Chapter: 1

INTRODUCTION
I have seen Cubans everywhere, scattered from Tierra del Fuego to Iceland…we have taken root where exile threw us…

Virgil Suarez

Diaspora, as the poetic lines of Virgil Suarez reveal, refers to displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through migration, immigration or exile. The author Cohen Robin signifies Diaspora as a “collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreams of home but lives in exile.” (ix) The idea of Diaspora varies greatly. However all diasporic communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories acknowledge that “the old country” – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions. Beginning with the Jewish experience as the original Diaspora, Robin Cohen in his book “Global Diasporas: An Introduction” reveals various articulated forms of Diaspora:

- Victim Diasporas
- Labour Diasporas
- Imperial Diasporas
- Trade Diasporas
- “Homeland” Diasporas
- Cultural Diasporas
“Each of these categories underlines a particular cause of migration usually associated with particular groups of people. So, for example, the Africans through their experience of slavery have been noted to be victims of extremely aggressive transmigration policies, or in the case of Indians, they are seen to be part of labour Diasporas because of their involvement with the colonial system of indentured labour. The author acknowledges that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and at any given moment one Diasporic group could fall into different categories.’ (97)

But concern is specifically being harboured about “Homeland Diaspora” and “Cultural Diaspora”. The term Diaspora, from Greek διασπορά means “scattering, dispersion” and it is the “movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland” or “people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location” or “people settled far from their ancestral homelands.” (Wikipedia.org)

Originally the word ‘Diaspora’ refers exclusively to the Jewish diaspora after the Babylonian exile, but recently the word has also come to refer to other historical mass- dispersions of people with common roots. The first modern attestation of the word is in 1876 from the Greek, derived from: Diaspeirein – “disperse”
From

Dia – “across” + Speirein “scatter”

In all cases, the term diaspora carries a sense of displacement; that is, the population so described finds itself for whatever reason separated from its national territory, and usually its people have a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point, if the “homeland” still exists in any meaningful sense.

The largest Asian diaspora outside of Southeast Asia is that of the Indian diaspora. The overseas Indian community, estimated at over 25 million, is spread across many regions in the world, on every continent. It constitutes a diverse, heterogeneous and eclectic global community representing different regions, languages, cultures, and faiths. The common thread that binds them together is the idea of India and its intrinsic values. The overseas community does serve as an important ‘bridge’ to access knowledge, expertise, resources and markets for the development of the country of origin.

“Homesickness” is a widely used term but there is a lot to delve on. We stay with our near and dear ones and are used to the comfort without any materialistic crutches. The moment we uproot our self and try to plant our self in some other place, we seek stability, comfort and cushion of love and sympathy of our loved ones which hitherto we left behind in our quest for
material betterment. But most of the time, we are bewildered when not a single hand is raised from the surrounding crowd to comfort us. Wobbly, we try to regain our composure and confidence; and start the journey to fulfillment of our dreams. There is a strange void in the heart, a pain in the mind and a feeling of estrangement which refuses to die – forming the basis of “Homeland Diaspora” that echoes in the literature and somehow attracts the reader to devour more of it. As the poet, Matthew Arnold writes in his poem “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”:

“Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
the other powerless to be born.”

The difference of views, mentality and outlook always prevails with the migrants making it difficult for them to assimilate the otherwise alien culture. This problem, at times becomes contagious. Problems erupt like a volcano and misunderstanding start taking the place of understanding. Adaption, instead of being a pleasure in the pursuit of material identity, becomes a proverbial pain and increase the longing ness of the thus deserted motherland. The search for identity in a climax of diaspora creates an individual who is more like a pendulum which swings between loss and gain.
The feel of cultural diaspora is thus painful and equally revered as well as a warning to the aspirants of migration as to what the future would bode for them. The perplexed nature of the characters further intrigues the leader of search more on this aspect which makes it pretty suitable for research. However, these are not the only valid notions of Diaspora. Rather, they are interesting starting points that will, hopefully, lead to further deliberations. Following words are apt to mention here:

“It is the wounded oyster that mends its shell with a pearl.”

Here the oyster can be compared to the migrant and the pearl to his creation out of anguish and his pain which are his wounds on his soul. 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 the alienation from the old and new cultures and homeland. In “Writing the Diaspora”, The Atlantic Literary Review Uma Parameswaran observes this making of a Diaspora consciousness in four phases:

There are four phases of immigrant settlement that are true both at the individual and collective level:

* The first is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land.
* The second is a phase in which one is so busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output.

* The third phase is when immigrants start taking part in the shaping of Diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno–cultural issues.

* The fourth is when they have “arrived” and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues.

However, this obvious development in one’s consciousness depends upon the cultures one lives in. The diasporic person is at home neither in the west nor in India and thus ‘unhomed’ in the most essential sense of the term.

Rushdie has put the dilemma of diaspora in *Imaginary Homelands* that the position of the exile or immigrant is one of ‘profound uncertainties’. To be ‘unhomed is not to be homeless’ as Homi Bhabha has pointed out in *The Location of Culture*. When the immigrant realizes his homelessness, the world around him confined and squeezed and enlarged slowly afterwards.

What is of particular interest in the works of diasporic writers is that they broach the problematic and creative nature of the position of the gap or hyphen occupied by their diasporic subjects and their works or rather “soul studies” reflect, in shades at once subtle and startling, the metaphorical homelessness and the metamorphic transformation which occurs in the life of the South Asian immigrant populace in the United States. What the
identity of America does to the South Asian diaspora or the people from the “nothing places”, as per her own terminology; is something more complex and more mutual than merely the logistics of re-location. It’s all about straddling one’s sense and sensibility in a way that connotes a peripheral distancing from one’s own cultural moorings and a superficial accommodation to the adopted culture, leading to a state of spiritual anxiety and estrangement that may be conducive to practical survival, but not to happiness, that may lead to acclimatization but not to uncompromised contentment. In an essay, “The Indian Writer in England”, The Eye of the Beholder: Indian Writing in English published in 1983, Salman Rushdie wrote:

“Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, crate fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.” (78)
The real pain of an expatriate may be well understood by a poem of Ismet Ozel entitled “Of not being a Jew” in which he lamented the fact that he felt like a pursued Jew, but had no second country to which he could go. He writes:

“Your load is heavy
He’s very heavy
Just because he’s your brother
Your brothers are your pogroms
When you reach the doorsteps of your friends
Starts your Diaspora” (Wikipedia.org)

The Indian diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population and not, in the Jewish sense, an exodus of population at a particular point in time. Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala” divides the Indian diaspora into two categories – the old and the new. He writes that:

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

The new Indian Diaspora which is in a way a change of the old Indian Diaspora of indentured labour migrants to various countries marked by dislocation, realignment and the acute desire of physical survival is now being substituted by a force, a creative wave marked by distinctness of their own in the global culture. The homogeneity of the old Indian diaspora has now given way to a heterogeneity and hybridity which hyphenates human identity and designates the diaspora, as per the opinion of many diasporic writers, as a kind of parenthesis, a gap in one’s history which will never be fully written out. While the old Indian diaspora marks itself off as an historical fact as landless people who became footnotes to the history of imperialism, the new Indian diaspora, according to Bharati Mukherjee in “The Middleman and Other Stories”, are of a different order:

“But we are refugees and mercenaries and guest workers; you see us sleeping in airport lounges; you watch us unwrapping the last of our native foods, unrolling our prayer rugs, reading our holy books, taking out for the hundredth time an aerogram promising a job or space to sleep, a newspaper in our language, a photo of happier times, a passport, a visa, a laissez passer.” (100-1)
They feel the acute desire and responsibility to retain the culture and values of the ancestral homeland.

In general the act of displacement, in today’s world, also connotes the lifestyle of subjects forever on the move, formulating not altogether unproblematic coalitional social formations wherever they live and having a streak of reactionary complexity in their psyche, both with regard to their exilic condition and the notion of homeland as a series of images in their minds.

William Safran, in his study of ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths and Homelands and Return’, defines the Diasporas in terms of six characteristics linked to two invariables: exile and homeland. These characteristics are:

- Dispersal of people from center to peripheries.
- The retention of collective memory.
- Vision or myth about homeland.
- A feeling of non-acceptance, alienation or insulation in the host society.
- A strong feeling that their ancestral homeland is their true, ideal home to which to return to, eventually.
- A responsibility for the maintenance or restoration of the homeland.
A self-conscious definition of one’s ethnicity in terms of the existence of this homeland. 

Safron’s ideal type of ‘centrea’, oriented by continuous cultural connection to a source and by teleology of ‘return’ is applicable to the community in the oeuvre of almost all the authors have been taken in this research work. They suffer from different kind of problems like: they feel uprooted and isolated from their native land. One of these problems is the emotional and psychic consequence of search for self-identity. Their œuvres tell different kinds of identity crisis i.e. national identity, cultural identity, economic identity, political identity and second-generation identity crisis. The notion of identity crisis is common in all these authors but with a variation. P.A. Abraham writes on expatriate community in “Writers of the Indian Diaspora”:

“The expatriate writer is always in a mood of complaint and projects the pain of exile and becomes a figure of solitude.” (57)

Especially after Indian independence the Indian diasporic community has acquired a new identity due to the processes of self-fashioning and increasing acceptance by the west. 

Diaspora as a topic has been favourite with a lot of books and authors in recent times. These books deal with Diaspora in a number of ways – from the historicity of the ‘original’ Jewish to abstract, general theorization of as a
contemporary reality. Since the purpose of this analysis is not exactly to define or interrogate the concept of Diaspora as such, but to fall back on it as a useful concept/category to read a text, it felt necessary to use a general, agreeable definition and explication of the term.

The Dictionary meaning of migrant is – a person who moves regularly in order to find work. That means he carries with him the culture and tradition along in the foreign land. The experience of alienation, nostalgia, guilt or day dreaming can be said to be just one dimension of migrant sensibility.

Communities that have remained distinct in South Asia are showing a tendency to mix in. certain second or third generation immigrants, but not all, do not think of themselves as belonging to a particular nation, sub-culture, or caste, but as just plain South Asians or Desis. Some Desis are creating what can be called a “fusion” culture, in which foods, fashions, music, and “the like from many areas of South Asia are ‘fused’ with elements from Western culture.” (Kvetko, “When the East is in the House: The Emergence of Dance Club”, 6) That is one reason they are known as ABCD – ‘American Born Confused Desi’.

The main flow of immigration from India to the USA started after the enactment of the Immigration Act in 1965. The resultant cross-cultural experience, which gave a new orientation to the lives of new immigrants,
offered them exciting material for creative efforts. They took some time to settle down and acculturate, but as soon as they did so, creative writing began to proliferate. Not only did they write about their lived experience in the new space, they also had to rethink their ‘political’ stand regarding their status as writers in the US and their attitude to the mainstream literature and culture. In the post – 1960s the USA was fast turning multicultural nation. And in that multicultural nation literary works from Indian American and others ethnic minorities were also emerging, initially in small numbers in the 1960s but later, particularly from the 1990s, pouring forth in profusion. While nostalgia and memory formed an important part of the early writing-that belong to the first generation, later writing concentrated on the cultural and psychological experience o those who were now ready to lay roots in the new soil i.e. the scenario mainly of second generation. Though the writer’s individual talent should be rooted in the tradition of a particular society and culture, the real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in the individual’s response in terms of belongingness, immigration, expatriation, exile and his/her quest for identity. The diasporic experiences of various writers of diaspora are bound to be different from each other. It has been observed that the Indian Diaspora is one of the most varied communities. The scope for finding out the contrast is always there as
the place of their origin does not bridge the gap between ‘home’ – the culture of origin and ‘world’ – the culture of adoption.

The word ‘diaspora’ means the dispersion of the Jews among the Gentiles after the period of their exile. Nearly every Indian writer – or writer of Indian origin writing in English – seems to have decided that the object of his or her imagination has to be the mother country. Jasbir Jain rightly points out in “Writers of the Indian Diaspora” that diaspora has the “ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee.”(11) The dilemma between the two is the struggle of diasporic writer. They do not bother about the geographic borders of the nation state; rather the cultural borders perceived by most diasporic writers are quite understandably drawn along national lines. In a world without nation-states, these writers would have merged with others who deal with cultural confrontations of all kinds. But diaspora literature focuses on cultural states that are defined by immigration counters and stamps on one’s passport.

For the writers of ‘diaspora literature’ however, cultural rendezvous are restricted to those between countries. This is because the authors are themselves dislocated along national lines.

“The diasporic Indian is “like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils
drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. For from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world.” (Bhiku Parekh, Some Reflections on the Indian Diaspora, p.106)

The Indian diaspora is varied at its core. The branches of this banyan tree reached far off countries like United States, Canada, Britain, Africa, Caribbean, South America and Australia. The well known among these are V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee, M.G. Vassanji, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Geeta Mehta, Jhumpa Lahiri, Himani Banerji, Suniti Namjoshi, Uma Parmeswaran, Neil Bissoondath, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Ann Bhalla. They treat India as their homeland but because of their different adopted lands, their consciousness as a diasporic writer is also different and gets its reflection in their work. But at the same time the Indian diaspora in general has a common concern to have a homeland of one’s own.

These diasporic writers continue to be hung up on their national identities even if they do not sometimes admit it to themselves. The odd feature of diasporic literature lies in its continued projection of the writer’s motherland, its culture and history. For this specialty the west finds colourful cultural ethnic shades in diasporic writings. Most Indian diasporic writers seem to set
their works in India and not in the adopted land. However, in view of the importance of geographical and historical space of any country in which the writer lives, the different consciousness of diasporic literature in terms of adopted land could not be ignored while it is difficult to decide which came first – the consciousness for the surroundings or the natural bent of writing. The Indian diaspora writers give expression to difficult voices as per their different immigrant experiences and realities of their new homeland.

The women writers of India are the products of two cultures, they are unsure of their status related to mainstream and also in relation to their minority group. Manju Jaidka writes about the empowerment of these writers in “The Writer as Trishanku: Indian Writing in a foreign space”:

“Grappling with the problem of defining their identities, the self they depict is a confused one, sometimes central and sometimes the marginalized other, although their effort is to move from margin to center. Such a move may lead to an empowerment of them.” (22)

Though these writers of India live on the peripheries of the mainstream culture they provide empowered space that promises to create new subjectivities, new identities in the US. Homi Bhabha writes about this “in-between” space in his essay, “Dissemination: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation”.
“The boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious internal liminality that proves a place from which to speak both of, and, as, minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent.” (300)

It is this location or “in-between” space which has turned in an advantage to a number of leading women writers of Indian origin. To redefine their self-identity and to express expatriate experience, they started writing after 1970s. These women have chosen the narrative strategy like the fictional autobiography for their self-definition and the mode of expression.

Today, more than half of all international migrants are women. The state of the world’s population 2006, the annual assessment of population related issues prepared by the United Millions population Fund has focused this time on women and International migration. Women move from village to town, from one country to another for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they join their husbands who have gone for better prospects; some time they go on their own to earn more, some time they are forced to move because of war, famine, poverty or political persecution. Their movement, forced or voluntary, is not an easy one. They expose themselves to new forms of violence and exploitation. This research work proposes toanalyse some recent novels which fall under the category of “novels of migration”. Focus
is on the attempt to explore the dialectic of identities, the crisis in values and the fragmentation of the self under the duress of the duplicitous demands of reality inundating the life of Indians in the United States. The analysis necessarily involves a close look on the problems of relationships between Indians and Americans, first generation and second generation Indians. These problems of relationships shall be explored through detailed study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Ann Bhalla.

This study is an attempt to explore the tensions and ambivalences faced by protagonists in their new homeland. The problems to be analysed and focused in this work are:

- Diaspora literature is bound to remind one’s past, why?
- Why can they not bring about a balance between home and abroad?
- Why do their works tell the lives of Indians in exile, navigating between the strict traditions, they have inherited and the baffling new world that must encounter every day?
- Why do they experience the sense of relationship and what are the problems being faced by them in establishing the same?
Works cited


