

Poetics/Politics: The Dilemma of South Asian Diaspora Writers

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The poetics of exile, the literature of the diasporas has come a long way from the *curse* of aphasia to a speaking out, from a loss of the filial ties to a retributive order of belonging, from nostalgia to amnesia to a conscious remembering, from the 'then and there' to the 'now and here' and 'beyond.' The path has never been linear nor the experiences unilateral. The inherent diversity of the poetics of exile has endowed it much of its vigour and character and though it is difficult to devise standard critical parameters to fathom the multiplicities of the poetics of exile. Dislocation in all its complex implications may serve as a benchmark, a useful point of departures towards an understanding of the poetics of exile.

Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia. Writers living abroad live on the margins of two societies and cultural theory is today being created by people who live on the margins. An important question is how does one define the margins. Do the margins expand themselves and does the centre shift? Or is it that peripheral areas further divide themselves and the centre remains the same, indifferent to what is happening around it? Does theory emanate from the intervention of marginal voices, or is it that their voices are controlled and homogenized by the centre? These and a host of other questions crop up when we focus on diasporic writing.

Increasingly the terms which are gaining popularity are 'expatriate' and 'diaspora'. The word 'diaspora' is literally a scattering carrying within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee. The requirements of the two roles are different. While one requires the projection of one's culture and the ability to enhance its understanding, the other seeks refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture. Further categories emerge through the use of such words as immigrant, exile, refugee. Their use attempts to give some indication of the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of migration. While immigrant defines a location, physical movement and a forward-looking attitude, 'exile' indicates a compulsory isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past.

The word 'exile' evokes multiple meanings which cover a variety of relationships with the mother-country alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context, perhaps all meanings are true with the migratory movements having been governed by different reasons at different times of history, and different reasons even contemporaneously. Economic reasons governed the movement of indentured labour and of the trading communities; they have also governed the pursuit of a

higher standard of living. Opportunities for work, research and freedom have motivated migration. Again, migration from a colonial state to a free country calls for an entirely different set of assumptions than migration from one free country to another.

The diasporic community is varied and complex and hence all attempts at homogenization are likely to lead to over-simplifications. Bhiku Parekh has observed that the Indian diaspora is one of the most varied, representing "half a dozen religions... seven different regions of India... nearly a dozen castes" (Parekh 105). It has shown a great mobility and adjustability as it has often been involved in a double act of migration—from India to West Indies and from there to metropolitan centres; from India to Africa and then to Europe or America on account of social and political reasons. Parekh also comments upon their networking with each other, their sense of solidarity which reverses the concept of homelessness. 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. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world" (106).

Yet this multiplicity of 'homes' does not bridge the gap between 'home'-the culture of origin; and 'world'-the culture of adoption. The boundaries have an uncanny habit of persisting in thousand different ways, and are very often conflictual. Homi Bhabha shifts this conflict to a theoretical gain, he transforms the diasporic scattering to a gathering, "Gatherings of exiles and emigres and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures, gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of city centres" (139-140), and thus he shifts the focus from nationhood to culture, from historicity to temporality, a hybridity which cannot be contained either in hierarchical or binary structures. Others like Rushdie turn to India, to a mythologising of history. Naipaul transforms his

sensibility to a perpetual homelessness while Bissoondath rejecting the homogenization of ethnicity, projects immigration as "essentially about renewal", about change. It is unjust, he points out to expect that the communities from which the immigrants emerge be required to stand still in time, to do so is "to legitimize marginalization; it is to turn ethnic communities into museums of exoticism" (Bissoondath 111). Ashis Gupta in an interview turns the discussion to the insider/outsider syndrome and points out that acceptability or rejection by a host culture depends upon the 'value of the person, his use to the new society, his educational level and his social milieu.

Thus, immigrants and expatriates define their positions variously but there is something more to it. The important questions which are often relegated to the background are how is the home country affected by diasporic space and does it, in anyway, assist the process of decentring? The Special Fiction Issue of The New Yorker (June 23 & 30, 1997) is a clear indication of the manner in which the stay-at-home writers are affected (one would soon have to coin a term for them like NEI, [Non Expatriate Indian] or RI [Resident Indian] as opposed to NRI [Non Resident Indian]). Of the dozen or so writers represented, Salman Rushdie, Amit Chaudhuri, G.V. Desani, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Jhabvala, A.K. Ramanujan all live or lived abroad. To balance this there is a solitary article on (and not by) R.K. Narayan, and a couple of poems. Bill Buford in his editorial asks the question "What does it mean to be an Indian--to be citizen of a country that for thousands of years was no country, that has not one language but at least eighteen, and that no single race or religion or culture but many races, many religions, many cultures" (The New Yorker 7-8). Rushdie's "Introduction" to the Viking edition is reproduced here and is titled "Damme, this is the Oriental scene for you!" G.V. Desani's piece represented here is "India, for the plain hell of it". The special Granta issue on India is somewhat more representative. Focused on India it has several contributions by foreign correspondents and journalists, other contributors are Nirad Chaudhuri, Ved Mehta, Amit Chaudhuri, Suketu Mehta and the twice-removed V.S. Naipaul. Of the writers in India are R. K. Narayan, the writer-publisher Urvashi Butalia and the Britisher Mark Tully. The Viking anthology concentrating on creative writing spans a longer period but is both unsatisfying and incomplete. Works like these provide ample evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on

the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted, only the margins have expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space.

The West continues to be the place for exhibition, recognition and judgement. There is need to realise the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural pulls and the creation of a new culture which finally emerges. It is equally important to understand the dynamics of reception at both the ends for reception is also rooted in cultural contexts. This double discourse of reception needs to interact not only to throw light on the meaning of this writing, but also to throw light on the non-diasporic writing and the formation of cultural theories. Diasporic writing exists and it cannot be wished away.

The visible *constants* in poetics of exile - dislocation, trauma, private and public histories, identity, culture, and allegiances- are ironically the *variables* that are manifested in complexly intricate patterns in the subjective self of the exiles, diasporas, refugees and immigrants and their creative expressions. These denominators have an inherent paradox, they can both be instruments of entrapment and of release. A majority of the literature of the diasporas harbours this paradox and it underlies the distinctiveness within the poetics of exile.

Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Mohsin Hamid, Khaled Hosseini, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Ashish Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, M. J. Vassanji, Neil Bissoondath, Bharti Mukherjee have responded to this paradox in their own characteristic manners, from different positions and perspectives. The commonality of their South Asian descent can hardly account for the distinctiveness of their aesthetics and creative expressions. The trauma of being one of *Midnight's Children* can hardly find a reflection in the trauma of being a plantation labourer in the Caribbean, holding fast to an idyllic notion of homeland and the shattering discovery of *An Area of Darkness*. The marginality of Parsi community in India and the Burghers in Sri Lanka speaks of different experiences. These writers inherit diverse cultural backgrounds and have come across distinctive experiences evolving individualistic sensibilities and ways to relate to the worlds within and outside.

The poetics of Lahiri, Hamid and Hosseini brings to surface the inherent versatility of the poetics of exile. They have not engaged themselves in standardized response to their otherness. They do not negotiate their belonging in terms of stereotypical renditions of

nostalgia and the pains of marginalization, they bring together various perspectives and attempts to comprehend India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and America beyond their own subjective positions and relationships with these countries. By putting together others' threads of belonging alongside their own they attempt to situate the web of relationships (cultural, ethnic, and national) in broader context. Their treatment of time and space and his narrative and structural strategies reveal different times and spaces in their simultaneous similarities and distances. Their political perspectives have gradually evolved. The initial evasiveness has given way to their delving into the larger and more public issues. But here again they avoid being caught up narrow political allegiances or approaches. Their concerns remain broadly humanitarian.

Journeys serve as a universal symbol in the poetics of exile. There are journeys across geographies and cultures, from one mode of being to another, from the physical to the subjective, from the material to the metaphoric, and from the private to the public. None of these journeys can be seen exclusively in terms of points of origins and destinations, they signify a to and fro movement where the points of origin become destinations and the destinations become points of departure. Neil Bissoondath underlines the crucial significance of the journey to one's land of origin, "For many the journey is inevitable: establishing oneself in a new land is always difficult; the effort can make the land left behind seem idyllic, and often only renewed contact will evoke the reasons for initial departure and at last cast the new land and the life it offers in a sharper, more compelling light. It is a sentimental journey that many, and even most immigrants must make before they can truly move on with their lives" (Bissoondath 126). For many the journey can be a shattering experience. V. S. Naipaul underwent a similar shocking realization during his first visit to India, "It was a journey that ought not to have been made; it had broken my life in two" (qtd. by Bissoondath 131).

In these writers' case the journey produces a contradictory result, it helps them to negotiate the split in their self. Their poetics does not speak of a settled state or perspective, but it has evolved beyond the journey from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Their works of fiction are structured as journeys: *The Lowlands* presents the journey of brother into America. *The Kite Runner* is the journey of an Afghan to that perfect edge where the barriers between the art and its creator fall and the form becomes the content.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist is Hamid's journey to America and back to Pakistan.

Aritha Van Herk considers the problem of the universal and the particular in the context of the poetics of exile. She points out the power of the 'overt story' to obfuscate the 'covert story' and the necessity of articulating the 'overlooked obvious story', the 'secret' and the 'absent stories', "These stories are the same but differently tainted: oxymorons of themselves, a contradictory reflectance. They offer every writer a Parisian choice. No matter which goddess he favoured, Paris would have purchased disaster, but his choice has dictated the story... and problematizing covert story, is the true crisis of every writer who wishes to entext the immigrant experience" (Aritha Van Herk 177-178). Even if the choice is Parisian, it is there. This choice finds a visible reflection the expatriate writer's treatment of history.

A recourse to history is almost inevitable in the experience of dislocation as it provides the dislocated a sense of belonging and security from the fear of anonymity. But an impulsive historicizing of one's ethnicity may lead to an entrapment in an illusion. Neil Bissoondath brings out the nature of this illusion, "To see oneself in history rather than outside it, to see oneself as a victim of history rather than as one of its victimizers, is to confer oneself a delicious sweet-and-sour confirmation of one's existence: deliciously sweet because you cannot be denied; deliciously sour because you have been brutalized. This life you lead is not your fault" (Bissoondath 103). Such a view of history is self-defeating, a perverse engagement with masochism. Similarly, a narrow alliance with communal histories to discover 'identity' proves equally misleading, identity is not an object to unearthed from the silt of history but it has to cultivated and negotiated through the layers of histories.

Engagement with history is a potential tool of empowerment in the poetics of exile. However, the nature of this empowerment is highly problematic and its roots can be precisely traced in the domain and the discourse through which this empowerment is sought. The writers very often choose to engage in racial communal histories, histories of the "homeland" and even in the context of the adopted homes concentrate on the experiences of their *own* communities. It can be granted that what is self-experienced and best known can be best expressed but such expressions may not be necessarily empowering as they may further authenticate the exile's estrangement, his/her marginality in the power structures.

Voicing the silenced, marginalized, ignored histories from narrow communal perspectives carries its own paradox, foregrounding one history is an overlooking of other histories equally marginalized and ignored. Margins writing, addressing colonial postcolonial centers stigmatizing them for their deliberate obliteration and ignorance while themselves ignoring their immediate *disenfranchised* neighbours. It is locking one's being and fate in an inheritance of marginality that refuses to leave and it facilitates the official divisiveness where the individual is always *less than or equal to* his culture of origin, a redundant stereotype.

More importantly the consistent operation within narrow communal/cultural confines is a denial of the history of the country in which the exile has come to be. This history too demands an endearment like the communal/cultural histories, keeping oneself out of it and relating to it only in a narrow cultural/communal perspective is double treason, to the citizenship, to the immigrant cause, to the community and to the self. History is always in the making, and to find a place in history as a product of historical lamentations can hardly be fulfilling.

These writers have negotiated histories, private, and public, communal, national in multiple ways. They do not approach these histories from a settled perspective or singular positions. Their engagement with history speaks of a constant search for belonging beyond the obvious claims of race, community or geo-political boundaries. *The Kite Runner* though partially nostalgic is not a mourning, a romance with a disappeared past. With all his love for his family, relatives and the landscape of his childhood, Hosseini both runs in and runs out of his family and searches for a newer belonging. He contextualizes the perspectives of the colonizers, the adventure seekers, his own hybrid community and that of the natives with each other and the island. He sees the absences, historical and contemporary, within these relationships and grasping them seeks to construct his own belonging.

In his treatment of the adopted home America in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid does not speak from his own subject position as a Third World immigrant or a South Asian American nor does he create a contemporary situation. By taking up the stories of the other immigrants Hamid relates to the challenges of the immigrant in a broader way, going beyond his own community. These writers establish affiliative ties with the immigrant communities and America. By moving into the establishmentarian history of America and forging an ex-centric,

unofficial history of the making of the nation, these writers stake a bigger claim over America than might not be possible speaking from a narrow communal perspective.

Nino Ricci points out, "Many immigrants hold on to romantic visions of their country which has changed dramatically since they left, and this contributes to a distortion of their identity. In their own country, they would have evolved with the customs of that country. And here, they hold strong to this idealized traditional notion of their culture." The tendency partially accounts for the reluctance of the immigrants to come to terms with the transformed present of their countries of origin. Ondaatje's *The Lowlands*, *The Kite Runner* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* are a far cry from the narratives of nostalgia. The extremely focused effort in these novels emphasizes an assumption of responsibility beyond the *sweet-sour* memories and the *ghosts* of an irretrievable past.

These writers' deliberate engagement with the Indian, Pakistani, Afghanistani and American politics in the present acquires an interesting relationship with the other deliberate assumptions of political responsibilities by other immigrants from South Asia. The politics of exile, to a great extent, takes its texture from the concerns with ethnic and commercial interests in the "homeland". A majority of separatist movements in the South Asia are propelled and sustained by 'international funding' coming from the immigrants who have come to believe in 'ethnic homelands.' The tracks of the funds for the struggles for a Khalistan, Bodoland and Kashmir in India and *Tamil Eelam* in Sri Lanka are too visible to be missed out. Then there are upbeat expatriate global businessmen ready to pounce upon any commercial opportunity to *invest* in the countries of origin, receiving laurels for their interest and making big money in the process. These novels offer a nice contrast to such pseudo patriotisms.

Writers who have moved away from one culture to another are caught between two cultures and are very often engaged either in a process of self-recovery through resort to history and memory or in a process of self-preservation through an act of transformation.' Expatriate writers have also been engaged in a permanent act of uprootedness and dislocation through travel and travelogues like Naipaul.? Moving outside the nostalgia-pro-test syndrome, Lahiri, Hamid and Hosseini create a "third space", by moving away both from the culture of their adoption and the culture of their origin and setting their novels

They project a world which rests on geographical and

culture dislocation. Both move away from the implicatory position of involved participation to a postured position of apparent neutrality. Both the novels project multicultural situations in an attempt to minimize polarisation and individual pulls of identity. The geographical dislocation raises several questions with respect to the poetics of exile, the nature of expatriate writing, the writer's relationship to his culture and his work.

Space provides in itself a dynamics for history. Writers from erstwhile colonized countries and marginalised or inferiorized societies are engaged in a process of reconstructing both national and personal histories with the objectives of analysing and understanding their own past and also as a historical intervention in the master narrative of the imperial races. Space is an important determinant of the kind of relationships which are produced. Power structures indicating exclusion and inclusion are spatial in nature. As Edward Soja has pointed out, "The historical imagination is never completely spaceless and critical. Social historians have written, and continue to write, some of the best geographies of the past" (Soja 14).

The colonial, imperial, totalizing or homogenizing centre is what Said's exile aims at dismantling. But the exile's problematic is how? Through constructing the small identity that is native or national which has been contaminated or eaten up, or through a lasting disunitive consciousness? About this Said takes two positions. In conversation with Rushdie on the Palestinian Identity (1986) Said emphatically stated: "Whether in the Arab world or elsewhere, twentieth century mass society has destroyed identity in so powerful a way that it is worth a great deal to keep the specificity alive" (Said 1995: 122). Only a year earlier than this conversation, Said had talked about the dangers of "difference" around identity even if it was small (1995: 100).

What he means is that an exile in his battle against the meta-centre can use his mini but distinctly grounded cultural- historical centre as an armament to liberate. Using small identity to "privilege" oneself or one's community over others is not creative, it is for that reason that this identity is to be refused. In his Reith lectures delivered in 1993, Said devoted one lecture to the theme of "Intellectual Exile", although all the six lectures build up a theory of the intellectual enterprise around the expatriate's experience.

Appropriation of myths and myth making plays a crucial role in the expatriate experience. These writers have appropriated established myths, have broken and rearranged and restructured them in their works.

Mythical mode has allowed them to go beyond the socio-cultural specifics of the spaces of his origin and of adoption and to relate to the larger structures and recurring patterns of human faith and aspirations. They have used myths in multiple ways to counter tyrannical historical determinations, to situate the personal into the broader frameworks, to question the constraints of identity, to explore the relationships between the self and the other, the otherness of the self and the selfhood of the other and to negotiate existence.

Their narrative, structural strategies have finessed from one work to another. In their hands history reads like fiction and his fiction appears more 'historical' than history. He has successfully negotiated what Ajay Heble calls 'the problem of history' with a consistent juxtaposition of history alongside myth, biography, the silences within history and through constant blurring of the borders between them. The self-reflexivity of the different modes and that of Ondaatje's own text tantalizes 'fixed' perspectives but proves a wholesome experience, a startling realization of the missing links, a sudden emergence of order.

The explosions and implosions in these texts do not end up in a chaotic scattering but there is a consistent striving for order a realignment of *the detritus of the age*, times and spaces, there is always room for negotiations, and reinventions. These writers internalize architecture and archaeology into their works and the narratives are structured in a manner that they consist the tonality of the corresponding techniques. The architectural structures in his books are not limited to buildings but they see architecture in books, bodies, relationships and organizes the architecture of his narratives in a manner that there are reflections and counter-reflections between them- an openness that allows movement from one to other bearing a simultaneous distinctiveness and similarity of textures. These writers, to an extent, does in his novels what Renee Green, the African-American artist, does through her visual arts:

"I wanted to make shapes or set up situations that are a kind of open....My work has a lot to do with a kind of fluidity, a movement back and forth, not making a claim to any specific or essential way of being." (qtd. by Bhabha 3)

Renee Green's concern with shapes and situations that are a kind of open also concretizes Ondaatje's primary concern as an artist, he shapes his narratives in a way that they foreground a fluidity and allow a movement to and fro. The apparent commonality in the corresponding techniques of these South Asian

writers, and Renee Green, an African-American artist, has more to it than a mere coincidence rooted in a postmodernist approach to art. Green's emphasis on the potential of liminal spaces like a stairwell is her effort to 'make associations between certain binary divisions such as higher and lower and heaven and hell.' While Renee Green has in mind the binary racial divide between the blacks and the whites, these writers try to capture the liminal spaces between races, cultures, socio-economic hierarchies, histories, geographical spaces, disciplines, genres and the modes of being and belonging. Their poetics is the etymological leaping out of the exile not to mourn or regret or to forget but to move through them to discover, to reinvent and recreate the self in its extensions through a constant negotiation of the contradictions and stasis.

Chelva Kanaganayakam in the context of Ghose's short story "Arrival in India" speaks of the 'camouflage,' the 'deceptive quality' that makes 'immigrant writing about a sensibility rather than a place' (Kanaganayakam 15). The statement has a vital significance in Ondaatje's poetics. Ondaatje's treatment of different spaces speaks of a sensibility that transforms what meets the eye/I, countering static positions and leaving space for vibrant re-creations through imagination. Aamir Hussain refers to the subjective privilege in the term 'exile', "there is a tremendous inherent privilege in the term, a mobility of mind if not always of matter, to which we as writers should lay claim: a doubling instead of a split" (Kanaganayakam 14). Their poetics is precisely the product of this doubling, even multiplicity, the *mobility of mind* that counters the stasis of matter/space mobilizing it by opening it up to reflect other spaces.

The journey of exile may both be regressive and revelatory, it can lead to a state of perennial homelessness, into a willed ghetto or may home the individual in the larger context of the world and its cultures. The exile has the privilege, the prerogative of choosing his/her path and mode of being. JanMohammad speaks of the 'specular border intellectuals' who choose to remain on the borderlines of cultures and consider 'other utopian possibilities of group formation' and the 'syncretic intellectuals' who are able to 'combine elements of the two cultures in order to articulate new syncretic forms and experiences' (JanMohammad, 97). The corresponding positions of the 'specular' and the 'syncretic' intellectuals again emphasize the crucial significance of the choice one makes, and the position one chooses

to be in. The poetics of Lahiri, Hamid and Hosseini combine the perspectives of both the specular and the syncretic intellectuals as they have chosen to create *utopian possibilities of group formations* and has also combined the elements of the two cultures of his origin and of adoption to *articulate new syncretic forms and experiences*.

The poetics of exile may acquire a more meaningful context if it is put in relation with the exile of the spiritual seeker, the exiles of Buddha. The spiritual seeker willingly moves out of the bonds of family, society and belongings to comprehend the meaning of existence, that part of the individual self that lies beyond the limits of his/her identification with a family, society, culture, time or a geographical space. Moving out of the social self is not a movement away from society or culture but it essentially enforces a deeper understanding of these constructs and endows the ability to look through them and to simultaneously capture the physical and the spiritual essence of being. Leaving his family and immediate space Buddha embraced the world and was in turn embraced by the world. Buddha cannot be reduced to an 'ism.'

Buddha is not about appropriation, but is about a surrendering, not about constriction but about expansion, not about stasis but about continuum, not about *conversion* but about perennial exploration, reinvention of the self, not about discordance but about harmony. The world has consistently defaced, has bought and placed Buddha in its museums.

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