NAIPAUL AND THE INDIAN DIASPORIC WRITING

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Abstract: Naipaul and Indian diasporic writing defines diaspora, stressing that the contemporary use of the concept of diaspora emphasizes that its modern forms are closely linked with the ever-increasing development of global capitalism that moves capital and labour from one space to another, wherever cheap workers are needed. The narratives of diaspora do not only consist of writings telling of free-floating subjects entering new worlds and acquiring new identities in an unproblematic manner. There are instances of representations of history, or stories addressing the formation of the identity of the second-generation immigrant. The question triggered by this statement is whether a diasporic writer as complex as Naipaul did become the master of his destiny, avoiding the constraints and limitations of his past. I consider it necessary to go deeper into the theory of diasporic writing.

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*In my paper, I will answer the following **research question:***

Before positioning Naipaul on the chess-board of postcolonial writing, it is necessary to consider his position as a British writer. How does he fit into the picture of a globalized culture?

In the background of globalization constructed on technological novelties such as the television and internet – considered "the most effective medium in accomplishing time-space compression" – Britain is also confronted with an important change of population. In the context of the social – political changes related to "the disintegration of the British Empire, the expansion of the Commonwealth, and the immigration of people of numerous nationalities, languages and cultures" (Christopher 5), the entire fabric of English society has changed radically, becoming "a multi-ethnic country with a plurality of identities and heritages" (Christopher 5). Moreover, theorists consider that due to the women's movement, the attitude of youth, immigrants' traditions and the post-war baby boom, British society transformed into a multicultural one (Christopher 5). The need for manual labour in areas which supported the new technologies led to a big wave of immigration from many distinct parts of the globe to a small but technologically developed location. As "Britain has continued to play a fairly substantial part in the world's intellectual and scientific development," it also became the new home of an important number of immigrants.

*In terms of **structure,** my paper is divided into **two distinct but closely connected main parts**: **Part One** - covers the answer to the question stated above while **Part Two** presents the main theme of the paper. The paper ends with the following **conclusion**: diasporic writers share some common traits: they – and their protagonists – are engaged in a continuous search for their origins. It is a quest for identity, marked by a nostalgia for a pre-colonial past, a longing for the lost values of their ancestors, an acute sense of their otherness. The example offered by Naipaul himself is edifying: the descendant of uprooted, indentured Indian labourers, to be later relocated in England, the writer returns to India in search of his roots.*

In the attempt to understand the place of the diasporic writing – Indian, in this case – in the context of world literature, I came across an article published in a Somali online journal – *Hiiraan Online* – recounting an evening with the renowned Somali writer Nuruddin Farah in Ottawa, Canada. What struck me most was Farah's statement:

  "One of the pleasures of living away from home is that you become the master of your destiny, you avoid the constraints and limitations of your past and if need be create an alternative life for yourself. That way everybody becomes the other and you are the centre of the universe. You are a community when you are away from home – the communal mind remembering. Memory is active when you are in exile." (Farah, 2009)

Hugh Tinker, writing on the condition on indentured Indians in Trinidad, thinks that there should be favourable feeling, respect even, towards the "sons of the soil," that – compared to the Malays, Burmese, Fijians, and even the Creole blacks, "there was an acknowledgement of a partially shared language and folk culture, in dance and music. *But the Indians were almost always stigmatized as the dregs of their country: lowborn, even criminal.*" (Tinker, 221, emphasis added). This is, then, the Indian community Naipaul presumably belongs to. And this is where we will be trying to place him, then extracting him from that community and following his journey to find his Indian roots and finally retire in his adoptive country.

In his *Introduction* to a volume of essays on diasporic fiction Jopi Nyman states that "contemporary literary representations of global movements emphasize *the meeting of cultures*, problematize *the idea of home*, and probe the issues of *belonging and national identity*" (Nyman, 14, emphasis added). Nyman's statement tackles a number of basic issues, which will form the essence of this chapter. To begin with, we are witnessing a redefinition of the term *diaspora* (Gr. διασπορα – "scattering") – which originally referred to the historical scattering of the Jewish and Armenian peoples. Nyman further argues that "changed paradigms in the study of migrant and immigrant identities have encouraged the use of the term because it allows for a reflection of communities resisting traditional patterns of assimilation and immigration." (Nyman, 14).

On the other hand, Khachig Tölölian offers a re-thinking of the concept by emphasizing that the various intra- and transnational communities dispersed across supposedly unmovable national boundaries reflect the increase in international migration rooted in various histories of colonialism and the needs of globalizing communities. It is the case of the community of the indentured Indians in Trinidad whose existence fits into Tölölian's comments:

  "We use 'diaspora' provisionally to indicate our belief that the term that once described Jewish, Greek and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community" (Tölölian, 1191: 3-7)

Obviously enough, Naipaul belongs to one of Robin Cohen's "cultural diasporas": Naipaul's Trinidadians of Indian descent share "more than a mere dream of a homeland fostered from one generation to another. What the emergence of these recent forms of

diaspora reveals is that they are generated by processes of modernity and changing social relations." (Nyman, 14)

According to Cohen, such communities are examples of changes in migration patterns and suggest new, mobile and flexible identifications that he identifies with postmodernity and its theorists. For Cohen, the contemporary migration problematizes issues such as home and nation:

"For postmodernists the collective identity of homeland and nation is a vibrant and constantly changing set of cultural interactions that fundamentally question the very ideas of "home" and "host". It is demonstrable, for example, that unidirectional – "migration to" or "return from" – forms of movement are being replaced by asynchronous, transversal flows that involve visiting, studying, seasonal work, tourism and sojourning, rather than whole-family migration, permanent settlement and the adoption of exclusive citizenships" (Cohen, 127-28).

The two views above reveal that the contemporary era is characterized by border-crossing movements all over the world, but global mobility is not so new. European empires – and the British Empire suits better to our demonstration – were based on international capitalism involving the movement of raw materials and the relocation of surplus labourers in other parts of the globe. The transportation of indentured workers from India to South Africa, Trinidad or Mauritius is just an example. At this incipient stage of our research, a few additional remarks are necessary. Trinidad & Tobago is a poly-ethnic island-state with large population segments of Indian and African origin. The indentureship system which explains the Indian presence in Trinidad functioned for about seventy years (1840-1910), and many studies have been devoted to the Trinidadian population of Indian origin.

In his essay, "Indians in New Worlds: Mauritius and Trinidad", Thomas Hylland Eriksen writes about the extent to which the descendants of the indentured workers managed to successfully "preserve their culture" and "reproduce their social institutions."[1] He mentions the limitations of all these theories, whose aim is to understand and explicate the intimate processes – both social and cultural – that take place in these societies. An examination of the Indians in the diaspora is of primary importance: a more suitable position would be to view the Indians' cultural adaptation as

"…the ongoing interaction between Indian and non-Indian social and cultural systems, where values, norms and forms of the organization are continuously negotiated and where the cultural differences within a statistically defined 'population segment' or an 'ethnic group' may be of greater significance than the systematic differences obtaining between the categories." (Eriksen, 1992)

There is, also, a close relationship between Trinidad – as 'host society' – and the newcomers who exert their own influence on their adoptive country. Nevertheless, such an influence may be less powerful and efficient. The result is a society of a special kind. If not exactly the American melting pot, the post-indentureship Trinidad

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[1] References are made to the following: Klass, Morton , East Indians in Trinidad: A Study of Cultural Persistence. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Braithwaite, Lloyd Social Stratification in Trinidad. St Augustine: ISER, (1975 [1953]); Smith, M.G. (1965) The Plural Society of the British West Indies. Berkeley: California University Press, 1965). See Hylland Eriksen, Thomas "Indians in New Worlds: Mauritius and Trinidad", Social and Economic Studies, no. 1, 1992.

"… is a socio-cultural environment where members of different ethnic categories share some fields of interaction, where some fields of interaction are kept closed along ethnic lines, and where a third, variable area of interaction belongs to an ambiguous grey zone as far as the reproduction of inter-ethnic shared meaning is concerned." (Ericksen, 1992)

I have started this chapter by defining diaspora. On the other hand, I should stress that the contemporary use of the concept of diaspora emphasizes that its modern forms are closely linked with the ever-increasing development of global capitalism that moves capital and labour from one space to another, wherever cheap workers are needed. The narratives of diaspora do not only consist of writings telling of free-floating subjects entering new worlds and acquiring new identities in an unproblematic manner. There are instances of representations of history, or stories addressing the formation of the hybrid identity of the second-generation immigrant.

The question triggered by this statement is whether a diasporic writer as complex as Naipaul did become the master of his destiny, avoiding the constraints and limitations of his past. I consider it necessary to go deeper into the theory of diasporic writing. Thus, Kalra, Kalhon and Hutynuk in their book *Diaspora and Hybridity* review the different meanings of *diaspora*. According to the authors, we are at present witnessing a fall of the term "immigrant" which together with "ethnicity" used to be closely linked to the concept of "diaspora". "Immigrant" has acquired a negative connotation designating a person who is from somewhere else, an intruder to a certain extent, which is in direct contradiction to the status of the children of migrants who have never migrated and were born in the host-country (Kalra et al. 14). Thus, the critics suggest that envisaging diaspora as a process, not as a homogeneous group of people would be beneficial: "When thinking about diaspora as a process, we are not considering specific groups of people, but more general ideas that may be applied across a range of groups. Thus, diaspora can denote ideas about belonging, about place and about the way in which people live their lives." (Kalra et al. 29)

Such an approach would shift the attention from the idea of diaspora as a specific group of people, to a set of more general concepts that could be "applied across a range of groups" (Kalra et al. 29). In this manner, diaspora could stand for ideas of belonging and of place without disregarding the "intimate or material connections to other places" (Kalra et al. 29). The diasporic condition seen as a process rather than as a feature of a finite group of individuals is in accordance with Stuart Hall's definition of diasporic identities. The critic describes diasporic identities as "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew" (Hall 402). This permanent 'becoming' at the cultural identitary level is both a source of enrichment and a cause for tension. As Abdul R. JanMohamed puts it, "genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture" (JanMohamed 18). The themes of in-between-ness and hybridity were at first the topic of interest for postcolonial studies, but since diaspora is linked to ideas of acculturation, deterritorialization and settlement in a different social, political and cultural space, these notions have been re-interpreted to fit the diasporic condition.

So what does it mean to experience the diasporic process (as defined by Karla, Kalhon and Hutynuk)? According to the extensive body of criticism available, the issue of identity is central to interpreting life in diaspora. Here too we must differentiate between cultural

identity and personal identity. Though they are linked and influence each other to a great extent, we must deal with them separately.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall draws attention upon the idea of cultural identity as being in a continuous process of transformation. The critic forwards a theory according to which identity is not a finite "product", but one that suffers alterations which become apparent especially in the case of diasporic subjects. Their experience, their moving from one space to another, from one culture to another, is bound to influence their identity. Hall maintains that diasporic people develop hybrid cultural identities: "The diaspora experience […] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*." (Hall 402)

As an analytical category, the hybrid has been both acclaimed and contested. Its usefulness in the study of cultures in contact has won its glory, particularly in postcolonial and diaspora studies, but because of the fact that it has been used in so many contexts (from biology to anthropology and cultural studies) it has been deemed unusually productive. The authors of *Diaspora and Hybridity* point to the term's "loose boundaries" that have influenced the interpretation of the notion of hybrid "to mean all sorts of things to do with mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange" (Kalra et al. 70-71).

In his extensive study, *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Robert J.C. Young recalls the different phases of understanding the concept of hybrid, starting with the early accounts of the 19th century about degenerated mongrel children until the 20th century postcolonial acceptance of the word to stand for "resistance against a dominant cultural power" (Young 21). In this last sense, hybridity is viewed as a characteristic of postcolonial writing, a label for a cultural fusion which attempts to destabilize the power position of the hegemonic colonial cultures over the subaltern ones. For a better understanding of the complexities of the hybridization processes, Young proposes a twofold description of hybridity, as both "organic" and "intentional": "[...] hybridity […] works simultaneously in two ways: 'organically', hegemonizing, creating new spaces, structures, scenes, and 'intentionally', diasporizing, intervening as a form of subversion, translation, transformation" (Young 23). But, to put it more simply, hybridization implies "making difference into sameness" (Young 24).

One of the most prominent figures in postcolonial studies to have re-shaped the term hybridity is Homi K. Bhabha. In his *The Location of Culture* he talks of the fallacious claims about the "purity of cultures". Bhabha manages to condense the principles of cultural hybridization in coining the concept of the Third Space of enunciation. He envisages any cultural system as "constructed […] in the ambivalent space of enunciation", a hybrid, a sum of signs that "can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (Bhabha 37). From Bhabha's theory of culture as hybrid, new approaches concerning the diasporic self have emerged which stressed the complicated interactions between the migrant self (and its culture of origin) and the settling environment (and its respective cultural framework).

An interpretation of hybridity (in the context of postcolonial studies, but which can be useful when talking about diaspora) is that provided by Anjali Prabhu. In the Introduction to her extensive study on the Indian communities from Mauritius entitled *Hybridity, Limits, Transformations, Prospects*, she underlines the fact that postcolonial theories of hybridity

tend to move away from the racial aspect embodied by the concept of hybridity and rather favour discussions about hybrid cultures and hybrid identities. The critic mentions that such theoretical directions are meant to empower subaltern agency. Thus, "[...] postcolonial theories of hybridity do away with the old dichotomy of colonizer/colonized, which is substituted by ideas of multiplicity, plurality, and difference in a less specifiable way" (Prabhu xiii). Her understanding of hybridity is in accordance with Stuart Hall's above mentioned view on diasporic cultural identities, seen in motion, in a perpetual transformation, multiple and constantly becoming.

This cultural in-between-ness specific to the diasporic location is according to R. Radhakrishnan "the space of the hyphen" (Radhakrishnan xxvi). In his view "ethnic hyphenation brings together the two driving psychological motivations for identity: being-for-the-self and identity for the other" (Radhakrishnan xxvi). The very idea of an individual being caught in a negotiation process of his/her identitary features may appear pathological, since identity as a social concept is based on the notion of individuality, of personality and it used to be viewed as compact and "non-hyphenated by nature" (Radhakrishnan 158). Nonetheless, the critic explains that, in order to be understood, the identity of diasporic people should be considered taking into consideration a different social equation. Thus, one should

"[…] multiply time by spaces to suggest (1) that the concept of identity is in fact a normative measure that totalizes heterogeneous "selves" and "subjectivities" and (2) that the normative citizenship of any identity within its own legitimate time or history is an ideological effect that secures the regime of a full and undivided identity." (Radhakrishnan, 158)

Radhakrishnan also underlines another important aspect of how diasporic identities are formed and influenced: becoming a hyphenated citizen entails "a passage into minoritization" (Radhakrishnan, 174). This aspect is pivotal for understanding the extent to which immigrants have to adjust their perception of themselves in the host-country. The tension arising from becoming a minority adds to a desire of the diasporic self to find his/her place "within the hyphen" (Radhakrishnan, 175-176). But as the same critic wonders, when a subject (for instance an Asian-American) is speaking from this hyphenated position, who is speaking exactly?

"If we dwell in the hyphen, who represents the hyphen: the Asian or the American, or can the hyphen speak for itself without creating an imbalance between the Asian and American components? [...] True, both components have status, but which has the power and the potential to read and interpret the other on its terms? If the Asian is to be Americanized, will the American submit to Asianization?" (Radhakrishnan, 211)

This series of questions brings to our attention another aspect specific to this line of criticism: the diasporic subject as a multivoiced individual. Building on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel, critic Sunil Bhatia proposes a dialogical model which could explain the fluctuations among the multiple *I* positions that a diasporic self is experiencing:

"[...] living in the diaspora is like being in a zone where all the contested parts of the self are constantly negotiating and renegotiating with each other. For the diasporic self, there is an ongoing, simultaneous dialogical movement between the 'I' positions of feeling at once assimilated, separated and marginalized." (Bhatia, 69)

The critic brings to the fore the complexities of the acculturation process experienced by diasporic people from a psychological point of view. Bhatia stresses the fact that immigrants should not be thought of as "moving in a linear trajectory from culture A to culture B", but rather as adopting a series of acculturation strategies in response to the anxiety induced by the new cultural context (Bhatia, 56-58). These acculturation strategies are, according to Berry and Sam, *assimilation*, *integration*, *separation* and *marginalization* (qtd. in Bhatia, 58). These processes are determined, on the one hand by the amount of interaction between the individual and the host culture, and on the other by "the degree to which the individual maintains or relinquishes his or her native culture's attributes" (Berry and Sam, qtd. in Neuliep, 420).

Of these four possibilities, Bhatia supports *integration* as the most advantageous strategy of acculturation. He supports Berry and Sam's theory regarding the interactions between the country of origin and the country of settlement: "Integration implies both the preservation of, and contact with the host culture, or the 'country of origin', and an active involvement with the host culture, or the 'country of settlement'" (Bhatia, 58). However, the critic raises a series of questions as to how the diasporic selves manage to successfully "negotiate their sense of simultaneously being in multiple cultures and their sense of being 'hyphenated' and 'in-between' cultures" (Bhatia, 62).

A possible explanation is offered by Hubert J. Hermans in his article "Mixing and Moving Cultures Require a Dialogical Self: Commentary on Bhatia and Ram" (qtd. in Bhatia 62). He maintains that "travel, immigration, diaspora and globalization require a more dynamic conception of the self" (Hermans, 25). According to Hermans, the attributes of this type of self are related to history, multivoicedness and dialogism.

This polyphonic feature of the diasporic psychology and the constant negotiation between multiple *I* positions, places the diasporic self in a both privileged and accursed position. This particular characteristic of the diasporic subjects is, at times a source of an enlargement of their cultural perspective, and at others, a reason for anxiety causing conflicts not only in the public space but in the private one as well.

In her book, *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*, critic Smaro Kamboureli points to the fact that the hyphen remains the sign of diaspora whether "it is immediately perceptible or not, fully embraced or brimming with ambivalence" (Kamboureli, 101). She speaks about the process of constructing an ethnic identity in the host country and how an immigrant's classification as Other by the mainstream society affects his/her perception of self. Kamboureli also speaks about a feeling of lack that an immigrant experiences: "The consciousness of no longer belonging to a cultural continuum induces a feeling of lack. Lack is imagined in terms both of a distant originary place and of the subject's lack of sameness vis-à-vis the dominant society." (Kamboureli, 138) This feeling of lack becomes an additional source of frustration for an immigrant who can go through great turmoil in his/her efforts to belong to the adoptive country's cultural and social frameworks.

There is a defining feature of the Indian diaspora which differentiates it from other diasporas. For example, the historical exile of the Jews – known as the Jewish diaspora – was essentially an exodus of the inhabitants of Israel which started in the 6th century BC and continued well into the 20th century AD. The Indian diaspora is not the result of an exodus, but an economically-generated displacement of indentured labourers employed by the British

colonial authorities to cover the increasing manpower needs of the plantations in the colonies. According to Fijian-Australian poet and scholar Sudesh Mishra – himself an example of modern-day diaspora – two different categories of Indian diasporic populations may be identified:

   "This distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasants to non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam, and Guyana, roughly between the years 1830 and 1917; and the other the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centres such as Australia, the United States, Canada, and Britain". (Mishra, 276)

        A new identity and reconsideration of this diaspora by the West came with India's independence in 1947, and the development of diasporic Indian literature closely followed the meanderings of the diaspora. The beginnings are quite unusual: Sake Dean Mahomed was a surgeon in the army of the British East India Company. He travelled to England in 1782, where he opened the first curry restaurant, "shampooing" baths, and wrote the first book in English by an Indian author, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794), which praises the Moghul rulers of India, and contains descriptions of several Indian towns. Forty-one years later, another "first" was written: the first book in English by an Indian author published in India, *A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945* by Kylas Chunder Dutt, which the author called an "imaginary history". Almost thirty years passed until the first Indian novel in English was published: *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the author of a total of fifteen novels. Other contributions to Indian diasporic writing in English include: the three Naipauls of Trinidad – Seepersad Naipaul (Sir Vidia's father), Shiva Naipaul (Sir Vidia's younger brother), and Sir Vidia Naipaul himself; Cyril Dabydeen and David Dabydeen of Guyana; Sam Selvon (Trinidad); the Kenyan-Canadian M.G. Vassanji; Fijian novelist Subramani; Indian Malaysian K. S. Maniam; Shani Muthoo from Trinidad, and Marina Budhos from Guyana.

        Just like their authors, most of the characters of all these novelists relocated at least once during their existence, Mother India generations away, and now a construct of their imagination. What unites them is the consciousness of their distant Indian past, and – as it is the case with Naipaul – a strong desire of finding one's roots and reconciling with the past. They are outsiders in the former colonizer's country, living agitated, sometimes purposeless lives, bearing as a burden the memory of their ancestors' dislocation from India to the West Indies. In his novel *Midnight* Children, Salman Rushdie commented on the necessity not to forget one's past – a country from which they had all emigrated. Losing one's past would mean losing a segment of their common humanity.

        There is then a second group of writers belonging to the Indian diaspora, whose common, unifying trait is their belonging to other countries, which allows for a certain distancing and detachment, for a personal understanding and definition of their Indianness, and their connection to India. Among this second group, we should mention: Raja Rao, who spent his life divided between India, France, and finally the USA; Kenyan-born Indian writer and philosopher G. V. Desani; Indian-American travel writer Santha Rama Rau; Indian-Canadian diplomat and scholar Balachandra Rajan; Bengali-English writer Nirad Chaudhuri; and the Indian-American blind writer Ved Mehta.

Commenting on the condition of "the new diaspora of international Indian writers", New Delhi poet and academic Makarand Paranjape is very straightforward:

"Instead of worshipping the leftovers and relics of a now inaccessible homeland as the old diaspora of indentured labourers did, the new diaspora of international Indian English writers live close to their market, in the comforts of the suburbia of advanced capital but draw their raw material from the inexhaustible imaginative resources of that messy and disorderly subcontinent that is India" (252).

One conclusion would be that all these Indian writers relocated in the Western world are doing their best to identify with and be accepted into the mainstream of the other migrant writers of the world. According to Salmon Rushdie, "Swift, Conrad, Marx [and even Melville, Hemingway, Bellow] are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 20).

In his essay, "Perspective: Exile Literature and the Diasporic Indian Writer" (2009), Dr. Amit Shankar Saha of Calcutta University distinguishes between two different categories in which Indian diasporic writers might be grouped: the writers who belong to the first category are those who relocated to the West at a certain point in their existence, taking with them their Indian heritage; their displacement is simply literal. The second category is made up of writers educated far from India since their childhood; to them, India is just the far-away, exotic place where they came from.

To conclude, diasporic writers share some common traits: they – and their protagonists – are engaged in a continuous search for their origins. It is a quest for identity, marked by a nostalgia for a pre-colonial past, a longing for the lost values of their ancestors, an acute sense of their otherness. The example offered by Naipaul himself is edifying: the descendant of uprooted, indentured Indian labourers, to be later relocated in England, the writer returns to India in search of his roots.

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