

Diaspora: Migrancy, Home and Generational Differences:

Dr Mohd Shafi Dar
Lecturer on Academic Arrangement
GDC Boys Anantnag(J&K)

Where should I take my heart?

It is difficult between two places:

Here [on this earth] there is a collection of fairies,

There [in heaven] there is an organised, sophisticated group of hoories [angels].

Persian couplet

If I am in transit my heart remains in my homeland.

Consider me there also, where my heart is.

Persian couplet

Since time immemorial, human beings have been moving from one place to another as nomads, hunters, traders, cultural carriers, soldiers, exiles and conquerors.

Indians too have migrated since the dawn of history. They have been going to different parts of the world as traders, teachers, preachers, adventurers and soldiers of fortune. Indian diaspora is so widespread that it stretches across all the continents of the world. Generally speaking, since the end of the World War II the former colonizing nations have experienced the arrival of many people from once-colonised countries who have established new homes at the old colonial centers. The reasons for migration have been variable. In Britain, colonial peoples were specifically recruited by the Government to cope with labour shortages, such as the drive after the World War II to employ Caribbeans in public services like health and transport. Others arrived to study, or to escape political and economic difficulties in their native lands. Some followed family members who migrated before them. All of them want to succeed. Every member of diaspora is an achiever in his own way and as he succeeds, his home country succeeds with him. What gives a common identity to all members of Diaspora is their common origin, the consciousness of their cultural heritage and their deep attachment to home country.

However, before we go ahead in studying the concepts like ‘home’ and ‘generational differences’ in diasporas, let us try to understand, what is a ‘diaspora’?

Robin Cohen, in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, tentatively describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who ‘acknowledge folklore — always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions’ (p. ix). The emphasis on collectivity and community here is very important, as is the sense of living in one country, but looking across time and space to another. Cohen continues that ‘a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a co-ethnicity with others of a similar background’ (p. ix). Note Cohen’s careful choice of phrase: ‘past migration history’. It is tempting to think of diaspora peoples as migrant peoples, and indeed many living in diasporas certainly are. However, *generational differences* are important. Children born to migrant peoples in Britain may automatically qualify for a British passport, but their sense of identity borne from living in diaspora community will be influenced by the ‘past migration history’ of their parents or grandparents.

The experiences of migrancy and living in a diaspora have animated much recent postcolonial literature, criticism and theory. Indeed, the slippages between the terms ‘diaspora’, ‘migrant’ and ‘postcolonial’ have been frequent and are not free from problems. The literature produced by ‘diaspora writers’, such as Amitav Ghosh, Hanief Kureishi, Bharati Mukherji, Caryl Phillips and Ben Zepphaniah, has proved immensely popular in Western literary criticism. Similarly, in the work of academics such as Homi K. Bhabha, Avtar Brah, Carole Boyce Davies and Stuart Hall, the new possibilities and problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora life have been readily explored. These possibilities include creating new ways of thinking about individual and communal identities, critiquing established schools of critical thought and rethinking the relationships between literature, history and politics.

But diaspora communities are not free from problems. Too often diaspora peoples have been ghettoised and excluded from feeling they belong to the ‘new country’, and suffered their cultural practices to be mocked at and discriminated against. If we look at a memorable moment in V.S. Naipaul’s ‘Prologue to an Autobiography’ (in *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives*), we may realize that diaspora people are always on the horns of dilemma, not knowing where to go and where to stay.

Now living in Britain, Naipaul grew up in the Caribbean Island of Trinidad and came from a family descended from Indian migrants to the Caribbean. He records an incident which occurred in the summer of 1932, when Indian indentured labourers were promised the passage back to India from Trinidad by the government once their contracts had expired. This had also happened in the previous year, when the *S.S. Ganges* collected a number of Indian labourers in Trinidad and sailed for India. The ship returned to Trinidad in 1932, collected more immigrant Indians and set off for Calcutta once again:

Seven weeks later the *Ganges* reached Calcutta. And there, to the terror of the passengers, the *Ganges* was stormed by hundreds of derelicts, previously repatriated, who wanted now to be taken back to the other place. India for these people had been a dream of home, a dream of continuity after the illusion of Trinidad. All the India they found was area around the Calcutta docks.

Our own past was, like our idea of India, a dream.¹

The repetition of the word ‘dream’ as well as the references to ‘illusion’ here is important. Naipaul points out that migration alters how migrants think about their *home* and *host* countries. Trinidad has been an illusion for the Indian migrants because it has not lived up to its promises. When viewed from India, it seemed a place of opportunity and promise, but the experience of miserable conditions meant it didn’t live up to the myth. But note too how, due to migrancy, India also becomes illusory like a dream. When viewed from the poverty of Trinidad, India can seem to the migrants a refuge from their miserable conditions. Yet, their voyage home reveals this view of India similarly to be more imaginary than true, as the return does not alleviate their hardships. Actually, a migrant while deciding to leave his homeland trades heaven for hell and when he decides to return he becomes a square peg in round hole.

The indentured labourers have in Trinidad constructed a different, imaginary India which is discontinuous with the real location. It consists primarily in the mind, and no act of actual, physical return can facilitate it. The idea of the home country becomes split from the experience of returning home. Naipaul’s example helps us understand Avtar Brah’s statement that “‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no-return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’”.² For Naipaul, India is also an illusory place from which he is fractured in both time and space, but which retains an emotional influence over his life. His example invites us to think about migrancy as constructing certain ways of seeing that impact upon both migrants and their descendents in a number of ways. To be blunt, migrancy has effects which last long after the act of migrating has finished.

Let us probe deeper the ways in which 'home' is imagined in diaspora communities. The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong to. As an idea it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort (although experiences of home may well fail to deliver these promises). To be at 'home' is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very like ourselves. A famous Kashmiri poet Sheikh Noor-U-Din Wali (Allah be pleased with him) expressed man's deep attachment to 'home': "GHAR WANDHAI GHAR SAASA BHAR NEERHAI NA ZANH, CHATITH YEMHAI KRU SAASA CHE HOO KHAASA NA KANH". Indeed man's home is his castle. But what happens to the idea of 'home' for migrants who live far from the lands of their birth? How might their travels impact upon the ways 'home' is considered?

Salman Rushdie, born in 1947 in Bombay, wrote an essay 'Imaginary Homelands' (in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta, 1991,). The essay may help to answer the above questions. Rushdie spent his childhood in Bombay. He moved to England as a student to attend Rugby School and later Cambridge University, and he eventually settled in London. In his essay Rushdie reflects upon the process of writing his novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) which is set in India and Pakistan, while living in north London. He records that on the wall of his London study room was a black-and-white photograph of his childhood home in Bombay. Rushdie reveals that one of the reasons which motivated his writing of the novel was an attempt to restore the world of his childhood home, distant in both time and space, to the present. But it proved an impossible task to 'return home' via the process of writing. In a sense, we all leave home at one time or another in our lives and feel a sense of loss for doing so; but, as Rushdie argues 'the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, or his present being in a different place from his past, of his being "elsewhere"'.³ This disjunction between past and present, between here and there, makes home seem far-removed in time and space, available for return only through an act of the imagination. Speaking of Indian migrants, Rushdie writes that 'our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we cannot be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind' (P.10). In this formulation, home becomes primarily a mental construct built from the incomplete odds and ends of memory that survive from the past. It exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present. People soon after their decision to migrate begin to search for new homes in host countries as well as in their native land. If imagining home brings fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement for the migrant, can new homes be secured in the host country? In migrating from one country to another, migrants inevitably become involved in the process of setting up home in a new land. This can also add to the ways in which the concept of home is disturbed. Migrants tend to arrive in new places with baggage; both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also in the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values. This can have consequences for the ways in which others may or may not make migrants feel 'at home' on arrival in a new place. Although migrants may pass through the political borders of nations, crossing their frontiers and gaining entrance to new places, some norms and limits can be used to exclude migrants from being accommodated inside the imaginative borders of the nation. The dominant discourse of races, ethnicity and gender may function to exclude them from being recognized as part of the nation's people. Migrants may well live in new places, but they can be deemed not to belong there and disqualified from thinking of the new land as their home. Instead, their home is seen to exist elsewhere, back across the border, perhaps not even there but somewhere else.

Rushdie's remarks about the Indian writer in Britain inevitably speak of the migrant as an adult who has experienced enough of India as a child to have memories of home to explore in retrospect. But what of those who migrated to Western countries as small children, or those born in the West to migrant parents, who like the young Naipaul in Trinidad, have little or no memories of a 'home' overseas? How do they deal with the issues of 'home' and 'belonging'?

Naipaul's use of the incident of the *S.S. Ganges* demonstrated an affinity between two generations: Indian migrants to Trinidad and 'Indian born' Trinidadians. Yet, the descendants of migrants are not always in the same position. Consider for a moment the photograph of Rushdie's childhood home hanging on the wall. At the beginning of 'Imaginary Homelands' Rushdie recalls revisiting the house in Bombay after many years in Britain and being amazed at how different it looked, both to the photograph on the wall and his memory. The visit affords Rushdie the opportunity to indulge a childhood memory, even as it underlines the fact this return doesn't eliminate feelings of displacement. Standing outside, he prefers not to announce himself to the new owners as he 'didn't want to see how they had ruined the interior'.⁴ We can borrow this remark to suggest that migrants in positions similar to Rushdie with their childhood memories of a distant place have a certain degree of 'interior knowledge' no matter how fragmentary and fissured it may be. But to the children of migrants, the interior knowledge of a distant place is unavailable. Thus, their reflections about these places in terms of 'home' are often differently constructed.

These *generational differences* are not absolute. Migrants can share both similarities and differences with their descendants, and the relationship between generations can be complex and overlapping, rather than forming a neat contrast. To get a sense of this, let us turn to an essay called 'The Rainbow Sign' by Hanief Kureishi, a writer born in Britain with a Pakistani father and English mother. This essay records Kureishi's experiences as a boy growing up in London, a visit to Pakistan as young man, and some comparisons between life in both locations. As a child, Kureishi admits to having 'no idea of what the sub-continent was like or how my numerous uncles, aunts and cousins lived there'.⁵ His relationship with Pakistan is obviously different to his father's. Yet at school he was mistakenly identified as an Indian by his teachers, one of whom placed pictures of Indian peasants in mud huts before his class in order to show the others Kureishi's 'home'. 'I wonder: did my uncles ride on camels? Surely not in their suits? Did my cousins, so like me in other ways, squat down in the sand like little Mowglis, half-naked and eating with their fingers'.⁶ The references here to the figure of Mowgli from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* suggests how Kureishi's identity was similarly fictionalised by others as an outsider who belonged to a land overseas, despite the fact that Kureishi was born, like his mother, in Britain. He was readily permitted to belong to Britain like his classmates. This is an example of the ways in which the descendants of migrants can suffer similar experiences to their parents or grandparents.

Hanif Kureishi visited Karachi and meet his relations there as a young adult. Kuerishi found it difficult to think of this place in terms of 'home'. He admits to a 'little identity crisis'. His uncles' anti-British remarks make him feel uncomfortable and strangely patriotic towards Britain, feelings he had not previously experienced. Although he does not try to indulge in feeling 'Pakistani', as this would be a dubious act of sentimentality, his identity crisis is outlined when an acquaintance declares to him: 'we are Pakistani, but you, you will always be a Paki — emphasizing the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis, and therefore the fact that I couldn't rightfully claim to either place'.⁷

This observation serves as a pivotal moment when thinking about migrancy. On the one hand, and without wishing to ignore generational differences, this comment indicates the perilous intermediate position that both migrants and their children are deemed to occupy: living 'in-between' different nations, feeling neither here nor there, unable to indulge in sentiments of belonging to either place. Kureishi feels devoid of the 'rightful' claims to belong. But on the other hand, and more productively perhaps, this moment shows that the conventional ways we use to think about ideas such as 'belonging' no longer work. Conventional ideas of 'home' and 'belonging' depend upon clearly-

defined, static notions of being ‘in place’, firmly rooted in a community or a particular geographical location. We might think of the discourses of nationalism, ethnicity or ‘race’ as examples of models of belonging which attempt to root the individual within a clearly-defined and homogenised group. But these models or ‘narratives’ of belonging no longer seem suited to a world where the experience and legacy of migration are altering the ways in which individuals think of their relation to place, and how they might ‘lay claim’ to lands that are difficult to think in terms of ‘home’ or ‘belonging’. Instead, new models of identity are emerging which depend upon reconsidering the perilous ‘in-between’ position of someone like Kureishi as a site of excitement, new possibilities, and even privilege.

Let us approach these new models of identity by returning for a moment to Salman Rushdie’s essay ‘Imaginary Homelands’. In registering his displacement from the Bombay home of his childhood, Rushdie does not dwell nostalgically upon this loss, although he registers loss in his remarks. Instead, he makes a virtue from necessity and argues that the displaced position of the migrant is an entirely valuable one. In learning to reflect reality in ‘broken mirrors’, he or she comes to treasure a partial, plural view of the world because it reveals all representations of the world are incomplete. ‘Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death’.⁸ The migrant seems in a better position than others to realise that all systems of knowledge, all views of the world, are never totalising, whole or pure, but incomplete, muddled and hybrid. To live as a migrant may well evoke the pain of loss and of not being firmly rooted in a secure place; but it is also to live in a world of immense possibility with the realisation that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed out of the myriad combinations of the ‘scraps’ which Rushdie describes — knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity.

In these terms, the space of the ‘in-between’ becomes re-thought as a place of immense creativity and possibility, as Kureishi’s essay ‘The Rainbow Sign’ also gives on to testify. Kureishi recalls seeing a photograph in his uncle’s house in Pakistan of his father as a young boy. This fragment from the past, like the photograph in Rushdie’s study room, becomes a valuable ‘scrap’ which he can use when stitching together new ways of thinking about his identity and his place in the world. He cannot ever think of his uncle’s house as his ‘home’, but is a vital treasure-house of manifold possibilities. Kureishi describes it as a ‘a house full of stories, of Bombay, Delhi, China; of feuds, wrestling matches, adulteries, windows broken with hands, card games, impossible loves, and magic spells. Stories to help me see my place in the world and give me a sense of the past which could go into making a life in the present and the future’.⁹ Although Kureishi does not occupy the same position as the Bombay-born Rushdie, and lacks what we called ‘interior knowledge’, he is also displaced. So it is safe to argue that the constructions of new narratives or routes can be a possibility, if not a necessity, for migrants and those born to them.

References:

1. Naipaul, V.S. *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives*, Penguin, 1984. P.53.
2. Brah, Avtar, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Routledge, 1997, p.192
3. Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands* (in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta, 1991), p.12.
4. Ibid. p.12.
5. Kureishi, Hanif, *The Rainbow Sign* (in *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign*, Faber, 1986), p.9.
6. Ibid. p.9.
7. Ibid. p. 17.
8. Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands* (in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta, 1991), p.12
9. Kureishi, Hanif, *The Rainbow Sign* (in *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign*, Faber, 1986), p.35.