

MYTHICAL INTERPRETATION OF INDO-CANADIAN DIASPORA

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The word Diaspora is not a substitute for the word immigrant. Diaspora essentially is a bitter experience of dislocation that leads to alienation, a sense of loss and nostalgic desires. It refers to that particular class of immigrants who are unable to go back, primarily because of the hostile climate of discrimination in the country of birth. The hostile climate is intolerable in the land of birth and tolerable in the land of adoption. Usually Diasporans are not happy anywhere, and suffer silently. A poem by Stephen Gill catches their inner self to some extent:

*I have gazed
into the graveyard of their eyes
often grabbing
the dry bones of their silence.....*

*A smoke of uncertainty
surround them like fear
and the albatross of loneliness
sits upon them
like a paperweight¹*

The “dry bones of their silence” due to hostility are seen nowhere among Indo-Canadian writers. Their writings do not reflect any trace of hostilities, because the climate of intolerable discrimination is non-existent in the country of their birth, and is tolerable in the country of their adoption. Indian immigrants in the global age are aspirants of new affluence. Indian immigrants to Canada can be included among the aspirants of new affluence more easily than among the Diaspora based on the mythical interpretation of Indo-Canadians.

Diaspora in Greek means dispersion or scattering. In Hebrew, the word that is used for Diaspora is Galut which means exile. It referred to the Jewish communities scattered in exile outside Palestine. Those Jewish communities were exiled from their homeland by Roman authorities between 66 and 70 CE. Diaspora therefore is “expulsion of a national from his country by the government or voluntary removal of a citizen, usually in order to escape punishment.”²

The first Diaspora in the history of humankind may include the incident soon after God created the world that has been recorded in the Bible. In the beginning, God created Adam and

Eve and gave them a beautiful place to live, called the Garden of Eden. He allowed them sovereignty over everything, except over a particular tree. They violated the commandment of God and tasted the forbidden fruit of that tree. As a result, they were forced out of that garden to work hard for their living.

Adam and Eve must have repented for violating the law of God. In the second life of hard work, they must have remembered the good old days when life was pleasing amidst trees, flowers and animals without day to day worries for food and shelter.

Diaspora has been mentioned in the Old Testament also as punishment. In Deuteronomy, dispersion of the Jews among nations is foretold as punishment for their apostasy. The book says: "thou shall be a Diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth"³. The Jews were exiled from Judea by Babylonians and Jerusalem by the Roman Empire. They travelled with their own luggage. Their dislocation, homelessness and memories of their homeland were part of the Diasporic sensibility. Sufferings in a new land under a new rule and geographical conditions and inability to go back were the important features of the Diaspora of the Jews. "Although the term refers to the physical dispersal of Jews throughout the world, it also carries religious, philosophical, political and eschatological connotations, inasmuch as the Jews perceive a special relationship between the land of Israel and themselves."⁴

Jews suffered beyond human imagination in the 20th century when the Nazis came to power in Germany, and set up concentration camps. Around seven million Jews were killed. Even after their homeland was formed, their sufferings did not come to an end. It is estimated that around 90, 0000 Jews from Arab countries dispersed to different parts of the world, mostly to Europe and North America.

Another Diaspora that sets a pattern for studies is from Africa which took place due to the slave trade. It was a forced dislocation that began in the sixteenth century. Africans were exported to North America, South America, the Caribbean Islands and other parts of the world.

In addition to that of the Jews and the Africans, other major Diasporas are those of Armenians and Indians. The Indian Diaspora started mainly after the British made India a part of the empire. Indians were taken as forced labour in the nineteenth century to other parts of the empire, including Fiji, Maritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname and Malaysia. Canada has a sizeable number of immigrants of Indian origin from African and Caribbean nations. Several of them are the descendents of the Indian Diaspora during colonial days.

The Indian Diaspora started in the form of indentured labourers, who were needed in different British colonies because of the abolition of slavery. At that time, India was a British colony as were the Caribbean Islands. Indians were sent there as indentured labours to work in sugar plantations. Their living conditions were repressive creating another form of slavery.

The major Diasporas have marked similarities. One is their loss of homeland and the sufferings connected with this loss. This loss is associated mainly with the Jews, the Armenians, the Africans and Indian indentured labour and a few other groups. In all these stories, migration was under compulsion.

The present use of the term Indian Diaspora, particularly when it refers to Indo-Canadian writers, is loaded with confusion. Its overuse conflicts with words like immigrant, visitor, racial minorities, ethnic groups, refugee, new Canadian, workers, expatriates, travellers, and other categories.

Sometimes the word is used to include nearly every one; even those who were born outside the country in which they live. If Diaspora is analyzed in the light of its original use that was for the Jews and the major Diasporas of non-Jews, it becomes necessary to include the elements of alienation, loss, forced migration, and a dream to return to the land of birth. It may include also the unwilling acceptance of the host country. Several elements of Diaspora are

reflected in the Immigrant, a novel, and poetry of Stephen Gill. For example, in his poem

“Tenants in Me” he says:

*The immigrant in me
talks of the days
when religiosity killed innocents
of different creeds.
Those painful shrieks
hidden in his blood
stagger at night.*

*He recollects the places
where he played
the house
where passed his days
with his brother, sisters
and fond parents.⁵*

In “An Immigrant Complains,” “his feathers flutter/ around the isle of loneliness.” He feels

*Under the clouds of emptiness
he sings of the spring fragrance,
decorating his home
with the blooms of longing.⁶*

Dr. C. L. Khatri, editor of *Cyber Literature*, recommends that

His (Stephen Gill) poetry should be read and evaluated in the light of his past nightmarish experiences in India when communal riots broke out in the wake of partition of India. It made him migrate from India and settle in Canada. But there are also the memories of brutality and tortured childhood that kept haunting him like his own shadow. Purged in the fire of sufferings, the young Stephen evolved into a muse full of compassion and he made it a sum mum bonum of his life to fight the violence, hatred and enmity and embrace the suffering masses with love and sympathy⁷

Diaspora and nostalgic desires are inseparable. There is no exoticism or marketing involved when diasporans write about their days back home, where they leave their childhood, friends and relatives because of the compulsory exile or intolerable climate of discrimination. “Exoticism, by definition, is the charm of the unfamiliar.”⁸ Nostalgia is the condition of being homesick. It is a moral pain with the obsession to return. It may cause functional disorders that may sap one’s vitality. Such persons are miraculously cured when they return to the family home. How can these immigrant writers be home sick when they never lived in India, except for their tourist trips. There is almost nothing in their writing about India that can be considered as nostalgic. If there is any, that is to exoticize for marketing. To group them under Indian Diaspora is going too far. It is better to call them immigrants or ethnic or Afro-Asian or Afro-Indian writers. The closest word that can be applied is aspirants of new affluence.

Some immigrant writers cry over discrimination in Canada, whereas the fact is that there was no discrimination in the country of their birth that forced them to settle abroad. They had no problem as forced exiled people have. Their tears in Canada are of a political nature. They enjoy shedding tears because there are sympathetic ears to listen to them. Sometimes, it helps to receive awards from governments on a sympathy basis.

Book publishers are in business to make money. They look for sensational material that is available in India at every corner. They also guide their authors as to how to sensationalize particular stories. The authors of such books are not there as prophets or on any mercy or peace mission. They also want to exploit situations. The result is exaggeration in the novels of such fiction writers to make them interesting. Such descriptions should not be confused with nostalgic desires. Such writers pedal India to Canada with exotic tales and settings. Their far-fetched stories may make them famous and bring money and to some even government grants but their descriptions are based on fantasies. It is mainly because Canadians do not know much about India.

Normally, Diasporans maintain continuous explicit and implicit contact with their homeland and other dispersed segments of the same group to ease their grief and cherish the memories of the past. Indo-Canadian writers do not have an organization to remain in touch and to draw consolation from one another. There is no necessity to draw consolation, because they are free to move back and forth between Canada and India. Though the print media is available free, only a handful of readers would like to collect weekly newspapers in English, Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi from the grocery stores. Most Indo-Canadian organizations are there just to dine and watch Indian dances arranged with funding from the Government of Canada.

“A key characteristic of diaspora is that a strong sense of connection to a homeland is maintained through cultural practices and ways of life. Among these culinary culture has an important part to play in diasporic identifications.”⁹ It is the culture that bonds a group and culture includes language and food habits. Religion has never been a unifying force in the history of humankind nor the last or the first name of a person. Any immigrant group from any nation who uses neither Indian dress nor enjoys Indian food on a routine basis should not be identified as part of the Indian diaspora. Food habits and language are the key constituents of diaspora. Indo-African and Indo-Caribbean in Canada hardly understand any Indian language and hardly prepare any Indian food at home.

In addition to these crumbling organizations of Indian immigrants, there are restaurants in some cities of Canada where both Indian and Canadian foods are served. Most Indian restaurants complain that they are in business due to the whites. Indians do not patronize them much.

Another element that is common is the Hindi films. But there is hardly any theatre in Canada where Indian films are shown regularly, though some cities have enough of them to patronize at least one. Such cinema houses are not common even in large cities. Still another feature is arranged marriages that are few and far between among educated families from cities. If there are arranged marriages, they are between the families living in Canada and India, not between the families within Canada. Most such marriages are to bring someone else also to Canada.

Diasporans in history had diaries in which they recorded the hard life in the lands of their birth. They often talked and wrote against that hard life and prejudices. See how Stephen Gill describes his days in India during the partition of 1947:

*It is the pain of these wounds of my life in India that I carry with me no matter where I go. I have struggled to catch a glimpse of that pain in the preface to Shrine, a collection of my poems of peace and social concerns. That pain is still alive in the caves of my arteries and comes to life as spectres, particularly when it is night. The more I try to escape those spectres the more they torment me. That is also my well from where I have and even now I draw the waters for my inspiration. I find that well inexhaustible and its water more satisfying with every visit to it. These visits are like that of a child to its mother...I carry the luggage of my discomfoting experiences wherever I go.*¹¹

Because those factors were responsible for their exile, Diasporans attacked them. Being from the majority or financially and educationally stronger groups in the countries of their birth, these Canadian ethnic groups did not experience intolerable discrimination in their homelands. That is why there is nothing worth noting about discrimination in the writings of these Canadian immigrant writers. They hardly know India and therefore cannot write, except about the caste system and things like that in general.

Unwilling acceptance by the host countries is an important constituent of Diaspora. This unwilling acceptance leads to their exclusion and alienation. Canada on the political and also on the social level accepts ethnic groups. The problem is with these ethnic groups themselves. They keep themselves aloof and form their own ghettos. To say that the host country, Canada, does not accept them is largely based on assumptions. Canada has multicultural policies. It has policies to hire members of ethnic groups in government and government funded agencies. Immigrants are treated equally before the law. Governments at all levels have funds for cultural and language activities. Materially they are better off than they had been in the countries of their birth. They can come and go wherever they like. There is no restriction either from the host country or from the country of birth. Several writers in Canada have been recognized with medals, certificates, prominent honors, even with money. They are recognized more than they had been in the country of their birth.

Canada is a nation of nations—a united nations in microcosm. “My Canada”, a poem of Stephen Gill, expresses this aspect when it says, “in thy lap/ lie all nations/ human and beasts/ melt into one shape/ under thy care.”¹¹ This aspect of Canada is obvious from the policies of Canadian governments at all levels. One example is the multicultural festivals when Canadians of different ethnic groups set up their stalls to sell their national foods in their national costumes. Instead of an entry ticket, visitors buy a false passport that is stamped by these stall holders of different nations. Here visitors buy their national foods. The idea behind this practice is to signify that Canadians do not have to travel to distant lands of the world. They can see the culture of the distant lands right in Canada; even can taste their national foods.

Stephen Gill, an Indo-Canadian poet and writer, says in a paper:

*In addition to refugees, Canada admits millions of immigrants who seek better social and economic conditions. Today, Canada is in the same situation in which Alexandria and Byzantium stood. Byzantium flourished for more than a thousand years from 330 AD to about 1400 in Eastern Roman Empire. The location of Byzantium provided the city with some excellent advantages. Byzantium emperors gave a home to refugee scholars and found time to build lending libraries. It was a cosmopolitan society full of vitality, a half-way house between the East and the West. They grew culturally wealthy. Canada is also growing wealthy. Canada is a cosmopolitan society, alive and vibrant—a United Nations in microsoms.*¹²

Because new comers are accepted with open arms, they do not meet the criteria of Diaspora that is unwilling acceptance by the host country. Canada, the host country, invites Indians to apply for immigration. The government of India also provides incentives to foreigners to open offices and invest money in India. Both have opened their doors. Unlike the Diaspora of the Jewish, Africa, Armenia and India, new Canadians can easily go back if they find discrimination.

Several immigrants hold dual citizenships. They come and go to the countries of their birth, not India. Diasporans did not enjoy these privileges. Moreover, there has to be a line to separate the descendents from the parents who were Diasporans. In the absence of such a demarcation, the whole population of Canada can be a Diaspora, including the native Indians who came from abroad centuries ago—probably from the East. The Europeans, including Germans, French, and English, came from abroad. Canada is a multicultural society. New comers to Canada are like the modern Indian population of the Caribbean Islands. The indentured labour from India that was exported to the Caribbean Islands got mixed up with other communities from Europe, Africa and Asia. Except their appearance and in some instances their first or last names, they have nothing to do with India. That situation gave birth to the modern new generation that is a hat that has lost its shape because everyone has attempted to wear it.

The children of parents of the Canadian multicultural society who enjoy most of the modern comforts would not like to settle in India. They may go as tourists to see the land of their ancestors but not to settle there. They are not home sick. They do not bear similarities with the Jews, Armenians and the Diaspora of the indentured labourers. Even the children of the first generation Indo-Canadians are the outcome of mixed marriages between different ethnic groups. The culture of several Indo-Canadians and Afro-Canadians or Caribbean-Canadians who appear to be of Indian origin, is a mixture of identities. The new generation cannot be nostalgic about the country they only hear, read or see on the TV screens like any other country and any person.

Most ethnic writers of Canada are not Diasporans and they were not Diasporans in the countries of their origin either. Their knowledge of India is not better than the knowledge of several whites who for one reason or the other are interested in India. Those who were not born in India, not even their parents, are not Indian Diasporans, because they are not in touch with India; they keep their contacts with the country of their birth that may be Caribbean or African.

Also, those aspirants who go abroad in search of new affluence cannot be Diaspora, because they are free to go back. Skilled workers and professionals, including medical doctors, engineers, nurses and investors, are under no compulsion to leave their country. Most newcomers bid farewell to their lands of birth because of their loyalty to the god of gold. Suffering from the mania of petrodollars, they search for an El Dorado of prosperity for themselves and their children in Europe and North America. They come and go whenever they want and eventually settle in Canada, enjoying the best of both worlds.

Such immigrants are like neo colonizers because due to their superior skills they are able to make money in much better living conditions and send it back home like colonizers. These overseas Indians are given different names. One of them is non-resident Indians (NRI). They carry their luggage of colour and habits that are peculiar to the nations where they were born. They buy lands in the land of their origin and visit them periodically. They have nothing to do with India, except their appearance. Those immigrant women who were not born in India do not have any idea of sarees, and Indian food, except chicken curry and laddoo.

Considering the barometer that has been used here, most Indo-Canadian writers are not "in tears amid alien corn," as Ruth was in "Ode to a Nightingale" of John Keats. Modern

India is an awakening giant after a long slumber. Some Afro-Asian or Afro-Indian writers of Canada want to be associated with India that has a long tradition to welcome everyone. Association is one thing and to be Diaspora or a diasporan another. Colonizers who came to India in the past had the same motive that was to make money. Colonizers came to India in the garb of the East India Company to trade. When they started their settlements and raising armies, the British Government dissolved the company to take over India. They were compelled to leave India when Indians boycotted their products.

Globalization has a profound influence on those who are aspirant of new affluence. Means of communications have accelerated their movements. More and more countries are opening their doors to them. Many Canadian and American companies have their offices and call centres in India because it is cheap to hire the local labour. That was the real object behind exporting indentured labour to other colonies when India was under the British rule.

Instead of investing large amounts to train doctors and other specialists, it is cheaper for Canada to hire specialists from India. With special skills and money in their banks, these Indians are flourishing in Canada under the roof of the multicultural policies of its government. These immigrants from India are now parliamentarians, university professors, medical doctors, nurses, business entrepreneurs and also in other spheres. The government of India offers multiple visas to Indo-Canadians. It is also trying to offer them double citizenships like Pakistan. Such citizens hold two passports-- one from their home country and another one from the country of their adoption. They are free to go back and return when they like.

Most immigrant writers of Indian origin in Canada may be identifiable because of their physical features or their first or last name. They may have been two or three generation Indians with mixed identities. They may be grouped on the basis of consciousness or a state of mind that is a kind of awareness that their ancestors had been from India. Because of this historical heritage, a new map needs to be drawn for them with different colours. They may be a part of transnational migration in general but to confine them to the pigeon hole of Diaspora would be confusing. The loyalties of these newcomers are divided among Canada and the country of their birth that possibly is in Africa or a Caribbean Island. They know almost nothing about India. To call them Indian Diaspora is going too far.

Diaspora is a concept with its own history. Its studies were established in the late twentieth century. Indo-Canadians bear more dissimilarities with the word Diaspora than similarities. Their migration is voluntary and more of an entrepreneurial nature. Taking hints from the discourses of other dispersions, the government of India began to adopt this term for Indians abroad, as a synonym for immigrants for nearly every category for its political ends. They include anyone who has even a remote blood tie with India to grab the dollars of the overseas settlers to save the ship of Indian bankruptcy. Most Indo-Canadians are aspirants of new affluence. The mythical interpretation of Indo-Canadian diaspora is a great injustice to the original Diasporans.

Works Cited

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² *The Columbia Encyclopedia*..

³ *The Bible*, "Deuteronomy", chapter 28, verse 25)

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⁵ *Shrine*. "Tenants in Me", World University Press, Pb., USA, 1999, p. 153

⁶ -----"Immigrant Complains,"-----p.78

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⁸ *Wikipedia Encyclopaedia* on line

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¹¹ -----p. 20

¹² Presented at the IACS International Conference on Canadian Studies held from April 12-15, 1999 at the Himachal Pradesh University in Shimla,India, and also appeared online Pakistan Christian Post..

Stephen Gill has authored collections of poem, novels, and critical studies. Several studies have appeared on his works.