Unit 20
Indian Diasporic Writing

Contents

Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to understand:

- The meaning and usage of the term diaspora literature;
- The characteristics of diaspora literature and related terms;
- The circumstances for the formation of diasporic communities;
- Indian diasporic community in Canada;
- The diasporic writing as cultural identity marker; and
- Indian Diasporic Novel writing in Canada.

20.1 Introduction

By now it is well known that diaspora is a term that was applied originally to denote groups of people of Jewish origin who were ousted from and scattered beyond the bounds of their homeland. It thus came to be associated with relocation through force. However, after going through various mutations, it now stands for relocation of groups of people or members of communities from one nation to another and not necessarily through the application of force. The other three more common terms that are used to denote a similar situation are 'expatriate', 'immigration' and 'exile'. It may be of interest to mention here that some scholars have begun to use a term 'internal diaspora' to denote similar relocation within the geographical bounds of a nation. However, the concept of diaspora is still associated with transnational relocation. In this unit we will discuss the imagery of the Indian diaspora in literalure.

20.2 Diasporic Communities—Circumstances and Reasons for their Formation

While Jews were allegedly forced to relocate or were subjected to a 'push', modern sociologists consider either 'pull' or 'push' factors or both to be responsible for the creation of diasporic situations, that is to say, circumstances under which people relocate themselves. These 'pull' factors are generally economic in nature that is prospects of better paid jobs or

more lucrative businesses, etc., lure people to relocate themselves. However, groups of people and chunks of communities also move from one national location to another because of better living conditions including better socio-cultural life or more tolerant political systems. Canada, for instance, has been considered one such destination for people from outside. The 'push' factors include adverse economic circumstances, that is, lack of appropriate job opportunities or absence of favourable conditions for carrying out business activities. 'Push' factors also included hostile or unstable socio-political conditions in general or for specific groups of people or members of particular communities that may also mean violation of their human rights or even threats to their persons and property. Groups of people in significant numbers from African and Asian countries ruled by dictators and military juntas have moved or have been forced to move to either Europe or North America for such reasons.

Reference to the Jewish community's dispersal also shows the antiquity of the phenomenon of diaspora, that is, people travelling away from home and settling among people with widely different cultural profiles. In our own parts, the existence of the ancient Silk Route is one such evidence. In fact, Buddhism traveled from India to the Far East and South East Asia because of diasporic situations However, the biggest diasporic situation in modern times—perhaps of all times—as also the most shameful situation was created when very large sections of population from different parts of Africa were removed forcibly to develop the Americas for their European colonial masters.

20.3 Diasporic Communities—Cultural Identity Versus Cultural Assimilation

Identity formation, we know, is a very complex phenomenon. Some identity markers are given biologically, that is these are racial and ethnic in character: pigmentation, colour of eyes, texture of hair and shapes of noses. Thus fair skins, blue eyes, curly hair and small flat noses are connected with various races and ethnic groups. Running into individual members of ethinic groups through the operation of complex genetic processes, these are the most stable of identity markers and consequently most difficult to shed or change individually or communally, especially in diasporic situations. Also, these come to be stereotyped negatively. For instance, women with natural blonde hair have been associated with dumbness—most unfairly, of course. However, the most unjustified stereotyping with tragic consequences has been the case of associating dark pigmentation with 'natural' inferiority of mind and human values.

Some other identity markers are gifts of the environment to members of particular communities. Innuits, for instance, unlike their other fellow Canadians, can reportedly divide the pehenomenon of snowing into at least six distinct categories primarily because snow is what they have all around them—all the time. Members of the Marwari community, originating in the desert of Rajasthan where adverse environmental conditions and lack of means of transportation made them more than optimal users of limited resources are known the world over—and they form diasporic communities in many parts of the world—for their penchant for building huge business empires out of very small beginnings.

It was these environmentally bestowed identity markers that, for instance, made the Canadian Government to encourage Hungarian farming community

to migrate to the mid-west when they were developing the Prairies into their granaries. Again, while developing the rail-road projects and the lumber industry on the Pacific coast in the west, the Canadian government encouraged migration from Punjab whose people were not only strongly built but were also known from their physical prowess to work hard under adverse conditions.

Most numerous—and most significant, perhaps—are the identity markers that are cultural in character. These involve language and religious beliefs, customs and rituals, forms of address and modes of inter-personal behaviour, dress codes and food habits, form and content of education, songs and stories, symbols and icons, myths and legends, practices for preserving history and tradition and many similar phenomena. Add to these, modes of production, economic, political and societal organization, professional and philosophical preferences and we have the complete cultural identity map of communities and individuals. However, this category of identity markers is relatively unstable and it is the members from this category that come under various degrees and kinds of pressure for change in changing situations. As societies change and evolve, cultural tokens also change. However, such changes take place at different paces among various sections of a society and when such difference is perceptible in a significant way we also term it as 'generation gap'.

This fluidity in cultural situation is more significantly pronounced in diasporic situations where not just two phases of evolution of the same culture but two different cultures—if not more—are in contestation. The cultural space that emerges out of such a contest is a hybrid space wherein new patterns of socio-cultural behaviour emerge that are, at different times, pastiche, marginally assimilated or significantly integrated, to name only a few. We shall speak about this space in more details in a later section of this Unit.

20.4 Indian Diasporic Communities—History and Evolution

Many Indian myths and legends warn people against crossing the seas to travel abroad. Going beyond the 'Kala Pani'—black waters—was considered sinful for the soul. And yet, Indians have been traveling and settling abroad in groups for long. However, in modern times, most of such settling abroad happened during the nineteenth century when the British colonial administration sent groups of Indians to work in other British colonies as indentured labour. This is how Indian diasporas came to be formed, for instance, in Mauritius, East Africa, South Africa, Malaysia and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean region, Fiji in the Pacific Ocean region and Trinidad, Guyana, Jamaica and Surinam in the Caribbean Sea region.

For various reasons ranging from economic to political, the British colonial administration did not want to employ local population either on the plantations or on development projects. Indian labour was one of the alternatives that the British employed. This could be construed as the 'pull' factor. Also, the British colonial rule in India had created what R.K.Jain calls, 'severe economic and social disturbances'. This was the 'push' factor. Thus, development of the economies of the colonies created employment opportunities abroad for groups of people belonging to either a community or a region. This is how people from Panjab, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Western Bihar, Gujrat, Sindh and Tamil Nadu came to form diasporic communities in some of the countries named above.

Such emigration, however, was organized in various ways. Two main types are distinctly visible. One was the indentured labour system under which Emigration Agents, subagents and recruiters at different levels identified workers who under an agreement volunteered to work for a particular employer for, initially, a period of five years after which he could, if he so desired, switch to another employment. It was only after ten years of work in that particular colony that the person was eligible for partial return passage expenses. Those who went to East Africa, South Africa, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam were recruited under this system. Most of such people did not choose to return after the completion of their indenture contract and settled down in those colonies, finding alternate employment on their own initiative or setting up small business enterprises.

Groups of labourers who went to work on the tea and rubber plantations in Malaysia or Sri Lanka were recruited under a different system that came to be known as the '*Kangani*' system. Under this system, migrants were recruited by headmen who were known as '*Kangani*'. Each *Kangani*, R.K.Jain tells us, recruited 'a score or more of men belonging mainly to his own caste and kin group. Sometimes, many such groups of recruited persons combined under a leader who was designated 'head *Kangani*'. It was *Kangani* who negotiated the deals, lent money for passage and other expenses to the recruited labourers and managed them. Since the workers under this system went to neighbouring Sri Lanka and Malaysia, they continued to be in touch with their families by returning home every couple of years. As a result, most of them could never be absorbed fully into the recipient societies.

Yet another form of group migration was through what may be termed as 'free emigration', also known as 'passenger Indians'. These were generally skilled labourers or petty entrepreneurs who came to explore the possibilities thrown open by development of these colonies. A number of Gujarati 'dukawallas' in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in East Africa, some groups of people in South Africa towards the end of Nineteenth century and more recent migrations since the beginning of the Twentieth century to Canada, United States of America, the United Kingdom and still more recently migration to the Middle East came under this form of migration. It may be significant to observe here that in the beginning invariably and in most cases even later, the workers were not allowed to either bring their families with them or send for them later.

Again, since most of the migrations under one form or another were never well-thought out and planned and were necessitated by either socio-economic disintegration back home or were prompted by lure of the lucre, the groups of people did not try to make the necessary adjustments in their socio-cultural world view. As it is, most of them treated these locations abroad as purely temporary and time-bound. As a result, their continued practice of the cultural patterns and values brought by them from the donor society back home and reluctance to imbibe new ones from the recipient society, created conflictual situations alienating them further from the host people. Most diasporic formations of Indians therefore became janusfaced from the very beginning, stranded as it were on a no-man's land between the two nation states, two societies.

Identity markers or cultural tokens, particularly those bestowed at birth and those acquired as culturally are the sites on which battles for new identity are fought in diasporic situations. Ethnic identity markers of immigrants cannot be got rid of and host societies accept them although

with a lot of reservations and at times these are derided, ridiculed and even subjected to hostile behaviour, particularly verbals. The term 'Paki' in England for persons of not just Pakistan but of South Asian origin has its roots in such behaviour. Similarly, the expression 'Calcutta Coolies' for persons of Indian origin in British Columbia, Canada at the turn of the last century was also an example of such hostility towards ethnic identity tokens, although, interestingly, the immigrants were not from Calcutta. And they were no coolies either. The host or recipient societies however put pressure on diasporic communities to shed as many as possible if not all cultural tokens of their past identities and acquire as quickly as possible the new tokens of cultural identity. Thus, there is pressure on groups of immigrants as also on individual members to shed their languages, customs and rituals, religious beliefs, health and hygiene, dress codes, food habits and forms of inter-personal behaviour. Some of these, the diasporic people give up voluntarily and easily– in visible public behaviour at least–in order to show their willingness to assimilate with the recipient society. For instance, immigrants are ready to learn not only the language of the hosts but also their peculiar accent. Indians trying to imitate American accent–what with a nasal twang–after relocating themselves there or the Indians in Australia trying to pronounce their diphthongs appropriately are instances of such voluntary attempts at linguistic assimilation. Similarly, Indian immigrant women give up wearing sarees or Salwar-Kameez, and taking to western dresses and other forms of formal wear are attempts in the same direction of acquiring tokens of their newly acquired identities. Gujrati 'dukawallas' in East Africa welcoming their customers with 'Jambo' and 'Karibu Sana' are only flaunting their newly acquired cultural currency.

However, there are some tokens that the immigrants want to hold on to as long as possible and are unwilling to shed easily. The Sikhs not willing to give up wearing turbans, or the Hindus not willing to shed their inhibition of eating beef or the Jews their kosher are examples of such reluctance to assimilate fully. Again, immigrants from the sub-continent not permitting their girls to go on dates or to have physical relationships with their boy friends before marriage are forms of behaviour that they are unwilling to adopt primarily because these are not part of the socio-cultural code that they have brought with them from back home.

A situation, therefore, emerges in almost all diasporas- particularly in those with more pronounced cultural distance– wherein a serious contestation takes place on the sites of cultural identity and assimilation. And this situation of riding two cultures simultaneously leads to schism and bi-polarity of behaviour on the part of not only individuals but also groups and communities in the host society that in its extreme form, at times, causes societal instability and disorders.

Diasporic writing, we shall elaborate in another section below, draws its sustenance from this situation of cultural contestation and the process of assimilation.

20.5 Diasporic Writing as a Marker of Cultural Identity

The diasporic cultural space that we spoke about in an earlier section is the cultural space that immigrants occupy almost perpetually since assimilation is an ongoing process and no full assimilation ever takes place. Again, as stated above, it is a space where a contestation is constantly taking place– a contestation between the donor culture and the recipient culture. This

contest takes place first in the minds of immigrant individuals and communities and later in their actions. While the former, namely, the donor culture tries to pull the members to their moorings as far as possible and as long as possible, the latter, that is, the recipient culture tries to oust and replace the former as much as possible and as quickly as possible. As a result, while trying to make necessary adjustments in this state of contestation between the two contending cultures, diasporic communities or individuals become janus-faced––now looking back, now the gaze fixed straight ahead. In situations of severe contestation, extreme states of conflict emerge, turning individuals as well as communities into cultural schizophrenics, victims of maladjustment, haunted by, as it were, Hamlet's dilemma–to be or not to be.

Writing is rooted in a culture. That is, writers are products of a specific culture, drawing sustenance from it and enriching it in turn. However, the world of diasporic writing belongs to the in-between space we spoke about above, the cultural no-man's land, the site at which cultural armies from a community's past and present clash by day and by night to vanquish each other. Since, it is believed, that creativity lies in states of fluidity, contest, conflict and instablility, diasporic writers seek this space, locating most of their writings here where immigrants are trying to ride two horses simultaneously who more often than not are also pulling them is two different if not opposite directions. The discomfiture and the adventure that results therefrom is what diasporic or immigrant writers relish. From Naipaul to Rushdie, Mistry to Vassanji, immigrant writers across various locations and times have woven their tapestries from these two-tone yarns and textures.

Reflection and Action 20.1

What is cultural assimilation? How does it affect identity markers of individuals in disaporic situations?

In this space lies buried a double treasure trove–of myths and legends, or orality and the written word, of rites and rituals, of songs and dances, of faith and belief, of philosophy and pragmatism, of memory and amnesia, of success and failures, of tears and smiles. In short, the lived experience ––of not one but two communities.

20.6 Indian Diasporic Writing

As stated above, most of those who went out to form the first diaspora were members of the working class or the farming community. Most of them were illiterate. Thus all the legends, myths and folk narratives they carried with them to their new lands were primary oral in nature. And it is to this repertoire that they added when they composed songs and poems, tales and stories, skits and plays while reflecting their new socio-cultural reality and sharing with one another. Some–very few though–could read and write and these acted as communicators between the members of the community and their families back home. In the letters they wrote on their own or their colleagues' behalf in which 'narrated' the details of their new lives–the living and working conditions, the weather and climatic conditions, the flora and the fauna, the food and the drink, the dress and the dress code, the law and governance, the hosts and hostility, the other 'others' and the solidarity and a myriad other things. And while narrating all these, the 'writer' took care of the sentiments of the one on whose behalf he was communicating. May be the person did not want him to alarm his people back home by telling the truth about the working and service conditions

which were generally harsh and adverse. May be, he did not also want to talk about extreme climatic conditions that only added to their misery. May be they did not want to say anything about the discrimination and injustices meted out to them by their employers and the society at large. So he asked his 'amanuensis' to make necessary adjustments. Again, may be he wanted the 'writer' to embellish some of the description, particularly those involving his performance, etc. So, the communications sent home were essentially 'facts'—with something added here and something subtracted there. But then this is precisely what literature is all about—facts with a few plusses and minuses here and there. Thus, in this communication sent to their families by the diasporic persons laid the seeds of literature. Similarly, in the songs and poems they composed and sang, the stories they narrated of their various experiences, they exaggerated or underplayed 'facts'. This was literature in its nascent form. These were the beginnings of Indian diasporic writings in its infancy. This was so in East Africa, this was so in Mauritius, this was so Fiji, this was so in Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica and this was so in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. The precise conditions and circumstances could vary, the linguistic and cultural expressions could vary but the manner in which Indian diasporic writings from various locations came to be was more or less the same.

Later, when subsequent groups of Indian immigrants arrived on these or other locations, particularly those with professional skills, they built on this tradition. Since they were literate and many of them highly educated, they wrote rather than narrating orally. They not only composed but also published. While some did it along with the pursuit of their professions, other made this—writing—their profession. In course of time, fairly stable body of such writings began to cris cross the global literary stage from various locations and some of these writers began to be noticed, read, evaluated and awarded. Soon, some of them became household names: Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Bharati Mukherji, Farida Karodia, Anita Desai, K.S. Maniam and Jhumpa Lahiri to name some.

Indian diasporic writings in Canada began much in the same way as they began elsewhere. To understand its origin and evolution, therefore, we should first get some idea about the Indian immigrant community in Canada—when and how did it begin, who were its founding members, with what hopes and dreams did they arrive there and how did evolve to what they are today.

The Indian immigrants began to arrive on the Pacific coast of Canada towards the beginning of the twentieth century when Canada needed large scale human inputs for their lumber industry, railroad projects and jungle clearing operations as a part of their expansion to the west. Having disallowed—through various laws—the Chinese immigrants who were working on these projects earlier, the Canadian companies encouraged Indians—particularly strong, burly Sikhs from Panjab—to migrate and work in parts of British Columbia. Sensing this as an economic opportunity, Indian immigrants started arriving, from 1905 onwards, in batches—big and small—travelling first zfrom Panjab to Calcutta by train, then from Calcutta to Hong Kong by small ships and finally from Hong Kong to Vancouver by CPR ships. Most of them found employment in saw mills, road building, woodcutting and land clearing. By 2006, their number had swelled to over 2000. It is at this point that they began to attract the attention of the local Canadians in the same manner in which the Chinese immigrants had begun to attract attention earlier. The Indian immigrants were now perceived to be taking

away jobs from the Canadians and they were perceived to be 'polluting' their culture and society with their 'filthy' habits and practices. Thus the sense of alienation that any group of people feel on moving away from home became manifold more because of harsher climatic conditions and hostile behaviour of the local people. They were intrigued by the all this because they considered themselves to 'loyal royal subjects' and expected to be treated well in all British territories. Their sense of intrigue turned to hostility when the Canadian government, under pressure from the Canadian people, created laws and regulations that discouraged Indians from migrating to Canada for employment. For instance, a condition of personal possession of two hundred dollars was imposed on each arriving passenger and, more importantly, the passenger had to undertake a 'continuous passage' from the port of embarkation to the port of final destination without any break en route. This was virtually impossible since there were no direct ships plying between India and Canada.

When the Komagata Maru incident happened in May 1914, when a ship with that name, carrying over 300 passengers fulfilling all conditions including that of 'continuous passage' was not allowed to dock and the passengers were not allowed to disembark—they were not allowed even food and water— despite the fact that there were women and children on board—the loyalty of the Indian immigrants 'slipped away with the slipping away of the ship from Canadian waters'. The immigrants realized that their maltreatment would end only if India were free. So, they began to support the National Freedom Struggle through the Ghadr Movement that was already very active across the border in the United States of America. They collected funds, organized meetings and above all brought out a number of publications to support the movement. *The Free Hindustan* started coming out in 1908 from Vancouver, edited by Tarak Nath. In 1909, *The Hindustan Association* was formed. In 1910, *Swadesh Sewak* began to published in Gurumukhi.In 1911, the publication of *The Aryan* started. Movements were launched against the banning of Indian immigration and for allowing the families of the immigrants to be allowed to join them. This only aggravated the racial hostility against Indians who were dubbed as 'polygamous Hindus' and 'Calcutta Coolies'. The Komagata Maru incident ended in a tragedy with the death of a child passenger, the others returning, the killing of Inspector Hopkins by Mewa Singh who was subsequently captured and hanged. As the first World War loomed large over the horizon, the Canadian government came down heavily on the supporters of the Ghadr Movement who were now scattered to various parts of North America. However, the struggle by the Indian immigrants continued after the first World War and right through the second World War. Particular focus was on the restoration of the franchise to vote that had been taken away from them in 1907. It was restored only in 1948 when Prime Minister Nehru intervened after India had become free.

Reflection and Action 20.2

In what way is diasporic writing an identity marker for a community?

After the war, many regulations that were considered discriminatory were repealed in deference to the UN Charter. Also, Canada needed huge inputs of human resources for its economic development that was put so succinctly by John Diefenbaker, the then Prime Minister in 1957—'Populate or Perish'. So under various criteria of 'employbility', 'dependent relatives', etc., more Indian immigrants were allowed. Thus the number of Indian diasporic people in Canada rose from 6,774 in 1961 to 68,000 in 1971 and 1,18,000 in 1976. Also, during this time people of Indian origin came to Canada not only from India directly but also from East and South Africa, the Caribbean

Islands, Fiji in the Pacific and from South and East Asia. Thus in the 1991 census in Canada, as many as 500,000 persons traced their origins to India. A large number of these were independent professional whose profiles were very different from those founding fathers of the Indian diaspora in Canada, most of whom were illiterate and who came to work as unskilled labourers. It is around these latter group of Indian immigrants that the seeds of Indian Canadian writing were sown. Here below, we study briefly the development of Indian diasporic novel in Canada as a case study.

20.7 Indian Diasporic Novel in Canada—a Case Study

As stated above, Indian immigration to Canada took place over a long period of time beginning with the first decade of twentieth century and these groups of immigrants came from various strata of the Indian society. While early immigrants were uneducated, those who migrated between 1947 and 1970 and even later were not only well educated, they were also professional. Again, While many of them migrated directly from India directly to Canada, many others came from East and South Africa where they or their families had settled earlier migrating from different parts of India. Similarly, others came via the Caribbean Islands—Trinidad, Jamaica or Guyana where their parents or grandparents had been taken as indentured labour for developing the British colonies.

All these factors made the assimilation of Indian immigrant community into the Canadian mainstream a very complex affair. And if this were not enough, many of these victims had been victims of political vendetta elsewhere—the Kenyans, the Tanzanians, the Ugandans, the Trinidadians the Jamaicans and the Guyanese, for instance—and hence their motivations for immigration were quite different from others most of whom came in search of better economic prospects. Again, most of those named above as the victims of political upheavals had been displaced twice—once having migrated of their own volition and a second time having been forced out. As such, their mindsets and approach towards assimilation were quite different from those who had not been subjected to political prejudice as yet.

And then there was the question of their cultural baggage that have been described by M.G. Vassanji with that most appropriate metaphor—the gunny sack. Each group of migrants brought in his gunny sack a whole set of cultural artifacts that ranged from religious and community beliefs, customs and rituals, myths and legends, songs and dances, fables and folk tales, intra-family and inter-personal behaviour, food and dress codes. But above all these, the most unique feature of caste hierarchies.

All these complexities with their concomitant tensions—psychological, physical, financial—of adjustment and assimilation in an alien cultural environment that had racial discrimination writ large all over it, is captured very significantly by writers of the Indian diaspora in their poems and plays—and more importantly because of the discursive nature of the genre—in their stories and novels. Moyez Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Reshard Gul, Cyril Dabydeen, Farida Karodiya, Lakshmi Gill, Uma Parameswaran, and many more have all focused on—directly or indirectly—the new culture of adoption by the immigrants together with their fear of losing the cultural identity that they had brought with them. Thus they all were—in their stories and novels—writing through their race. Thus, they invoked in their writings, their ethnicity, the myths and legends, customs and rituals, the interpersonal behaviour and idiosyncrasies of the country of their origin together with that of the nation of their first immigration.

With this kind of focus of their writings these first generation writers of the Indian-Canadian diaspora were exposing themselves to the charge of exclusionist ghettoisation and letting their work be pushed to the margins. However, through this, they were also redressing the imbalance of Canadian writing being primarily European and white in its content, form and worldview. By bringing in their own cultural identity, they were in a way questioning the underlying philosophy behind the official policy of multiculturalism which was in itself an attempt to compartmentalize the society. Thus it may not be outrageous to observe that Indian immigrant writing in Canada was, irrespective of the content and form, a political activity in the same way as women, aborigines, gays and lesbians around the globe and in our own case by Dalits and tribals have been making political statements by their very acts of writing.

Indian immigrant writing in Canada did not actually make a beginning until 1950 and it was only in the 70s of the last century that it was identifiable although it was recognized as a part of a portmanteau category—South Asian literature in Canada. The label itself was politically motivated by lumping together writings by authors belonging to not only half a dozen nations of South Asia but also by extension of another dozen nations of Africa and the Caribbean islands wherefrom some of these writers of South Asian origin had migrated to Canada.

Between 1962 and 1982 as many as 102 writers from this category had published 196 books. But most of these were one book writers. 1982 was a watershed year for Canadian writers tracing their origin to India. In that year, M.G.Vassanji started a journal—*Toronto South Asian Review*, TSAR in short—to publish the writings by authors of South Asian origin who were facing publication discrimination by so-called mainstream journals and magazines. It is interesting to note here that most of the better known Indian immigrant writers of Canada, including Vassanji and Mistry were first published in TSAR. Since then, not only has the number of publications more than trebled, the quality of writings has improved, forcing better recognition.

Rohinton Mistry is perhaps most visible among the Indian immigrant novelists of Canada. With books like *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*. *Family Matters* and *Tales from Ferozsha Baag*. Mistry focusses his authorial gaze primarily on his own community, namely, the Parsis. Mistry has made Indian socio-political reality the basis of most of his books. His books also bring out the tragic dilemma of the Parsis, namely a very small community whose demographic profile is in a negative growth mode, acting extremely conservative when it comes to recognizing marriages made outside their religious confines. This Mistry shows to be in sharp contrast with their otherwise very modernist outlook.

M.G.Vassanji, is one of the most publicly acknowledged Canadian writer who belongs to the Indian immigrant community. With two Giller awards, he is amongs the most highly recognized writers of Canada. In fact, almost all his books—*The Gunny Sack*, *No New Land*, *Uhuru Street*, *The Book of Secrets*, *AMRiiKA* and *The In Between World of Vikram Lall*—have won one or another award.

Like Mistry—or any other diasporic writer—Vassanji also focuses on his own community—Ismailis who are portrayed as Shamsis in his books— that traces its origin to Gujarat on the Western Coast of India and a large section of which migrated to the East Coast of Africa in nineteenth century to form

a substantial Indian diasporic community in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania from where they moved on to Europe and North America including Canada in the latter half of the twentieth century. Vassanji himself came to Canada from Tanzania via the United States of America in the seventies.

Another significant novelist—his numerical contribution however is confined to just two books, one a novel and another a collection of short stories—is S.S.Dhami who in his novel, *Maluka*, has very vividly and significantly portrayed the formation of the Indian diasporic community in British Coumbia in the beginning of the twentieth century. Maluka is perhaps the only novel that focuses in such great details on the travails and triumphs, the failures and the successes of the early immigrants—those burly Sikhs from Panjab—who with their tenacity and perseverance overcame stark racial prejudice and appalling working and service conditions.

Cyril Dabydeen came to Canada from Guyana in the Caribbean Islands where his ancestors had been moved as indentured labour by the British in nineteenth century from parts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is this experience of the Indians in Guyana that Dabydeen makes the subject of his novels and short story collections, which include *The Wizard Swami*, *Dark Swirl*, *Jogging in Havana* and *Elephants Make Good Stepladders*.

Reflection and Action 20.3

Write an essay on the Indian diasporic novel in Canada.

Other Indian immigrant novelists include Ashis Gupta, Rewat Deonanadan, Neil Bisoondath, Arnold Harichand Itwaru, Saros Kawosjee and B. Rajan.

Immigrant women novelists of Indian origin were late arrivers but have since contributed significantly to the Indian immigrant novel in Canada. Prominent among those are Anita Rao Badami, Lakshmi Gill, Uma Parmeswaran, Hiro Boga Ramabai Espinet and Nalini Warrior. Besides them, those who have focused on short story are Himani Banerji, Arun Prabha Mukherjee and Surjeet Kalsey.

Despite the myriad variations of religion, caste, language, region, educational and economic profiles as also the routes taken by members of Canadian Indian diasporic community, the writings about them by members of their own immigrant community portray them in the context of problematics of nation, home, homelessness, home beyond home, self, identity, integration and assimilation. In this too, the members of various groups show the same kind of variation as is visible in their socio-cultural profiles. It is this difference in their mindsets and responses that demarcate—at times—one novelist's worldview from another. Again, while nostalgia, memory, amnesia and lived experience are the sites on which some of these contestations are carried out, various writers show varied approaches here too.

20.8 Conclusion

Diasporic experience is basically about 'home' and 'world' where home stands for the culture of one's origin and world refers to the culture of adoption. Sometimes the concept of home is equated with that of the nation one is born into and world as the nations one immigrates into or exiles one into. Because of this sense of 'exile', an alternative term used for diasporic experience is 'homelessness', a term that was popularized by Said but that is also a favourite of a writer like V.S.Naipaul. Homi Bhabha would explain this experience in terms of what he calls 'gathering'—

"gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees, gathering on the edge of 'foreign' cultures, gathering at frontiers; gathering in the ghettoes or cafes of city centres" as would he put it. Rushdie, on the other hand, would turn home into 'imaginary homelands' and liken them to broken mirrors some pieces of which are lost irretrievably. However, the picture that emerges out of the broken mirror—that is to say, the diasporic experience—may be different from the one reflected by a mirror that is whole but it is no less significant. It contiains images of not only the donor culture but of the host society as well. M.G. Vassanji would find a parallel for the diasporic experience in a jigsaw puzzle some of whose pieces are again lost like the pieces of Rushdie's mirror. For Vassanji, the creativity of a diasporic writer lies in supplying those missing pieces with the help of his imagination and the resultant history would be what he calls 'imagined history'. Abdul Jan Mohammed describes immigrant's experience to be that of a 'border intellectual'—either 'specular' or 'syncretic'—the first refers to an experience wherein an immigrant is not able to adjust both to 'home' and 'world' simultaneously whereas syncretic refers to an experience wherein an expatriate is able to reach out to both cultures—the donor and the recipient—simultaneously.

20.9 Further Reading

Bhabha, Homi, 1994. *The Location of Culture*, Routledge:London

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