the society right from the beginning to the present era.

Sometimes the migrants decide not only to leave their own country for another, but to settle in the latter. Then it becomes ‘emigration’ which means “the process of leaving one’s own country to go and live permanently in another country.”\(^{15}\) It is the same as ‘immigration’ which suggests “the process in which people enter a country in order to live there permanently.”\(^{16}\) The migrants or more specifically, emigrants or immigrants or settlers mostly depend on the historical settings, circumstances and perspectives for their decision-making. There are for some political reasons or economic reasons or personal reasons like finding a spouse while visiting another country and emigrating to be with them, people choose to emigrate whereas the immigration implies long term permanent residence (and often eventual citizenship) by the immigrants. Tourists and short term visitors do not fall under this category. Expatriates, different from both emigrants and immigrants, suggest, “a person living in a country that is not their own.”\(^{17}\) However, seasonal labour migration (typically for periods of less than a year) is often treated as a form of immigration. The global volume of
immigration is high in absolute terms, but low in relative terms. “The UN (United Nations) estimated that total 6.976 billion living humans on the planet Earth,”\textsuperscript{18} and out of them “214 million are international migrants in 2010, about 3.1% of world’s population who are migrants and other 96.9% still live in the state in which they were born, or its successor state.”\textsuperscript{19} The Middle East, some parts of Europe, little areas of South East Asia, and a few spots in West Indies have the highest number of immigration population recorded by the United Nations’ data of International migrants till 2010.

\textbf{Countries with the Largest Number of International Migrants- 2010*}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Name of Country} & \textbf{Total International Migrants (millions)} \\
\hline
UNITED STATE OF AMERICA & 42.8 \\
RUSSIAN FEDERATION & 12.3 \\
GERMANY & 10.8 \\
SAUDI ARABIA & 7.3 \\
CANADA & 7.2 \\
FRANCE & 6.7 \\
UNITED KINGDOM & 6.5 \\
SPAIN & 6.4 \\
INDIA & 5.4 \\
UKRAINE & 5.3 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
Countries with the Highest Percentage of International Migrants- 2010*

**TABLE-2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Country</th>
<th>Total Percentage of International Migrants (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>QATAR</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNITED ARAB EMIRATS</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KUWAIT</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JORDAN</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TEWRRITORY</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SINGAPORE</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISRAEL</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHINA, HONGKONG SAR</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMAN</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAUDI ARABIA</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Among those with at least one billion inhabitants.

[Table 1 & 2]Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2009), International Migration, 2009 Wall Chart (United Nations Publication, Sales No. 09 XIII.8)

When someone is moving to another place, if pull factors are responsible, he/she has exotic views about the country where they are migrating and so they uproot themselves willingly. The term ‘uproot’ suggests “to leave a place where he/she has lived for a long time.”

People are ready to do so because they have decided to establish themselves in a new country and culture. As they have roots- “the feeling or connections that you have with a place because you have lived there or your family came from there” of their homeland and when they try to plant it in different country, they face difficulties. Since they are part or member of the gradually increasing groups of migrants, emigrants, immigrants, they always desire to be greeted by the people of other countries. In most of the situations, the response is not positive because of different people or culture or
social conditions or politics. Ultimately, they have to make ‘adaptation’—“the process of changing something, to suit a new situation.”\(^{22}\) It may be social or cultural or political or even personal adaptation. The people, who have migrated, expect that the people of ‘host’ country would assimilate them but on the contrary the society of ‘host’ country is not ready to accept the presence of migrants in their own paradigms of culture, values and thoughts.

Hence, sometimes the open disgust (attacks on Indian students in Australia) has to be faced by the migrant which is a sign of marginalization. The term marginalization refers to the overt (surface) or covert (hidden) feelings within the societies where it is perceived that the migrants do not have desirable traits (expected by the host societies) or they deviate from the group norms which tend them to be excluded by the wider society and so they are ostracized as undesirable. Wing Leung describes a marginal person as: “…. One who does not belong… [T]he marginal man… [dwells] at the margin of two cultures and societies… [and possesses] a marginal mentality… [with its] unresolved identity crisis.”\(^ {23}\)

This creates a gap in society, not only like rich and poor, but results into majority and minority. And it is observed that most of the people in minority are from the groups of the migrants. As democracy celebrates majority, in the same manner, to some extent the minority groups have to experience the consequence of their decision of uprooting themselves from the ‘homeland’ and planting the roots in the ‘host’ countries. This idea was also expressed by Louis Wirth, an American sociologist speaking of minority groups thus: “A group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination.”\(^ {24}\)

In this respect, what is apparent first is a distinctive social group, with their own characteristics and features, then the singling out or victimization by the more numerically dominant members of the host society, and hence the subsequent unequal treatment leading to acts of discrimination, social ostracism, etc. which is the essence of marginalization.
Within the Developed World, racial or ethnic minority groups, stand out as being the most marginalized social groups. This also includes the poor, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, the obese, teenage mothers etc. All these groups tend to suffer from some forms of marginalization and a typical host of social ills, poverty, unemployment, poor education and poor health. They each tend to be ostracized and so suffering from various forms of social exclusion. In this situations migrants, immigrants and emigrants become the prey of the process where marginalization has already existed from the very beginning.

The person who has migrated to the developed nations-the first choice as host countries in the perspectives of globalization faces discrimination/oppression under the name of conservatism to religious, cultural or nationally defined beliefs and customs. The term ‘conservatism’ is derived from the Latin, ‘conserváre’ which means “to conserve” or “the tendency to resist great or sudden change.” It is observed as the social tendency of developed nations where the people treat the migrants as an intruder and consider them a risk for their established values and beliefs. Sometimes it is considered as a political ideology which is difficult to define whether it stands for preserving the past or the contemporary worldwide conception of conservation as a right wing political stance. Samuel Francis, an American columnist defined authentic conservatism as: “the survival and enhancement of a particular people and its institutionalized cultural expression.” But sometimes in the name of cultural expression, the people of host societies oppress or try to annihilate others’ culture and identity to protect their social supremacy and also pretend that their act of exclusion (of migrants from main stream) is not unfair. Roger Scruton, a British Philosopher calls it: “Maintenance of the social ecology and the politics of delay, the purpose of which is to maintain in being, for as long as possible, the life and the health of a social organism.” So, ultimately the negative aspect of conservatism makes the discrimination in the society much wider.

The endeavor of the migrants is to be a part of the majority to dissociate them from their own self. They always adapt their ‘identity’ according to the expectations/demands of the host society which force them to put their identity
on a ‘flux’. The migrants experience the ‘fluidness’ of their identity and always exercise their ‘ego’. It seems that the conscious act of changing identity, though unconsciously is unacceptable or pinching the ‘self’. In this respect, it describes the less success and much failure and a great defeat on the other field, where they are trying to plough their dreams on the land which has harsh and dried soil – refusal of the society to their identities. Meanwhile, the migrants become nostalgic-remembering the past. The memories of life on their homeland shatter/jolt them in new countries. They try to resettle in their in their native land as consolation for the ‘self’ that it is in touch with ‘home’. They realize that ‘home’ is the only place where they feel real happiness of life. Gradually they become a part of displacement-“the act of displacing; the process of being displaced”29 which gives them less chances to attach themselves with their native land as they are the victims of push factors or forced migration or displacement. A specific form of forced migration or displacement is population transfer, which is a coherent policy to move unwanted persons, perhaps as an attempt of ethnic cleansing. Forced migration has accompanied religious and political persecution, as well as war, throughout the human history, but has only become a topic of serious study and discussion relatively recently. Displacement is a subset of forced migration. Such displacement is the forcing of communities and individuals out of their homes, often also their homelands, for the purpose of economic development, with the construction of dams and other activities such as irrigation and mining. It results into the fear of protection into other countries, so they have to live like refugees-“someone who leaves their country, especially during a war or other threatening event.”30 According to United Nations a ‘refugee’ is a person who: “owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him / herself of the protection of that country.”31

The migrants find themselves in a state of dilemma because they are unable to achieve something better out of their decision to leave their own land
forcefully or willingly. They are always confronted with circumstances prevailing and try to overcome them, but they fail. The dilemma in their minds whether to go back to their homelands where there is no trace of any roots or settle themselves into the society which is practising marginalization beyond their groups, to the migrants, makes themselves like a ‘board’, floating on the river, knows nothing about its future or stay or stoppage.

Even they are unable to take any firm decision as to whether to go back or settle in their ‘host’ country, due to both push and pull factors. They experience the harsh realities of migration and their dilemma remains as it was. Since they are not fully accepted by the society of the host countries, and on the other hand, not totally attached to their ‘homeland’, which results into the feeling of ‘nowhereness’ or ‘alienation’ among the people who have migrated from their own country. Thus, they find themselves at a great loss of any attachment with ‘home’ or ‘host’ country. They always question their decision of uprooting their ‘real home’, ‘their real identity’, etc. The main drawback experienced by them is ‘the loss of identity’. The people who are not sure about their exact identity, have to pass their lives with ‘hyphenated’ identities and sometimes with the loss of original identities. They also have to change their identity according to the demand of the society, quietly depriving the ‘self’ from the originality. Such adaptation on different soil may result into unexpected crops – the next generation, which will be totally cut off from their origin, even in their memories. When the next generations of the migrants do not even know about the culture and tradition of their forefathers, then, how can we think of respect for it (culture) from them? The question can be answered by only the migrants, if they teach the values to their children. But the problem is that even they are far away from their original homeland, and the great barrier occurs between the action and the thought, which creates a chaotic feeling among the people experiencing alienation in its different senses.

As it has been stated that the world has witnessed so many diasporas like, Indian, European, African, Jews, Caribbean etc. from the very beginning of the human history. The scope of the academic study of diaspora particularly Indian
diaspora is much wider, significant and important because the people of Indian subcontinent have migrated to different countries for various reasons at various periods of its history.

The NRI (Non Residential Indians) and PIO (People of Indian Origin) population across the world is estimated over 30 million. As per UNDP’s (United Nations Development Programme- the United Nations’ global development network) report of 2010, after China, “India has the largest diaspora in the world, estimated at 25 million, besides being one of the largest “sending” nations in Asia, with an emigration rate of 0.8% out of which 72% work in other Asian countries.”\textsuperscript{32} The Indians have immigrated almost in all corners of the world. “Taking 5000 as the minimum figure, overseas Indians are found in as many as 53 countries.”\textsuperscript{33} For a large country like India, the study of movement of population even within the different parts of the country helps to understand the dynamic of the society in a better way.

The data on migration by last residence in Indian as per census 2001 shows that the total number of migrants has been 314 million. Out of these migrants by last residence, 268 million (8.5%) has been intra-state migrants, those who migrated from one area of the State to another. 41 Million (13%) were inter-state migrants and 5.1 million (1.6%) migrated from outsiders of the country.\textsuperscript{34}

Among the immigrants of diverse nationalities, Indian immigrants constitute a sizeable segment and also have evolved as distinct diasporic entities. So it is essential to study its traits closely. The study of Indian Diaspora can be distinguished between “two main phases of emigration.”\textsuperscript{35}

[1] Overseas emigration in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century

[2] 20\textsuperscript{th} Century migration to industrially developed countries.

Sometimes, these two phases could also be treated as the ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ phases of Indian Diaspora and at some juncture; it is difficult to separate both from each other.
Indian Diaspora – Before Colonial Period:

The emigration of Indians has a much longer history e.g. the Buddhist Bhikkus who travelled to remote corners of Central and East Asia, and also the early migrants to East Africa mainly belonged to small trading communities like the Ismailis, Bohras and Banyas of Gujarat region. The trade with East Africa, however led to a permanent Indian settlement there of the Indian Merchants.

Indian Diaspora during the Colonial Era:

The new geographical discoveries hiked the demand for labourers in mining and plantation in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. The European countries were unable to meet the short fall in labour by deploying even their labour force. These situation/ factors made India a great reservoir of cheap, docile and efficient labour. In this period, 3 (three) distinct patterns of Indian emigration were identified and they are:

(i) “Indentured” Labour emigration.
(ii) “Kangani” and ‘maistry” labour emigration.
(iii) “Passage” or “Free” emigration.36

The indentured labour emigration was officially sponsored by the colonial government during 1834 to 1920, in which the individual labourers signed the contract for 5 (FIVE) years, to work on plantations and they were taken to the British colonies of British Guyana, Fiji, Trinidad and Jamaica. However, the Kangani (derived from Tamil ‘kankani’ meaning ‘foreman’ or ‘overseer’) system prevailed in the recruitment of labourers who were not bound by any contract or fixed period of service. And most of the labourers in third pattern, were the members of trading community from Gujarat and Punjab, who emigrated to East Africa to work on the construction of railroads, who were not officially sponsored as they paid their ‘passage’ and they were ‘free’ from any kind of contract.
Indian Diaspora in Post-colonial Phase:

After the Independence of India in 1947, a significant phase of emigration was identified which also includes 3 (THREE) patterns:

(i) the emigration of Anglo-Indians to Australia.
(ii) the emigration of professionals and semi-professions to the industrially advanced countries like U.S., U.K. and Canada.
(iii) the emigration of skilled and unskilled labourers to West Asia.\(^3^7\)

After India’s independence, many of the descendants of intermarriage between Indians and the English felt marginalized and left for England, but they were not racially and ethnically acceptable by the English, hence some of them emigrated to Australia, which has become a ‘second homeland’ of the Anglo-Indians. The emigration of doctors, engineers, teachers and other semi-professionals to the industrially advanced countries of the West during 1960s and 1970s often described as ‘brain drain’ was in large number and essentially voluntary in nature. In the wake of ‘oil boom’ in West Asia, so many skilled and unskilled labourers (mostly ‘male’) emigrated there voluntarily, but its trends and conditions were determined by labour market vagaries.

Girmitiya in Indo-Caribbean Diaspora:

“All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way.”\(^3^8\)

This may be true even in the case of Indian diaspora to Caribbean. From 1837 to 1917, over half a million Indians immigrated to Caribbean as indentures (girmitiyas) to work on sugar plantation vacated by Africans who refused to continue working on their old plantation, under conditions similar to those of slavery. The indenture system (now known as ‘girmit’ (agreement) system in Fiji & South Afirca) under which the Indians were contracted to work, usually for 5 (FIVE) years before returning to India. This indentured system is ‘a new system of slavery’- a term coined by Lord John Russell in his speech in the British House of Commons in February, 1840. Some of them returned to India at the end of their contract, “nearly 75 percent – made the Caribbean their ‘home’.”\(^3^9\)
The background of the demanding Indian indentured system was colonialism as it is estimated that roughly 40 million African were taken away from their homes, in order to work on the vast land/areas of America, Australia, New Zealand and Island countries on India ocean which were captured by the Europeans. Many of them died during transportation and those who survived were traded and treated like animals in the colonies. When the African slavery got abolished in America, a great void in labour supply on the colonial plantation was created, because the former slaves refused to go back to the plantations. This situation led the Europeans to turn their attention on the vast pool of labour in India, much of which was under European domination at that time.

From 1838 till the end of Indian indenture system or girmi-system in 1916, 1.2 million Indians were transported to Europeans colonies including Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa, the French Reunion, Surinam, Jamaica and Fiji to work on sugar plantation.40 “… of the 544,198 Indians who immigrated to Caribbean, between 1838 to 1917, 70 percent or 382,848 settled in Guyana and Trinidad.’’41

As a result the term “Indo-Caribbean” came into existence to refer to the descendents of Indians who immigrated to the Caribbean between 1838 to 1917; so far these Indo-Caribbeans have lived in the Caribbean for more than 150 years. “About 143,939 Indian immigrants who settled in Trinidad arrived in 1845, and the population consisted mainly of the descendents of Africans who had lived as ‘slaves’ in this region for three centuries already, and had become indigenised into a new, mixed Caribbean culture known as ‘creole’.42 The Indians were adopting the culture and customs prevailing in their so-called ‘home’. A British visitor- Calder Marshall to Trinidad in 1930 writes as follows: “…Indian communities have dropped their religion, dress, and customs and become Europeanized.”43

Indians’ cultural assimilation i.e. their adoption of Western culture, Creole customs implied cultural ‘progress’. However, the immigrants were regarded by the plantation owners as ‘lowly’ and uncivilized – mere ‘coolies’ or
‘girmitiyas’ who were useful as cheap labours. The ‘coolies’ were also seen by some British officials and missionaries as members of a lesser breed, in dire need of cultural, moral or religious upliftment. The rapid rate of cultural transformation, indigenization or creolisation of Indians gave birth to a sense of suspicion among Afro-Caribbean and other ethnic groups, about the authenticity of Indians’ commitment to their new Caribbean homeland. Donald Wood – a British commentator observes this situation as the intractability of Indians to cultural change in Trinidad. Donald Wood comments further on the ‘coolies’ – a term applied to indentured Indians and says: “If Africans were regarded as clay which could easily be moulded into a Christian and Western shape, the Hindus (and Muslims) of India were more like a stone that could only be worked painfully and with much toil.”

The Indian indenture system was, in many aspects akin to the African slavery. This is especially true in the way that they were recruited, transported and treated during the indenture (agreement). Some research reveals that the majority of ‘girmitiyas’ were not allowed to return to their homes in India and in this way they became permanent slaves to the British colonial government. After the independence of Trinidad and Tobago, in 1962, the sense of suspicion increased between the ethnic groups – Indo- and Afro-Caribbean and creolization began to take on political implications. The hidden insidiousness became pervasive with politics.

In Trinidad, Indians worked chiefly in agriculture, either on European owned plantation or on the plots of their own land which they acquired in lieu of the return passage to India at the end of their term of indenture. Indians acquired a reputation for avarice and were suspected of neglecting their basic physical needs such as nourishment and hygiene for the sake of getting rich. Despite the negative reputation, some Indians thrived economically, mainly through agriculture or business, and also they made a bid for education largely through facilities provided by the Canadian Presbyterian Church, which established churches, schools and a theological seminary to train the local preachers in Trinidad. Yet, somehow Indians could not shake off a nagging feeling of
suspicion that they were outsiders, interlopers, mere birds of passage, not fully committed to Trinidadian nationality.

The Indians experienced a deep sense of alienation also at the time of arrival in Trinidad due to the loss of Indian culture and customs. Then as ‘coolies’ with servile status, they faced discrimination within a colonial superstructure of the society dominated by feudal, values of race, colour & class, and a legacy of slavery and exploitation.

...a process of social change in which Indians grew in numbers and wealth and gradually became more creolised in 1968, they accounted for 36.47% of Trinbagonians compared with 43.31% by Africans. Since then, Africans have declined to 38.6% whereas Indians have increased upto 40.3%. Despite this gradual increase of Indians, however the People’s National Movement (PNM), an African-based party founded by the historian Dr. Eric Williams (1911-1981) was victorious in all elections and formed the government of Trinidad and Tobago continuously from 1956 to 1986. In 1986 the PNM was defeated by the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR), a multiracial party which later fragmented along ethnic lines. It was not until 1994, that an Indian-based party, the United National Congress (UNC) under the leadership of Basdeo Panday, was able to win national elections.45

Along with other dissatisfaction, the profound sense of alienation and insecurity was produced by this political disenfranchisement of Indians in Trinidad, for more than 30 (Thirty) years, that finally fuelled their ‘second migration’ from Trinidad to developed nations such as Britain (UK), United States (US) and Canada. “This out-flow of thousands of Indo-Trinidadians in a joint migration along with many more thousands of Indo-Guyanese is what mainly constitutes the Indo-Caribbean diaspora.”46

Before 1960s, West-Indians of all ethnic groups immigrated to developed countries in small numbers specially for educational or economic purpose. But in a surprising development, specific factor of ethnic insecurity emerged after independence (1962) to influence Indo-Trinidadians and Indo-Guyanese to immigrate in large numbers than before. “The fate of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora as reflected primarily in the writing of Neil Bissoondath who is a part
of this diaspora which is not unusual since the ‘second migration’ has been in full swing for more than a generation already and includes many other younger Indo-Caribbean writers who live in Canada like Cyril Dabydeen, Rabindranath Maharaj, Shani Mootoo and Ramabai Espinet.”

Neil Bissoondath: A Biography –

Neil Devindra Bissoondath was born on April 19, 1955 at Arima – a city in Trinidad, grew up in the town of Sangre Grande, where he attended a Presbyterian primary school established by Canadian missionaries. Though he was born in Trinidad, he has Indian roots. “Bissoondath’s great – grandparents numbered among the 144,000 indentured labourers (Girmitiyas) who came to the island of Trinidad from India as a part of indentured labour system from 1838 to 1917. They laboured on the rice and sugarcane fields in India and years ago migrated from India- their own country to Trinidad and from there to Canada. So, Bissoondath has a family history of double migration. Along with that, he belongs to a family having literary tradition. “Bissoondath is the grand-son of Seepersad Naipaul (1906-1953) – the first writer to emerge out of Indian settlement in Trinidad, whose The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories (1943) is acknowledged as the first full-length work of fiction by an Indo-Caribbean author.”

He is the son of Crisen Bissoondath, a merchant and Sati Naipaul – the sister of V.S. Naipaul (born in 1923), a brilliant writer and winner of 2001 Nobel Prize for literature and Shiva Naipaul (1945-85). Instead of returning to India, Bissoondath’s family decided to remain in Trinidad where his paternal grandfather opened a store in the town of Sangre Grande, an enterprise that provided employment to Bissoondath’s father, Crisen, as well as presented the family members with opportunities for education and travel that were not available to all but a small minority of East Indians in Trinidad. Bissoondath’s family moved to Trinidad’s capital Port of Spain, in his early teen to be nearer to St. Mary’s College, the Catholic high-school where Bissoondath received his secondary education.

A far greater impetus to his creativity came from his mother’s side as Sati Naipaul and her sisters encouraged Neil in his reading from an early age. A gift
which was given by his mother, a book of Hans Christian Anderson’s *Fairy Tales* helped Bissoondath a lot to develop the interest in the field of reading at a young age. Although V.S. Naipaul had moved to England (in 1950), some five years before Bissoondath’s birth, his influence as a role model for his nephew was extremely important. Uncle Vidia (V.S. Naipaul) is also responsible for the development of Neil, as a growing literary figure and to continue the literary tradition of the family which was started by Seepersad Naipaul—“the progenitor of a literary dynasty that originates in himself and runs through his sons V.S. and Shiva to his grandson Neil Bissoondath.”

The idea of becoming a writer came to Neil Bissoondath’s mind when he realized at the age of nine or ten, from his uncle’s example that writing could be a way of making one’s living. Bissoondath’s family had general expectations and no direct pressure on him to follow in his Uncle Vidia’s footsteps. Bissoondath recalls;

> There was never any word of encouragement or discouragement. They (his parents) let me do it with their fingers crossed. Certainly with my mother there were fingers crossed.\(^5\)

Though Bissoondath’s childhood was a happy time, he always recalls of being conscious of the narrowness of life on the island. From the early age, he was constantly aware that “there was more to the world.”\(^5\) While Neil was in his mid-teen, the safe, albeit confining world in which he has lived as a child was pervaded by a sense of threat as “Trinidad was torn by riots and army rebellion.”\(^5\) Even after the Independence of Trinidad in 1962, the old, highly stratified, plantation society had experienced the existing racial, cultural and economic differences in the society. By the time Bissoondath graduated from high school in the early 1970s. However, he became pessimistic and cynical about political life in general:

> You… grow up with the attitude or belief that everybody’s a thief. And it didn’t matter really who formed the government or who formed the opposition. It just gave you greater opportunity to steal, and whoever was in power would steal.\(^5\)
Trinidadian politics had become extremely corrupt, violent, and sharply divided among racial lines, which is reflected in Bissoondath’s views. The suffocating confinement of island life, the persistent political tensions and Bissoondath’s belief in impossibility of pursuing a career as a writer in Trinidad, led him to depart from the island at the age of eighteen. Following the advice and guidelines of V.S. Naipaul, Bissoondath was encouraged and able to take a decision for his career. In September 1973 (at the age of 18), he travelled to Toronto to study French at York University, quitting his birthplace “willingly, happily, looking forward to a new kind of life.” After graduating from York University, Toronto with a B.A. degree (1973-77) in French Literature, Bissoondath started to teach English and French (from 1977-85) as a second language at the Inlingua Institute of Languages and Language Workshop; he became assistant director of the latter in 1982. Though he had a full-time teaching load, he managed to spare time for reading and always dreamed to be a writer like his uncle- V.S. Naipaul. To convert his dream into reality, Bissoondath continued writing even at the Institute of Languages where his fellow teachers would read and comment on the short stories written by him in his leisure time. While his students (many of whom were like himself, recent immigrants) passed on personal tales that became fodder for several early pieces of writing of Bissoondath. There in 1984, he met his future wife, Anne Marcoux, who was a Quebecois law student looking to brush up her English Language. In 1985, Bissoondath moved from Toronto to Quebec City to join his partner – Anne, a lawyer. They returned to Toronto in 1986 where Anne was engaged in completing her graduation in Law. The couple moved to Montreal in 1989, where Anne had been appointed to a research position. Meanwhile, Anne became an important commentator on Bissoondath’s writing. He and Anne have a daughter named Elyssa, born in 1991.

Bissoondath has not visited Trinidad since 1983, when he travelled there to attend his mother Sati Naipaul’s funeral. Bissoondath’s father – Crisen subsequently remarried and moved to Toronto for a time, and finally he returned to Trinidad where he died in 1990. While his father in Toronto, Bissoondath
tried to establish an adult-to-adult relationship with him, but found that
generational and cultural differences stood in the way. Bissoondath’s brother and
sister both have lived in Canada for sometime. He also has regular contact with
Anne’s family in Quebec City. In 1989, he hosted segment of T.V. Toronto’s
Fragile Nature series, and in 1991 made a personal film essay, “My Father,
Myself”, on the relationship between fathers and children. He has served as a
writer in residence at the University of Toronto, the University of Ottawa and
Concordia University in Montreal and began teaching a creative writing course
at Concordia in 1993. At the moment, Neil Bissoondath lives at Ste-Foy in
Quebec City with Anne Marcoux, his wife and daughter- Elyssa. He teaches
literature and creative writing (in French) at Laval University Quebec from 2005
as a full-time instructor and organizes workshops entirely in French with
Francophone students. Outside the academy, Bissoondath enjoys equally an
unusual profile within Quebec society. He regularly writes articles for the
francophone papers about the visible minority in a city with few immigrants. He
is well known on the Quebec cultural scene too. He is known as a Canadian
author.

Neil Bissoondath: As a writer and His works -

Bissoondath is a noted writer of fiction and also an out-spoken critic of
Canada’s system of multiculturalism. He is of the view that Canadian
multiculturalism has emphasized differences. He is an intellectual who often
seems to operate on pure instincts, a self described optimist whose writing
thrives on dark themes and contrary positions. It’s a typical irony that
Bissoondath, one of the key Canadian writers to emerge from the mid-1980s
boom in globally themed fiction, is perhaps best known in the country- Canada
for a work of non-fiction that attacks official multiculturalism of that country.
Today, the author says he’s deeply weary of the entire subject. In fact, Bissoondath’s working method seems to circumvent the pitfall of didacticism.
He writes without outline or preconceived plans, and always starts out with
images and characters rather than plots or themes.
Neil Bissoondath’s writing takes readers into marginalized social and geographical territories, without ever moving far outside the conventions of literary realism. He says that he was always an eager student of current events, and from his general reading, he already had most of the information he needed to tell his stories. His recent work may be particularly dark and troubling, but he’s been writing about personal strife and political violence for two decades. He says: “I’m told there may be some controversial aspects to some things in this novel, but I just write what seems to be true and well, we’ll see what happens.”

He goes on to argue that fiction’s ability to get beyond such logic is its key strength, a strength that he believes as arising directly from its focus on the character(s). The author says with almost militant conviction: “Character, character, character, without convincing, complex characters, a novel, no matter how much it fleshes out its social or political context, will not work as a novel.” In his works, the physical description of unknown islands or countries, setting locale also from Canada, influence of other writers like Conrad, Tolstoy, Milind Kundera etc. and the element of insurgency are usually found by the reader.

Given his family history of double migration from India to Trinidad to Canada, it is not surprising that his narratives often focus on the experience of (im) migrants such as of displacement, uncertainty, alienation, isolation, cultural dislocation, insecurity and adaptation. These themes dominate many of the stories in Bissoondath’s Digging Up the Mountains (1985), a collection of 14 (FOURTEEN) short stories, which was published by Macmillan Canada, Toronto in 1985. With its glowing reviews Bissoondath made his debut as an author considering this moment as a first break for a long career in the field of writing. “When he did submit his first collection of short stories to Macmillan in 1982, he did not meet with immediate success.” As per the instruction of the editor of Macmillan (who was very impressed with Bissoondath’s stories), Bissoondath spent a month at Banff School of Fine Arts in 1983, where he wrote and revised his stories in consultation with other experts in the workshop on creative writing at Banff, then only Bissoondath’s work began to gain
exposure e.g. “Dancing” was published in Saturday Night and other two stories – “In the Kingdom of the Golden Dust” and “There are a lot of Ways to Die” - were read on the CBC radio programme named ‘Anthology’. Macmillan contacted him to see his revised stories and offered him a contract, which resulted in the publication of *Digging Up the Mountains* in 1985. On the publication of his first work, Bissoondath had mixed feelings – on the one hand, he was very happy for converting his dream (to be a writer) into reality whereas on the other hand, “he was greatly saddened that his mother (Sati), so long a supporter of his literary efforts, did not live to see the publication of his first book.”59 [Sati Naipaul died in 1983]. His alertness to the complexity of gender relations in the multicultural context and to the differences between women’s and men’s respective experience of migration and cultural adaptation are particularly seen in most of the stories. The very first work of author focuses with narrative urgency on themes of displacement, marginality and political victimization in the stories like “The Cage”, “In the Kingdom of the Golden Dust”, “Insecurity”, “Dancing” etc. It marks the brilliant debut of Neil Bissoondath as a major voice in Canadian fiction. Focusing on contemporary themes of cultural dislocation, revolution, and the shifting politics of the Third World, the stories resonate with Bissoondath’s compassion for people threatened by circumstances beyond their control. The shorter stories, about half of the collection, are primarily character sketches. They are pleasant and generally well done but lack fire. The longer stories are broader in context and far more successful. Extremely moving, even narrowing, the title story and “Counting the Wind” effectively presents the characters who try to survive anarchy and the overpowering shadow of unknown authority as they suffer the indignities and terror of civil war and revolution. It is a series of short stories which focuses on the themes like alienation, terror, homelessness and adaptation. Bissoondath has won McClelland and Stewart Award for Fiction and National Magazine Award in 1986 for “Dancing” – a story from *Digging Up the Mountains* (1985). “if the stories in *Digging* consider themes about ethnic persecution and political turmoil in a post-colonial, Caribbean context, Bissoondath’s first novel *A Casual
Brutality allows him to examine similar themes in greater scope.” His first novel A Casual Brutality (1988) tells the story of Dr. Raj Ramsingh, an immigrant to Canada from a fictional, politically unstable Caribbean country called Casaquemada (Spanish for a house that is burning) who left the island at the age of eighteen to study medicine in Canada. He later returns to the island with his white, Canadian wife and son, practises briefly as a doctor, but during his stay, the political situation rapidly declines into revolution and chaos, in which his wife and son are killed; and Raj returns to Canada. It presents a tough portrait of both the societies. This novel is narrated in first person, describes the protagonist’s inner journey towards maturity and understanding and is bound up with a physical journey from a small Third World island to a metropolitan centre of Western culture. This novel is a ‘Colonial Bildungsroman.’

The first chapter of this over-written first novel is intense, as Raj-in Casaquemada’s airport, is suffering from unexplained anxiety, while he awaits a plane to Canada. Once, in the plane and flying, he begins writing in his book about what forced him to abandon Casaquemada. What he writes are the remaining seventeen chapters. This narrative’s bulk therefore consists of flashbacks to Raj’s “shattered dreams.” Raj’s narration comments on the historic origin of Indo-Caribbean diasporic consciousness, within the context of the post-colonial Caribbean. Unfortunately, this autobiographical novel is overburdened with irrelevant mini-biographies of people who lead miserable lives in Trinidad or Canada. The novel’s tension derives from the moral corruption of simple Caribbean people as they scramble for money. Neil Bissoondath vilifies clichés and stereotypes, and populates Casaquemada with Philistines who are immorally affected by them. His aim is not to recount a specific epoch in Trinidad’s history, but rather to draw on episodes that took place in various West Indian countries. His first novel A Casual Brutality was long listed for the 1988 Booker Prize and short listed for the books in Canada First Novel Award.

Over the time, Bissoondath’s focus has shifted away from Trinidad towards his Canadian experience and concerns. The title story of On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows (1990) – a collection of short stories penetrates the limbo
world of a diverse group of fugitives from political violence and economic oppression who anxiously await the outcome of their application for ‘refugee’ status in Canada. In Bissoondath’s third book *On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*, all 10 (ten) stories are concerned with immigration or exile in one form or other, and mostly are set in Canada, except “The Arctic Landscape High above the Equator” and “Things Best Forgotten.” Four stories out of ten, deal with Caribbean immigrants’ problems and sense of alienation and insecurity in Canada. Another story from this collection, “The Power of Reason” emphasizes the migrants’ experience of gender specificity and the problem of equal opportunity for women by the characters named Monica and her daughters and sons who work hard and remain strangers respectively. All migrants’ experience to take advantages of opportunities gained through migration, are artistically depicted in this collection of short stories.

It is, however, the solid, consistent and moving writing that attracts our attention and holds it through this collection. The ten stories cover a wide range geographically, emotionally and experimentally. While one would expect V.S. Naipaul’s nephew to write about the immigrant experience, concentrating on those from the Caribbean, he has gone beyond. Through the title story, Bissoondath shows us that we all face ‘uncertain tomorrows’, some filled with physical danger, others with emotional or social upheaval and change. Bissoondath’s characters are from varied background and he takes us from Montreal to Toronto and from Spain to South America to World War II Paris. In doing so, he reveals to us the link of our experiences, that we all carry vestiges (footprints) of our past and of our present’s past with us, and that change is constancy. All characters of Bissoondath speak to us of their strength.

Bissoondath’s second novel *The Innocence of Age* (1992) is the story of intergenerational tensions in an increasingly racist Toronto. The novel is mainly concerned with relationship between Pasco Taggart, a father and his son Daniel. Pasco is contented with his small restaurant business, whereas his son, Daniel, an MBA graduate is ravenously ambitious and upwardly mobile who wants to be a successful businessman like his boss Leon Simmons – a cynical and
unscrupulous businessman, concerned with exploiting people and earning maximum profit. “The contrast between the Taggarts is generational, meaning that the father stands for leisurely, old fashioned, humane values, and the son for the ruthlessness and ambition of a successful modern day business tycoon.” The contrasting views of the father and the son throughout the novel, give us an opportunity to measure these views against their actions or the attitudes that emerge from their relationships with other characters.

*The Innocence of Age* (1992) suggests that migration is not a necessary prerequisite either to intergenerational conflict or to cultural alienation within the family. In this novel, a father and son live in entirely different worlds, although both have always resided in Toronto. Except for the fact that its two main characters are Anglo-Canadian, and have no familial connection with another country, *The Innocence of Age* conforms virtually in every respect to the thematic and structural paradigms of “ethnic fiction.” This would be a quintessential immigrant novel, although its central characters are not immigrants. By writing an “ethnic novel” centering on people customarily perceived as “non-ethnic”, Bissoondath effectively “ethnifies” Canada’s dominant cultural group.

His book on multiculturalism, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994) contributes to the debate on Canadian Multiculturalism. For Bissoondath Canadian Multiculturalism is hollow because Canadians wanted immigrant to adopt Canada’s values and way of life. *Selling Illusions* is Neil Bissoondath’s personal exploration of a politically motivated public policy with profound private ramifications- a policy flawed from its inception but nonetheless implemented with unmatched zeal. Since he immigrated to Canada almost three decades ago, Neil Bissoondath has consistently refused the role of the ethnic, and sought to avoid the burden of hyphenation – a burden that would label him as an East Indian – Trinidadian – Canadian living in Quebec. Bissoondath argues that the policy of multiculturalism, with its emphasis on the former or ancestral homeland and its
insistence that ‘THERE’ is more important than ‘HERE’ discourages the full loyalty of Canada’s citizens.

Through the 1971 Multiculturalism Act, Canada has sought to order its population into a cultural mosaic of diversity and tolerance. Seeking to preserve the heritage of Canada’s many people; the policy nevertheless creates unease on many levels, transforming people into political tools and turning historical distinctions into stereotyped commodities. It encourages exoticism, highlighting the difference that divide Canadians rather than the similarities that unite them. The intellectual agility displayed in the respectful manner in which Bissoondath examines the delicate issues related to identity while not becoming a victim to political correctness run amok is truly to be admired.

The Worlds Within Her (1998), his third novel, is centered around the chief protagonist Yasmin Summerhays, a middle aged woman who returns from Toronto (Canada) to her native Caribbean island which is politically unstable, to dispose of the ashes of her mother who has died and been cremated in Toronto. Though Yasmin’s home island is not named, but its ethnic and political features give away its identity – Trinidad. Yasmin was brought to Toronto as a child by her mother-Shakti, had become a successful immigrant, and married to a white Canadian by whom she has a daughter, Anna. “Yasmin’s return to her native island is neither the lugubrious business of stern, filial duty, nor a blithe and care-free holidays; she is also on a more serious quest of psychic, cultural, biographical and historical research to explore ‘the worlds within her.’”

In The Worlds Within Her, Neil Bissoondath picks up where he left off in his previous fiction – chronicling the small, crucial emotional turning points in ordinary lives. The story of Yasmin’s troubled life is told through a complex layer of flashbacks and flash-forwards. But the main action takes place in the Caribbean and it concerns Yasmin’s reluctant encounter with her past – with a secretive mother, a father who was assassinated for his political activities, and the remaining family members who have their own versions of the truth and of the past.
Juxtaposed against this lattice work of memories and misunderstanding, there is the more straightforward and chronological story related by Yasmin’s mother, Shakti. Bissoondath alternates between Shakti’s engaging first person point of view and the more impersonal third person point of view employed in the rest of the novel, and it’s the contrasts and contradictions between mother’s and daughter’s versions of family history that give *The Worlds* its richness and texture. Some of the themes at the heart of Bissoondath’s 1994 best seller, *Selling Illusions*, a controversial critique of multiculturalism and identity politics in this country (Canada), find their way into this novel, albeit peripherally. Bissoondath makes sure that they take a backseat to the themes of personal betrayal and secret histories that preoccupy the novel’s cast. Everyone in the novel resists to be stereotyped and the each character becomes broader and deeper as it unfolds.

*Doing the Heart Good* (2002), the first book for Cormorant publisher and forth novel by Neil Bissoondath, is the story of Alistair Mackenzie, a retired Anglo-Canadian professor of English, who struggles with the climacteric of his decline into old age, after his wife dies and he lives in the house of his daughter with her family- her French-speaking husband and their son. The action intersperses episodes from Mackenzie’s retirement with flashbacks of his academic career, memories of past social and political events, and recollections of relationships with former colleagues, friends and his wife Mary. It is an affecting reflection upon the life of an aged academician, from one of Canada’s foremost literary talents who re-examines his insular life after his house is burnt, to reflect on the causes and effects of life: how momentary impulses change the course of direction, how unexpected horrors still haunt him, how friendship can be nurtured as well as starved, how love sustains, how hatred destroys and how in a ramshackle way, it all makes a peculiar and rather moving sort of sense. It is a novel of memory – of what means, how it informs, how it can salvage tomorrow from the debris of yesterday- written at the very height of a great artist’s power.
The Unyielding Clamour of the Night (2005) is Bissoondath’s second book for Cormorant, and he has nothing but praise for his latest publisher. He says:

I like working with an editor who helps me to improve my writing and Mare has that ability. The author also feels that the smaller press has just as much to offer publicity wise as a larger publisher.63

The Unyielding Clamour of the Night (2005) is Neil Bissoondath’s best novel to date. It is a novel of humanity and wisdom by a novelist at the heights of his powers. Its themes are timely and well considered: suicide bombings, armies of occupation, insistent insurgency and the politics of oppression. While no conclusions are drawn in this subtle, nuanced novel, there is much to challenge assumptions.

Bissoondath’s fifth novel unfolds in an unnamed country closely resembling Sri Lanka, a land torn with racial, religious and political strife. The tale’s protagonist, Arun Bannerji (21), is a young man of privileged background, leaves his home in the prosperous North in South East Asian island nation to teach in the devastated south, where a civil war between the military and rebel insurgents profoundly, affects daily life. Idealistic and driven by a need to give meaning to his life, Arun left his family’s lucrative business to teach at an elementary school in the poverty-ridden South. At the ramshackle school and with sickly and rebellious children, Arun’s idealism is sorely tested during his long and his sense of purpose smothered by the reality of his new situation. Over the course of several months, he befriends some of the local people- Jaisaram, the local butcher, and his daughter Anjani, who reads to her father from romance novels; Kumarsingh – a “go-getting” entrepreneur, Seth, an American –trained army captain stationed at the local base; and various pupils. In Omeara, however, nothing is as it seems; everyone has secrets and truth which is elusive. At the village school, attendance is meagre and irregular. The only students who attend the school are those, who had been damaged by the conflict and are incapable of working in the fields. Surrounded by poverty and the constant threat
of violence, Arun’s optimism is eventually depleted and frustration with educating the village’s school children overwhelms him. When violence finally touches him personally, he is forced to confront basic truth about his friends, his family, his country and, most wrenchingly, himself. The squalid town of Omeara is the setting against which Arun works out his troubled destiny. It is a somnolent place with a pervasive air of menace, and its people are shifty, uncertain, and fearful of unintended consequences. Arun’s transformation from an ideal man to suspicious man ends with great statement. The book remains, from the beginning to end, gripping and sharply intelligent:

It was almost as if by being submerged at that moment he had been there to greet them. The light, the warmth, the water, The shock. Like a birth into another world.64

This novel juxtaposes personal angst against harsh political reality where Arun seems the perfect conduit.

Neil Bissoondath’s The Age of Confession (2007) a recent work was the inaugural lecture delivered by him at the Antonine Maillet – Northrop Frye lecture (began in 2006) – an annual event made possible by the close collaboration between the Northrop Frye International Literary Festival (began in April 2000) and the Université de Moncton, in the Council Chambers of Moncton City Hall, on Saturday, April 26, 2006. This book includes both French and English versions, as well as dual language prefaces and biographical notes on Bissoondath, Frye and Maillet. The text of the lecture itself is only 25 pages long. The title expresses Bissoondath’s belief that every age is, in one-way or another, an age of confession. The objective of the lecture series, according to this book’s introduction is: “to stimulate a more profound reflection on the literary and social understanding of fiction and critical writing as texts which might be viewed as both products and producers of social discourse.”65

In this work Bissoondath’s underlying point is that the narrative is a technic and the humans have ability to use it to give shape to their experience. It can be abused when it becomes propagandistic, but when used properly, it offers a way to make sense of our lives and communicate something of us with
others. For Bissoondath, fiction is clear whereas poetry is complex. Further, he is of the view that stories shape the world, imposing order on chaos, and each time when we tell a story, we reveal a little about our experiences, dreams, fears, desires and fantasies. It is unique in its ability to affirm human existence and confirm human complexity as fiction is confessional.

*The Soul of All Great Designs* (2008) by Neil Bissoondath is a typical contemporary Canadian novel. The words ‘witty’, ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘erotic’ are unlikely to fly to the lips of most readers. The first half of this novel is narrating a man known to the reader only as “Alec” who grows up in suburban Toronto as an only child to a loving couple but desperately average parents. Alec eventually surmises that the quickest way to escape from the dreariness of home and his job at a hardware outlet is to play off his gentle manner and almost feminine good looks. Gay men find the heterosexual Alec very attractive, and women treat him as an unthreatening friend, since both parties assuming that he is a gay. He starts taking jobs as an interior designer; it’s only natural that he does nothing to dispel his client’s expectations that he is an openly gay man. Alec has only one way to achieve success by fabricating his identity as a gay man because that is the demand of his clients and to satisfy them is the cornerstone of his business. Alec has compromised with his libidinous desires to sustain his successful public ‘self’, hence sometimes he encounters a strife between his ‘real’ and ‘public’ self. Alec counters sardonically:

These selves of ours we’re supposed to be true to are constructions- the roles we play, roles that are either given to us or that we invent ourselves. More useful advice would be: Be true to the role you’re stuck with.66

A little drunk on the success of his elaborated identity game, Alec takes a dangerous step toward true intimacy when he meets Sumintra (“Sue”), a recently graduated girl with English major who helps her father in his catering business. “Sue” is a young woman who is trapped in the role of a dutiful daughter of her hardworking Indian immigrant parents, neither of whom understands her passive but persistent resistance to a string of arranged- marriage proposals from the families of suitable Hindu-Canadian men. She is forced to balance her Indian
immigrant parents’ strict tradition in Canadian society where she must hide aspects of herself from both the worlds. When Alec and Sue meet, their chance meeting quickly leads to a passionate affair stoked by the thrill of secrecy. It draws out the tension of Alec’s impending breakdown in a series of understated but evocative scenes distorted by Alec’s self-serving confessions and cynical appeals to the reader for sympathy. Sue, the reluctant but hopeless romantic, is equally compelling, and the domestic scenes capture the dynamics of an utterly ordinary Indian immigrant family.

**Other Works of the Author:**

Besides, Bissoondath has written some works like:


He has also written some books in French Language like

- Tous Ces Mondes en elle (1999)
- Re Tour á Casaquemada (1999)
- Un Baume Pour Le Coeur (2002)
- Í Áge de la Confession (2007)

Bissoondath has worked as a Co-Author in the following books:

(i) Indo-Caribbean-Canadian Diaspora (2005) by Frank Birbalsingh.


*Under the Ribs of Death* (1990) sets in the immigrant community of Winnipeg’s North End, follows the progress of young Sandor Hunyadi as he struggles to cast off his Hungarian background and become a “real Canadian.” Surrounded by poverty and social humiliation, Sandor rejects his father’s impractical idealism and devotes himself single-mindedly to becoming a successful businessman. Equipped with a new name and hardened heart, he is close to realizing his ambition when his fortune’s wheel takes an unexpected and possible redemptive turn. This novel is relevant as a commentary on the problems of cultural
assimilation because it combines social realism and moral parable. It portrays the immigrant experience in the years leading up to the great depression.

*Indo – Caribbean – Canadian Diaspora* (2005) is the first full-length book on Neil Bissoondath – the prominent writer of today. Frank Birbalsingh has worked through literary and family lineages, diasporic imaginaries and affiliations and located Bissoondath at the junction of his Caribbean roots, his Naipaulian association and the new non-hyphenated Canadianness. The work forms a significant contribution to the Caribbean and diasporic studies because it problematizes the struggle of emigrants, who are compelled to move again towards a fresh sense of dislocation and a fresh struggle for acceptance.
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59. Ibid., p.4


61. Ibid., p.86


[“Hard Questions”, an interview of Neil Bissoondath by Nicholas Dinka, Published September 2005].

