

Pinaki Roy (ed.)

Words from India in the West

A Critical Approach to Select Writings by the
Diasporic Indian Litterateurs

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Dedicated To:

Prof. (Dr.) Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay,
Vice-Chancellor, Bankura University

(The Teacher, The Administrator, The Critic...)

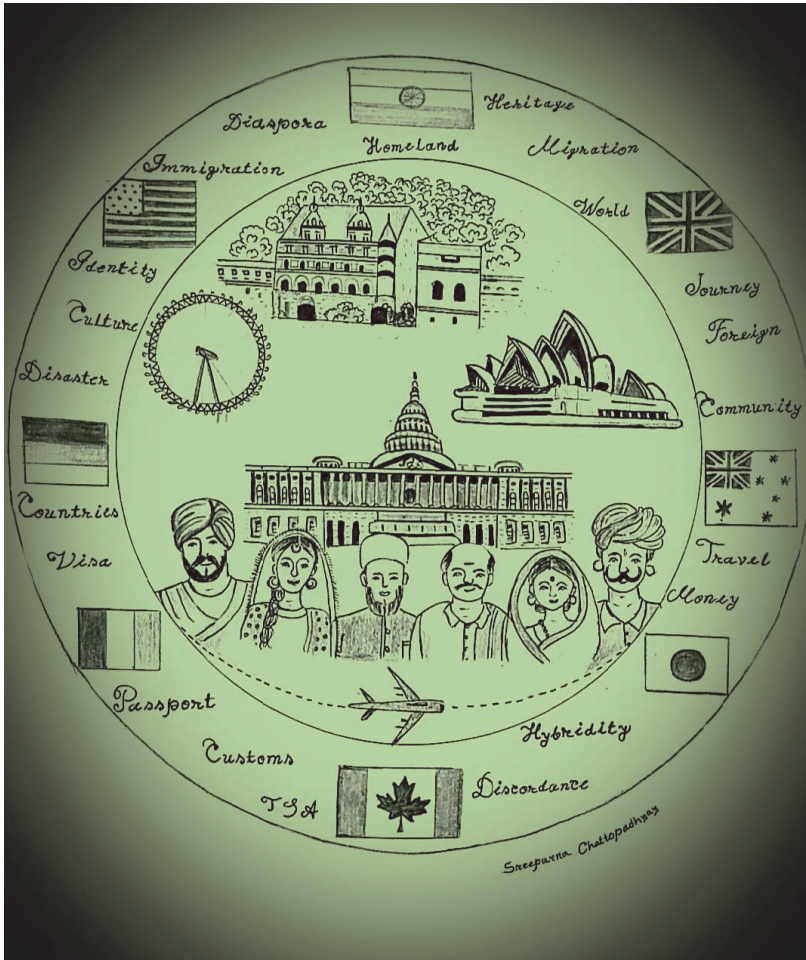


Illustration: *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: The Indian Diaspora and the World* by Sreeparna Chattopadhyay, 2022

Foreword

I grew up as a boy in a North Bengal village during the 1960s, hearing people of my grand/parents' generation lament the loss of a life of abundance in their *desh* (homeland) that they had to leave behind following the partition of India in 1947. Intrigued by the discriminatory aspects of India's Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019, which continues to encounter protests against its impending country-wide implementation, I fished out of an old family trunk a 1948 document issued by the Government of West Bengal that registers the name of my (paternal) grandfather as head of a family of refugees that sought *ashroy* (refuge) in a new land. The paradox apart—those who lived in an undivided India ('East Bengal' pre-partition) were now treated as refugees in a partitioned India—I saw in their eyes pangs of loss and separation, nostalgia for and swelled pride in the soil they were uprooted from and yet an unflinching resolve to make a new home here in the face of overwhelming odds. Despite all conceptual distinctions made today between refugees and diasporas, and the hostland being the West in the title of Pinaki Roy's present volume, I could not open the foreword disregarding the location from which I am writing and the convoluted history of dislocation/relocation that those people had suffered. Loss, backward-looking, mourning and labored homemaking define both refugees and the 'old' diaspora. But when I look at their third or fourth generation, on the other hand, I find many of them settled in the West (Britain and North America) and that if they remember their home at all, it is the present-day Bengal and not the land (Bangladesh now) their ancestors came from because they were never there. They form the 'new' diaspora in other lands through re-migrations in my brief narrative.

As we enter into the broader frame of Indian diaspora in Roy's book, of Indian diasporic literature in the West, an engagement with the fast-changing trajectory of diaspora is in order, a trajectory also borne out by the editor's arrangement of chapters. In fact, diaspora as concept and praxis is ever in a diasporic state because its nature is to keep crossing borders and frontiers 'of language,

history, race, time and culture' (Zhang 2004: 69). The essays collected in Roy's volume are about Indian diasporic writing from two spatiotemporal zones popularly known as, or broadly divided into, old and new diaspora. It is common knowledge that while the 'old' stemmed from 'colonial capital' (Rai and Reeves), the new is an outgrowth of globalization—although world theories or globalization approaches often differ from diaspora studies in that the latter is limited to a set of particular geographic and sociocultural spaces (Faist 2010: 15). The 'old' tells of 'a forced dispersion' (Chaliand and Rageau), of slavery and indentured labour; the 'new' of 'individual choice', 'hypermobility' and '(post)modern ascendancy' (Mishra 2007: 3). Notwithstanding this old-new binary in studies of migration and dislocation, assimilation and adaptation, homelessness and homemaking, the concept of diaspora today evokes a plethora of new movements, developments and their interconnections. The Jewish diaspora may still be considered 'the fundamental ethnic model for diaspora theory', as Vijay Mishra maintains, but it must also be 'reread through alternative models much more attuned to spatio-temporal issues' (6).

Words from India in the West makes it plain that diaspora is a challenge to the narrow precepts of nation and nationalism, territoriality and its interior hegemony. Yet it is always defined by its relationship to nation—in one way or another. The old diaspora happened when the (home)lands that 'supplied' labour, or from which people were exiled, were not independent nations. Decolonization and the birth of nation-states in quick succession during the middle of the twentieth century not only changed the very patterns of migration from former colonies but boosted the migrants' morale in their fight for rights in the land of settlement (Shukla 2018: 169) and included them as subject in the host nation's political and cultural discourses. Noteworthy in this context is the US Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 that awarded greater visibility to South Asians, especially Indians, in broader national debates on race, ethnicity and difference (166). Diaspora also functions as the nation's Other. The suspicion about the immigrant as an alien, especially since 9/11 and also following unplanned migrations caused by war, poverty and natural calamities, interferes with what Žižek

(online) calls the 'National Thing', the majoritarian imaginary of home/nationhood that is supposedly violated by the racial/ethnic Other coming from outside. The 'Nation qua Thing', however, was always already 'contaminated' by the alien within. The alien within is the enemy within in terms of their skin colour or faith, caste or gender and sexuality, as the case may be. They spoil all 'pure enjoyment' of 'the real Thing' (Nation), as Mishra correctly argues after Žižek (2007: 14).

The concept of home(making) remains a recurring motif in the essays collected in Roy's volume. Insofar as home to a diaspora is an absence that is sought to be overcome through 'domophilia' (Raychaudhuri), home as a fictive construct, Avtar Brah's 'homing desire' aptly explains contemporary diasporic imaginary and diaspora's altered relationship with nation. This homemaking is not a yearning for a return to the home left behind; home (or the homeland) as the point of origin is at once changed by history and mediated by unreal expectations from an(other) adopted location. Nor does it turn the hostland into a substitute for the abandoned home; it can at best produce a 'liberatory nostalgia' (Raychaudhuri 2018: 12) that helps the diasporic subject fight the double jeopardy of total assimilation and discrimination in the hostland. On the other hand, the new diaspora, the rich/affluent rather than the working class, lives in both worlds simultaneously – physically as well as virtually, problematizing further the ideas of home and nation. Under neoliberal globalization aided by free market, the Internet, trans-territorial hiring of labour, fast and cheap travel and dual citizenship, diaspora is now considered not only a 'precursor to transnationalism' (Rai and Reeves 2009: 5) but synonymous with it in spite of their different sociopolitical histories and 'intellectual genealogies' (Faist). Transnationalism has become, especially since the 1990s, the experience of international migrants, changing notions of home (belonging), nationality and citizenship. Arjun Appadurai's concept of 'deterritorialization' acquires renewed relevance in appreciating this 'spatial turn' (Collyer and King), a flexible/liquid notion of space, though the everyday of transnational activities including the movement of people and the creating of sociocultural fields also retains a sense of embeddedness in real place. This may

not return us to methodological nationalism even as national ideologies and interests are peddled through 'transnational diasporic circuits' (Hegde and Sahoo 2018: 2). Diaspora as a concept may still appear somewhat inseparable from a community's ethno-cultural distinctiveness, or its sense of home. Yet contemporary diasporas, as Tölölyan observed as early as 1996, are 'the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (online). Overcoming the debate on the 'ideal type' of cosmopolitanism by shifting the focus from communities to practice (Faist 2010: 20), transnational diaspora has come to mean for us a constant negotiation between multiple spaces indicating the 'shifting terrains of habitus' (Bandyopadhyay).

Roy's volume also suggests that diaspora studies, for India or for any other former colony, is connected to postcolonial studies. Whether or not displacement, global movement and transnational network—conditions for defining contemporary diaspora—can be part of postcolonial studies that initially built on home, nation and belonging remains a debatable issue. Yet it is evident that the South Asian diaspora expanded steadily after the decolonization of the subcontinent and postcolonial migration. Postcolonial discourse, for us, connects to this phenomenon especially by providing 'a cultural turn in globalization studies' (Ashcroft 2014: online). As Bill Ashcroft would say, globalization is not singularly economic—it has many forms, cultural globalization being the most important in our context. The figure of the postcolonial migrant that increasingly turned transnational in patterns of movement that go past the human (see Thomas Nail 2015), soon became the carrier of local practices that affected the nature of the global diaspora by undermining the Eurocentric narrative of nation (and of modernity in general) with questions of difference and alterity, diversity and hybridity (Ashcroft 2014: online). And postcolonial literature, a good part of which is also diasporic, is 'the ultimate border crosser' (the border within is included) and therefore 'inherently postnational' (Ashcroft 2020: online). Even on the economic front, postcolonialism is closely related to 'the new global capitalism' (Dirlik 2000: 309) that transnationalizes for the contemporary diaspora the process of production. The 'contemporary figuration' of capitalism that

camouflages the totalizing structure within the transnational system of 'apparent disintegration and fluidity' and subverts 'possibilities of resistance' is very much part of the postcolonial critique today. It is not a question of returning to 'national loyalties' for the transnational diaspora, although Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently described the Indian diaspora as 'brand ambassadors of India', but one of recognizing its own position in global capitalism (316).

The Indian diaspora is the world's largest overseas diaspora today. The present volume aptly recognizes the global Indian diaspora's burgeoning contribution to the literature and culture of our times and is, therefore, an important addition to diaspora studies. Many of the literary works and cultural texts under scrutiny here, have received international recognition. Divided into seven distinct sections, based on the diversity of genres the works belong to, the book contains theoretical forays into (Indian) diaspora as well as essays on diasporic fiction, non-fiction, and even theatre and filmmaking. 'Words' in the volume's title acquires special import in two different senses: theatre and film are viewed in the interstices of text (word) and performance; secondly, the essays/chapters represent a plethora of voices from South Asia vying for greater recognition in the global register of literary-cultural studies. Building on the perspectives of 'India-based critics', as Bashabi Fraser points out, on literature produced in the Anglophone world of Britain and North America, the volume makes a political choice that reinforces the contemporary nature of encounters between the home and the world.

Apart from his introduction as volume editor, Pinaki Roy has another essay here that provides an 'overview' of the novelists of the Indian diaspora since Kamala Markandaya and thus helps in quick mapping of the terrain. The volume, on the whole, discusses Indian diasporic literature across the spectrum of exile and migration, displacement and alienation, assimilation and adaptation, transnationalism and transculturalism. Within these broader spatiotemporal tropes of diaspora, the essays collected in this volume probe trans-oceanic border-crossing and its travails (Munshi), the 'performatives and [...] counter-performatives of belonging'

(Mukherjee and Sarkar), the dilemma of diasporic experience and the duality of identity (Singh), the interweaving of myth, reality and magical realism (Dubey), poetic ruminations on home and the magical power of memory (Arora), gender identity amidst cultural encounters (Swarnakar), and the interaction of self and nation within a colonized space (Mallick). There are also essays in the volume on other cultural forms – on Indian diasporic theatre which is still a marginalized genre because of its very composite nature (Dutta); on visual culture including India-made films that explore ‘heterogenous identities’ in ‘transnational communities’ (Samajdar); and on the steady overseas journey of Indian cuisines (Chattopadhyay).

Words from India in the West should cater well to the needs of anyone pursuing higher studies in South Asian/Indian diaspora anywhere in the world.

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