

Indo-Canadian Novelists from Africa and the Caribbean: A Historical Survey

Priyanka Singh

The term "Diaspora" is derived from the Greek words "Speiro" (to sow) and "dia" (over). However, Diaspora is associated primarily with the historical exodus of the Jewish people from the Biblical Israel following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. It forced their removal to Babylon and their existence outside Palestine. In Jewish reference, the term "acquired a more sinister and brutal meaning. Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile." (Cohen IX) The present paper intends to give a historical survey of Indo-Canadian novelists from Africa and Caribbean. Since these writers are diasporic and they share indenture labour migration, the paper will first establish a critical standpoint on diaspora. In addition, it will also give a brief historical analysis of the indenture system.

I

Diaspora now finds application and acceptance as a reference to massive movement and worldwide dispersal of many other people. Robin Cohen explains Diaspora as communities of people living together in one country who 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." (Cohen IX) The emphasis on collection and community here is very important, as is the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another. Diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of similar backgrounds.

Though diaspora is a result of mass migration, the later generations of migrants- though they have not experienced migration- share the same sense of loss born from living in a diasporic community. They are inevitably influenced by past migration history, trauma, identity-crisis and marginalization of their ancestors. Avtar Brah rightly states that distinct communities are created out of the "confluence of narratives of different journeys from the 'old country' to the new which create the sense of a shared history." (Avtar Brah 183)

Therefore, whatever heterogeneity several diasporas share, they are implicated in the construction of a common "We" or composite communities. But it does not implicate that diaspora claims to be essentialist. Beneath the veneer of this common "We", which is constructed of a shared sense of loss, exile, dispossession and otherness, diasporic identity resists to be essentialist. Stuart Hall opines that "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a *positioning*." (Hall 395)

Thus diaspora constructs as well as deconstructs the notion of a common "We". It is because, as Arjun Appadurai puts, culture is "a volatile form of difference," rather than an "inert, local substance" that is distinctive modern fact. (Appadurai 60) In such a volatile cultural positioning a diasporic writer is more interested in, what

Salman Rushdie would say in his famous essay on “imaginary homelands”, the creative, re-creative power of “imagination,” rather than the contingencies of an actual “homeland”. (Rushdie 1991)

Indian diaspora in Canada is a composite as well as volatile community. What gives a common identity to all members of Indian Diaspora is their Indian origin, the consciousness of their cultural heritage and their deep attachment to India. What differentiates them is their different territorial and linguistic background. Apart from this, the different reasons for migration of Indians under colonial rule and post colonial migration also create difference. Post-colonial migration began as a matter of free choice. It was either for better education chosen by prosperous Indian families or for economic betterment.

Under the colonial rule reasons for migration were entirely different. Three major migrations took place during the colonial period; indentured labour migration, the migration of Indian soldiers for the imperial armies of Britain, France, and Holland, and the migration of Indians as labourers to Africa for the construction of railway networks and colonial establishment. The indentured labour migration is the point of inquiry here because it was the earliest form of Indian labour migration which served in the making of African nations for more than two generations and yet after the independence of the African nations the descendents of these labours were considered as potential threats to the natives. Therefore they were forced to migrate further: thus again there were on exile, leaving all establishments behind.

II

Indenture was, “a contract by which the emigrant agreed to work for a given employer for five years, the emigrant was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in colony; at the end of ten years, he was entitled to a subsidized return passage.” (Jain 4) The Indian indenture system started from the end of African slavery in 1834 and continued until 1920, when thousands of Indians were transported to various colonies of Europe to provide labour for sugar plantations. Most of the immigrants during this period were unskilled or semi-skilled labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Rajputana, Maharastra, Bengal and central and southern coastal districts of Madras. The Indian indentured labour importing colonies were Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Grenada St. Lucia, St. Kitts, Reunion, Surinam, Fiji, East Africa and Seychelles. (Sharma 20)

In the early years of the Nineteenth Century, the socio-economic conditions in India -particularly in rural India- were very harsh. The establishment of the British factory system in India had destroyed Indian domestic industries including the spinning and weaving of cloth and tens of thousands of workers were displaced.

They also faced scarcity of food due to failing crops and high food prices. These conditions forced people to look for other alternatives. Indenture system, with the promise of land to farm and higher wages got significant response from these people.

Besides there was no uniform system of control applied to all prospective recruit of labour. Under the indenture system, a prospective employer of labour placed

an order with a recruiting agent based in India for the supply of a stipulated number of labourers. The recruiting agent thereupon sent his subordinate to villages to collect the required number of men. These men became indentured labour to their employment agencies.

The agents lured a large number of workers painting a rosy picture which was exactly the opposite of the existing reality. These immigrants usually, carried with them meager belongings of utility items, clothing, and perhaps a blanket. Yet, they managed to bequeath to their children and their grand-children the cultural heritage of their land of origin.

Debarred by white prejudice and legal discrimination from access to the dominant group, Indians were discriminated and forced into a position of intermediate stratum. After a long sea voyage under crowded and insanitary conditions, the workers were housed in extremely primitive dwelling, consisting typically corrugated iron barracks. From its very inception this system was doomed to induce a fundamental sense of placelessness, marginalization and homelessness. Frank Birbalsingh gives a very authentic account of the condition of indenture:

The physical condition of indenture... induced disorienting feeling of insecurity, fear and panic. Herded like cattle on so-called "coolie ships," the immigrants were little better than human merchandise, as indeed their predecessors were, the African slaves who were also transported in ships across the Atlantic during the infamous Middle Passage. ... But not by its length alone was the voyage disorienting; it enforced loss of caste and custom, and cut the immigrants adrift from all that they knew and cherished in their homeland. The term "jahaji bhai," Hindi or Urdu for ship brother was invented as a designation of the new relationships which immigrants had forged with shipmates in their attempt to compensate for broken ties with family and friends they had left behind in India.(X-XI)

Flogging by white overseer was a daily occurrence. The condition of these labourers was the same in every colony. This indenture system almost worked as a form of pseudo slavery. Official discrimination of these labourers was a usual phenomenon. They also faced different problems in different colonies.

In South Africa, the issue of apartheid posited a grave problem to them. And when immigration from India to South Africa was stopped due to political disturbances caused by apartheid they lost touch with their homeland. In East Africa, the scene was full of bizarre incidents. The immigration rules in East Africa were "so difficult that no alien was admitted unless he could fill a post that was for the benefit of everybody." (Bachau 7) Most of the Indian were employed as indentured labour to work on the Kenya Uganda railways being developed by the colonial administration. But the conditions were the same as in other British colonies. Social privileges and benefits were taken away from the Indian labourers. Their positions were no better than those of slaves. In the Caribbean Islands plantation labourers were isolated and their freedom was restricted.

The most interesting aspect of the indentured Indians was their interaction with different races in the colony. There were drastic changes in domestic organizations, linguistic demarcations and perpetuation of traditional values in the

migrants. This cross-section of communities and its geographically dispersed nature led to the formation of “ethnic ghettos” (Bachau, 8), an illusion of home orientation and the myth of returning to their homeland.

Amid all these adverse conditions they survived and often flourished in due time. They started considering Africa their home but the situation changed in the 60s and 70s. For the young generation of this time Africa was their home and they had no feeling of homelessness like their forefathers. Those were the times of economical setback and political unrest of the entire African continent. The indigenous Africans had a very hostile attitude towards Indians whose situation was like a “colonial sandwich”, with the European at the top and Africans at the bottom. Amid increasing resentment of the Africans many Indians fled to England, Europe and North America to avoid racial and political discriminations. After America and Britain Canada became the most significant country where Indian immigrants were visible in large numbers and are playing an important role in the social, economical and cultural life of Canada. Indian immigration to Canada bears an historical perspective. The novels of these dislocated writers deal with diasporic Indians living in East Africa and their further migration to other places. They concerned with how these migrations affect the life and identity of such dislocated lives. Their works construct a common “We” as well as explore different responses of different diasporan groups to a necessary heterogeneity and diversity.

III

Literature of the East-Indian Community in Canada presents a multicultural variety. Writers of the Indo-Canadian literature have tried to express themselves in all major literary genres, drama, poetry and prose. These writers deal with themes of minority alienation, marginalization and otherness. The quest for identity and the question of existence has been a common voice in the writings of these immigrants. The feelings, emotions and sentiments which diasporic writers project in their writings, lend Canadian literature a different shade and vividness. It is expressed through a consciousness of otherness, giving their writings an ambience and sensation of identity, in its presentation.

The experiences of these immigrants had always been there in the tradition that they adopted in literature. When the immigrants of the East Indian first begun as indentured labour they used the oral tradition for the expression of their feelings and writings. This phase of the oral tradition of literature continued till the influx of immigration shifted from indentured labourers to the expatriate groups consisting of scholars, professional and other educated people. The writings of these new immigrants gradually furnished, contributing to all genres of contemporary Canadian literature.

Suwanda Sugunasiri, an immigrant to Canada from the Indian Sub-continent, in her article “The Literature of Canadians of South Asian Origin: An Overview” (1985) records that from 1962 to 82 a surprisingly large number of South East writers in English had published their works (1985 1-21). In the Canadian context, the term south Asian literature meant the writings of Canadian who trace their origin

to one of the following South Asian Countries, India, Srilanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

It also includes the writing of the East Indians who journeyed to Canada, having come from Britain or other erstwhile British colonies such as the South Africa, East-African Countries, Mauritius, Latin American states and the nations of the Caribbean Islands. The literary artists of these places carry different types of experiences in terms of their personal identities, histories and geographies. They have a different identity and belonging, and juggling with new words and new worlds. Their cadenced voices remind one of their different identities, multiple ethnicities, but now intersecting in a common hyphenated term in the multi-cultural society of Canada. They emerge as powerful voice of a new literature. My focus will be on the Indo-Canadian writers of Africa and the Caribbean.

Moyez Ghulamhusein Vassanji was one of those novelists whose forefathers migrated from India to other countries through indenture system. M.G. Vassanji was born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1950, and grew up in Dares-Salaam, Tanzania as a member of a small Muslim Ismaili Sect. After completing his education he came to Canada as a research associate and lecturer at the University of Toronto in 1978. He is the author of seven acclaimed novels: *The Gunny Sack* (1989), which won a commonwealth prize; *No New Land* (1991); *The Book of Secrets* (1994), which won a commonwealth prize; *Amriika* (1999); *The in-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003), which also received the Giller Prize in 2003; *The Assassins Song* (2006), which was short listed for the Scotia bank Giller prize and the Governor General's Award for fiction; and *The Magic of Saida* (2012). He is also the author of two collections of short fiction, *Uhuru Street* (1991) and *When She Was Queen* (2005). He has also authored a travel memoir, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008), which won the Governor-General's Prize for nonfiction.

Vassanji's works (except *The Assassin's Song*) deal with in-between situation of diasporic Indians. Vassanji is concerned with how these migrations affect the life and identity of such dislocated lives. As a secondary theme, members of his community of Indian Muslims of the esoteric Shamsi sect (like himself) later undergo a second migration to Europe, Canada, or the United States. Vassanji explores the impact of these migrations on these characters who are installed as a buffer zone between the indigenous Africans and colonial administration.

Farida Karodia is another novelist who was educated in South Africa and Zambia and later migrated to Canada. Her first novel *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) highlights the tragedy triggered by racism in the South Africa. This novel was a runner up for the *Fawcett Literature Prize*. It concerns with the difficulties that non-white faced in getting an education under apartheid. Her other remarkable works are *Coming Home and Other Stories* (1988), *A Shattering of Silence* (1991), *Against an African Sky* (1994), *Other Secrets* (2000) and *Boundaries* (2003).

Writers from the Indian diaspora who came to Canada from Latin American countries brought with them a different flavor. Cyril Dabydeen (born in Guyana) is one of them. He won the highest poetry award in Guyana, the *Sandbach Parker Gold Medal*. He moved to Canada in 1970. His novel *Drums of my Flesh* (2005)

won the top Guyana Prize for Fiction. His other important novels include *The Wizard Swami* (1985), *Dark Swirl* (1988) and (for young adults) *Sometimes Hard* (1994). His novels evoke colonial Guyana with its combination of squalor, poverty and raw boisterousness. They explore divided loyalties of the new home and the home left behind.

Arnold Harrichand Itwaru is yet another important name among the writers of East Indian who hails from Guyana. He immigrated to Canada in 1969. His important works are *Shanti* (1988), a modern classic, *Home and Back* (2001), and *Morning Yesterday: Seven Short Stories* (1999). *Shanti* explores a political story of imperialism and exploitation in colonial Guyana. This and other works spread anti-colonial message through several incidents of colonial resistance and clashes.

Other prominent Canadian writers from Guyana are Frank Birbal Singh, Roy Neehal, Victor Ramraj. These Indo-Canadians from Guyana speak of the suffering of marginalization under the indentured labour system under white domination.

Canada has also attracted people from the British colonies in the Caribbean Islands. Neil Bissoondath is one of them, whose *A Casual Brutality* (1989), was short-listed for the Trillium Award and the W. H. Smith (Canada) First novel Award. His other novels include *The innocence of Age* (1993), *The World Within Her* (1999) (nominated for Governor General's Award), *Doing The Heart Good* (2002), *The Unyielding Clamour of the Night* (2005), *The Soul of All Great Design* (2008). Frank Birbalsingh canonizes Bissoondath in following words:

Among South Asian Canadian writers from the Caribbean, Bissoondath may be regarded as the most perceptive and skilled commentator on characteristic themes of disorder and persecution leading flight or misplacement, and ultimately to uncertainty or inner disorder. (164)

Harold Sony Ladoo is another Indo-Canadian who was born in Trinidad and came to Canada in 1968. *No Pain Like This Body* (1972), his first novel, remains a classic of Canadian and Caribbean writing. His second novel *Yesterdays* (1974), like first novel portrays Indian in a rural Trinidad setting. In his novels "the living conditions of ... characters are a direct product of British colonialism in the Caribbean: they entail struggle, pain, terror, and frustration for most people, and the desperate scraping together of essentials that will sustain body and soul." (Birbalsingh 146)

These novelists have been deeply affected by two experiences: the psychic tremors of indenture, a kind of banishment from India and later their exilic existence in Canada. This is what distinguishes them from so-called main stream literary aesthetic. They know that they are not fit into the prevailing paradigm of literary theory and aesthetics. They are conscious of the fact that the dominant ideology of the West has marginalized non-white diasporic writers as "immigrants". Thus these novelists consciously choose the position that belongs to those Fanon called "the wretched of the earth". They write about unheroic, oppressed, marginalized, and the people of hyphenated category. They write and recreate the history of those who are dislocated, neither here nor there. Thus India, along with Africa, not only gives an identity but also provides aesthetics as opposed to the Western aesthetics of exclusivism in the name of race, gender and colour. These writers corroborate with what Arun

Mukherjee defines as “oppositional aesthetics”, (1994 vii) that means they continue to be oppositional to the dominant ideologies of literary and cultural analysis in Euro-America. They are compelled to return to their past. Their transnational cultural negotiations and existence in exile compel them to investigate the history of their community; about the generations of oppressions. Arnold Harrichand Itwaru defines their position

We are here, not there, in the region of our birth. ... For to be in exile is considerably more than being in another country. It is to live with myself knowing my estrangement. ... But this estrangement goes further. It touches upon the very notion of home, the lands and places of our birth. For that land, there, that region, lives in us as memory and dream, as nostalgia, romance of reflection, that which defines us as different, that to which we think we belong but no longer do. It is thus that many of us repeatedly invent scenarios of our return but never realize them. It is thus also that those of us who do visit there return here to find that after the painful winters of our struggles a deep sense of uneasiness prevails ... [W]e are now visitors: of our past, and unwelcomed visitors here, and other places like here, where our silence and invisibility, despite our embodied conspicuousness, are the dimensions of our rejection. (202-203)

This consciousness of always being in exile, estrangement that *we belong but no longer do* and a compulsion to return to the point of origin (which proves to be chimera) shape the fictional world of these diasporic authors. The above statement of Arnold Itwaru defines the situation of the Indo-Canadian authors from Africa and the Caribbean.

To encapsulate the vast ocean of creativity of these Indo-Canadians is not an easy task. Their writings basically focus on the discriminations, demarcations, differences, injustices, inequalities that have been a part of almost every East Indian. Their sense of identity in the multicultural society of Canada has been determined by the tradition and culture to which they belong. Thus homogeneity and heterogeneity consist together in their works. The various cadenced voices remind readers of constantly different ethnicities, different identities, different geographies, to which these writers belong. Thus they provide new imaginative ways of dealing with the rich multicultural society of Canada.

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