

# Writers of Indian Diaspora



# Writers of Indian Diaspora:

## *Critical Essays*

Edited by

Bijender Singh,  
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and Surendra Kumar Sao

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and Surendra Kumar Sao

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### **Editors**

Bijender Singh  
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## INTRODUCTION

Diaspora is a term often used to describe communities formed through movement, both voluntary and forced, across borders and between locations. This movement often leads to dislocation, or a sense of being uprooted from one's ancestral homeland. As a result, the immigrants face cultural fluidity and hyphenated identities. Fluidity in diaspora discourse has long been a subject of scholarly debate in academia worldwide. The experiences of diasporic writers and communities, and the evolution and transformation of their cultures in the postcolonial diasporic spaces, have deepened our understanding of cultural fluidity and, in the wake of it, the role of *hyphens* in migrant identities. "Despite its ubiquitous popularity, the concept of diaspora has been heavily criticised in scholarly literature" (Gowricharan 1). Displacement, nostalgia, hybridity, and the desire for home are pivotal themes that shape the experiences and narratives of diasporic writers. Writers of Indian heritage from around the world address these issues in a variety of ways, reflecting the subtleties of their personal experiences as well as the larger socio-political situations in which they live. Their stories not only reveal the personal hardships and achievements of diaspora life, but also provide profound insights into the complexities of identity formation and the celebration of the idea of being Indian-American and the ongoing search for belonging. Radha S. Hedge and Ajay K. Sahoo also write, "The geographical diversity of the Indian diaspora has been shaped against the backdrop of historical forces of colonialism, nationalism and neoliberal globalisation" (1–2). Vijay Mishra writes in the introduction of his book *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its unique way" (1).

Bhikkhu Parekh, in his essay "Some Reflections on the Indian Diaspora", writes that a diasporic Indian is "like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spreads out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world" (106). Bhabha, another great name in postcolonial studies, looks at the homogenising effects of diasporic movements, and hence shifts from diasporic scattering to a gathering, "Gathering of exiles and empires and refugees, gathering

on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures, gathering at the frontiers; gathering in the ghettos or cafes of the city centres” (139–40). In short, the diasporic community keeps embracing heterogeneous ideas and culture, and in the wake the immigrants enjoy multiple cultural identities, creating what Bhabha refers to as “the Third Space.”

Cultural identity is not tied to the fixed concepts of home and nation; rather, the meaning is always in flux—constantly evolving and creating a void, where the whole idea of rootedness is renewed and redefined over time. In his article titled “Cultural Identities and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall observes that the possibility of absolute return to a fixed site of origin always remains a question as cultural identities are always unstable points of identification within the discourses of history and culture. It has nothing to do with the essence of identity; rather sense of positioning always foregrounds. And, therefore, Hall says, “There is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic transcendental “law of origin.” (226). Hall further adds:

Diaspora experience is identified, 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. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (234)

Etymologically, the term ‘diaspora’ is derived from the Greek word ‘disperrein’ where ‘ia’ means ‘across’ and ‘speirein’ means ‘to sow or scatter.’ Avtar Brah also writes that it “involves images of multiple journeys” (181). In this sense, diaspora refers to people who are dispersed, displaced or dislocated from their homeland or native place as a result of exile, forced migration, immigration or resettlement. The source of the word traces back to the exile of the Jews from Palestine. However, more recently, the postcolonial scholars have used the term to articulate the experiences of the migrant that metaphorically connote to a variety of postmodern and postcolonial diasporic sensibilities like nostalgia and longing, cultural hybridisation, mongrelised and hyphenated identities, resilience and adaptability, community and solidarity, multilingualism, transnational connections, historical consciousness, creative expression, etc. The writers of the Indian diaspora vividly encapsulate these diasporic sensibilities in their works. They navigate themes of identity, cultural heritage, nostalgia, and the intricate relationships between the diaspora and their ancestral roots. The characters in Indian diasporic writings address the duality of identity, the struggle to balance tradition with modernity,

and the ongoing quest for a sense of home. Salman Rushdie writes in *Imaginary Homelands* that the diasporas “are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back at their mother land or home” (10).

One of the key aspects of the Indian diasporic experience is the quest for identity and a sense of belonging. Literature in this genre often depicts the tensions faced by diasporic individuals as they try to preserve their Indian identity while assimilating into the culture of their adopted country. The authors skilfully portray the conflicts and dilemmas arising from a dual cultural existence, presenting a subtle understanding of the immigrant experience. When people go away from their home, they feel nostalgic about it. Avtar Brah writes about home in the following words:

Where is home? On the one hand, ‘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’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day ...all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (188–89)

Moreover, Indian English literature sheds light on the impact of historical events and socio-political factors on the diaspora. The stories often reflect the historical context of migration waves and the reasons behind them. It portrays the struggles of early Indian migrants who endured hardships as indentured labourers, as well as the challenges faced by later generations seeking better opportunities in foreign lands. They feel nostalgic about their homeland. Makarand Paranjape writes about homeland:

A homeland can be anything; a nation, a region, a linguistic area located in South Asia or a language, ethnic, or religious group originally from South Asia or a combination of both... Homelands and diasporas are structurally interdependent as homelands give rise to diasporas; diasporas also can create homelands and, thus, identity. (162)

The diasporic experience is also closely tied to the notion of multiculturalism and hybridity. Indian English literature beautifully captures the amalgamation of Indian cultural values with the diverse cultures of the adopted countries. This blending of identities is depicted in various contexts, be it in familial relationships, social interactions, or artistic expressions, offering readers a

glimpse into the complexity of multicultural societies.

Indian diaspora is a global community with deep-rooted connections to its cultural heritage. Indian English literature plays a significant role in representing the diasporic experience, showcasing the struggles, aspirations, and transformations of this dispersed community. Through its texts, the genre highlights the evolution of identities, the challenges of assimilation, and the celebration of diversity, making it a valuable contribution to both the literary world and the understanding of the Indian diaspora. Women also play an important role in this context. Sandhya Rao Mehta also writes:

In many ways, gender becomes an important consideration for the diaspora as women are not only seen to be retainers of cultural identities but are actually responsible for physical production in the homeland as well as the new land. (6)

During the British colonial era, India witnessed significant migration patterns driven by various economic, social, and political factors. The British colonial rulers actively encouraged the movement of Indian labourers to various parts of the British Empire to serve as cheap and exploitable workforce. These migration waves had a lasting impact on the Indian diaspora, shaping their experiences and cultural identities in foreign lands.

One of the major migration trends during the colonial era was the recruitment of indentured labourers from India to work in various British colonies. Indentured labour was a system where Indian labourers signed contracts with colonial authorities to work for a specific period in exchange for passage, food, and shelter. These labourers were often from impoverished rural backgrounds and were lured by the promise of better prospects abroad. Colonies such as Fiji, Kenya, and Malaysia were significant destinations for indentured Indian labourers. In Fiji, Indian labourers were brought in to work on sugar plantations, shaping the demographic composition of the island nation to this day. Similarly, in Kenya and Malaysia, Indian labourers were employed in plantation agriculture and other manual labour-intensive industries, contributing to the development of these colonies. Jain and Reddock remark in this context:

In the West Indies labour for the plantation originally came from the indigenous island peoples, the Caribs and the Arawaks/ Tanios. However, initial efforts to mobilize the native population as a labour force failed because the Amerindians died in their thousands, through suicide or from being too weak to withstand the hard labour. The most



successful solution found to the labour problem was the large-scale importation of African slaves. (3)

After India gained independence in 1947, the various migration patterns of the Indian diaspora underwent significant changes. Many Indians chose to move to countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, and Gulf countries seeking better economic opportunities, education, and professional growth. This period saw a diverse range of migrants, including skilled professionals, students, and entrepreneurs.

The United Kingdom also became a popular destination for Indian immigrants due to historical ties and economic prospects. Indian communities flourished in cities like London, Birmingham, and Manchester, contributing to the cultural diversity of the United Kingdom. In the United States, Indian immigrants were drawn by the promise of higher education and professional advancement. The Indian diaspora in the United States has grown significantly, with Indians excelling in various fields, including technology, medicine, academia, and entrepreneurship. The Gulf countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Dubai, and Qatar, became major destinations for Indian workers seeking employment in the oil and construction industries. The Gulf nations provided a significant source of remittances back to India, supporting the country's economy.

The historical events surrounding Indian migration significantly influenced the diasporic experience. The indentured labourers faced harsh working conditions, exploitation, and cultural dislocation. Despite these challenges, they preserved their cultural heritage and traditions, giving rise to vibrant Indian communities in their adopted lands. Benedict Anderson writes in his book *Imagined Communities* (1996) how the people from different countries remain interconnected. He writes, "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Post-independence migration was marked by the struggle for identity, as the Indian diaspora grappled with the complexities of assimilation and integration into new cultures. The immigrants faced issues of racism, discrimination, and nostalgia for their homeland, which found expression in Indian English literature and other artistic forms.

The journey of the Indian diaspora has been shaped by the enduring impact of historical events, making it a poignant tale of resilience, adaptation, and cultural diversity. Today, the Indian diaspora continues to make significant contributions to their host countries and maintain strong ties with their Indian roots, bridging the gap between

nations and fostering a global Indian identity. Indian diaspora literature forms a captivating collection that weaves together the experiences, struggles, and triumphs of people of Indian origin living across the globe. This literary genre, primarily written in English, offers a rich exploration of the diasporic experience, addressing themes that resonate with individuals torn between multiple cultural identities, the longing for a distant homeland, and the complexities of assimilation into foreign societies. From the early pioneers to contemporary voices, the works of various Indian diaspora writers present a kaleidoscope of emotions, reflecting the diverse and ever-evolving nature of the global Indian community.

There are several writers who have taken dominant themes related to diaspora in their works. To begin with the Nobel Laureate, V.S. Naipaul's magnum opus, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, centres on the protagonist's quest for identity, and a sense of belonging in Trinidad and Tobago. The novel explores the challenges faced by the Indian diaspora in embracing their cultural heritage while adapting to a foreign land.

In *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie masterfully weaves the tapestry of postcolonial India through the experiences of Saleem Sinai, whose life mirrors the birth of independent India. Rushdie's novel celebrates the cultural hybridity of the Indian diaspora, capturing the intertwining of Indian and Western influences. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* follows the journey of a young Indian woman who immigrated to the United States. The novel narrates the themes of displacement, loss, and reinvention as the protagonist navigates her way through American society. Her novel, *Wife*, also deals with cultural shock, identity crisis and her neurotic stage of Dimple Dasgupta to the extent that she kills her husband. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* explores the feelings of nostalgia and longing experienced by the protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, an Indian-American torn between his Bengali roots and American upbringing. His mother, Ashima Ganguli, also faces many problems in assimilation in the United States.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels prominently explore themes of diaspora, focusing on the experiences of the Indian immigrant experience in America. Works, such as *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, and *Queen of Dreams* offer rich narratives of cultural assimilation, identity crisis, familial bonds, and personal transformation. Divakaruni's novels vividly depict the challenges and triumphs faced by immigrants, blending the complexities of old-world traditions with the dynamics of new-world realities. Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* reflects on the experiences of Indian diasporic women writers. Her poetry narrates the themes of gender, identity, and cultural displacement. In *A Fine*

*Balance*, Rohinton Mistry portrays the lives of characters from diverse backgrounds, weaving together themes of cultural traditions, resilience, and hope in the face of adversity. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* follows characters in India and the United States, addressing themes of migration struggles, the clash of cultures, and the complexities of globalisation. Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* also explores the postcolonial perspectives of the Indian diaspora and the challenges faced by the protagonist, Hugo Baumgartner, a German Jew who finds refuge in India during World War II.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* intertwines the lives of characters in India and London, exploring the idea of borders, partition, and the interplay between personal and political histories. Shailja Patel's poetry collection *Migritude* explores themes of migration, diasporic dreams, and the complexities of identity for African-Asians. Thrity Umrigar's novel, *The Space between Us*, narrates the lives of two women from different socio-economic backgrounds, addressing themes of cultural conflicts and the bonds forged between them. Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* portrays the lives of illegal immigrants from India in the United Kingdom, highlighting themes of diaspora and globalisation. Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* examines the lives of characters grappling with their sexual orientation and cultural identities within the Indian diaspora. Karan Mahajan's *Family Planning* navigates themes of generational rifts and the clash between traditional values and modern aspirations within the Indian diaspora. Shoba Narayan's memoir, *The Milk Lady of Bangalore*, narrates her experiences when she lived in India and the United States. Siddhartha Deb's *The Beautiful and the Damned* provides insights into the lives of young Indians who move abroad in pursuit of dreams and aspirations, exploring themes of transnational existence. Chetan Bhagat's *One Indian Girl* is about the life of a successful Indian woman working abroad, reflecting on themes of gender roles, societal expectations, and what it means to be a global citizen.

Thus, Indian diaspora literature showcases a diverse range of voices and themes, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the Indian diaspora experience. Through these writings, readers are exposed to a rich tapestry of emotions, cultural complexities, and the constant search for identity and belongingness faced by individuals of Indian origin living across the world. The literature serves as a bridge, connecting the diaspora with its roots and facilitating cross-cultural understanding and empathy on a global scale. Diasporic literature has played a significant role in shaping cultural identities. For diaspora communities, literature serves as a means of preserving cultural heritage and passing it on to future generations. It

offers a sense of belonging and affirmation, even in distant lands. The exploration of themes like cultural hybridity, displacement, and the search for identity resonates with individuals who find themselves straddling multiple cultural worlds. As these stories are shared and celebrated, they contribute to the formation of a global Indian identity that transcends geographical borders. Diasporic literature promotes inclusivity by highlighting the common threads that bind humanity together. By addressing themes of migration, diaspora writers emphasise the universal experiences of leaving home, seeking a better life, and striving for a sense of belonging. These narratives dismantle barriers and bring people together through shared experiences and emotions. In turn, this promotes a more inclusive and accepting society, where diverse cultural identities are recognised and celebrated.

The journey of the Indian diaspora through Indian English literature is a compelling narrative that has unfolded over the years, reflecting the struggles, aspirations, and triumphs of a dispersed community. From the early explorations of indentured labourers in distant colonies to the contemporary reflections of global citizens, the literature has served as a bridge that connects the diverse experiences of individuals living across the globe.

Indian English literature has beautifully captured the complexities of the diasporic experience, addressing themes of identity, belongingness, cultural hybridity, and the longing for a distant homeland. Through the works of eminent writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Arundhati Roy, readers have been taken on a journey through the intricate emotions and challenges faced by the Indian diaspora. From the struggles of early migrants to the aspirations of the current generation, the literature has painted a vivid picture of the diaspora's evolution and its enduring connection to its cultural roots.

The enduring significance of diasporic literature lies in its power to connect diverse cultures and experiences. These literary works have invited readers from different backgrounds to empathise with the joys and sorrows of the diaspora, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation for cultural diversity. By providing a window into the lives of individuals torn between multiple identities and cultural worlds, the literature has transcended geographical borders and spoken to the universal human experience of seeking a sense of belonging and navigating the complexities of life. Moreover, diasporic literature has played a pivotal role in fostering cross-cultural dialogue and mutual respect. It has enabled individuals from various backgrounds to engage with each other's stories, promoting inclusivity and breaking down stereotypes. As readers immerse

themselves in the rich tapestry of Indian diasporic literature, they gain valuable insights into the shared experiences that connect humanity, despite geographical and cultural differences.

Thus, the journey of the Indian diaspora through Indian English literature is a testament to the resilience, diversity, and cultural richness of the global Indian community. The enduring significance of diasporic literature lies in its ability to connect diverse cultures and experiences, fostering cultural understanding, empathy, and inclusivity. We get a chance to explore and appreciate this vast literary treasure that reflects the struggles and triumphs of the Indian diaspora, ultimately enriching our understanding of the human experience and celebrating the beauty of cultural diversity.

The anthology titled, *Writers of Indian Diaspora: Critical Essays*, presents a compelling and distinctive collection of 37 critical essays and it analyses 37 literary works of different Indian writers living in various parts of the world. Unlike other anthologies, this book stands out as a unique, distinctive and important contribution in the field of Indian English diaspora. One of the key differentiators of this anthology lies in its specific focus on the various texts of Indian diaspora, a subject that has gained momentum in present scenario due to globalisation and increased migration. This book attempts to provide an in-depth examination of the complexities of identity, self, migration, and cultural encounters, enriching the discourse on the dynamic literary landscape of 37 Indian diaspora writers through 37 texts.

To begin with, the first chapter titled, “Egoism as a Barrier to Family and Marital Bonds: Insights from Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*” by D. Amalraj, uncovers the egoism as a significant factor contributing to the absence of a cordial environment in familial and marital relationships. His analysis highlights how self-centred behaviour of the characters disrupt communication, breed mistrust, and erode emotional connections in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*. Amalraj charts out that overcoming such egoism requires gender equality, empathy, selflessness, and mutual understanding, essential for nurturing human relationships.

The second chapter titled, “Geetanjali Shree’s *Tomb of Sand*: A Milestone in Literary History,” is written by Shikha Saxena. Through a detailed analysis, Shikha Saxena highlights the significance of this novel in challenging conventional literary norms and its contribution to postmodern literature. Shikha’s chapter explores various narrative techniques, themes of identity crisis and memory, and the exploration of human consciousness. She examines how Geetanjali Shree’s inimitable writing style establishes her unique place in the literary landscape.

In the third chapter titled, “Spatial Identity in Kavita Daswani’s *Salaam Paris: The Power of Place in Shaping Characters*,” Madhu Kamra explores how the place occupies a pivotal importance in characters’ life and reshaping their identities. Their life gets immensely influenced by the spatial contexts they inhabit. Madhu’s chapter explores the intricate connections between the main characters and the physical places they occupy, revealing the significant impact of the environment on their personal growth, self-discovery, and life.

The fourth chapter titled, “Feminism, Infidelity and Memory: Rediscovering Identity in Sunetra Gupta’s *Memories of Rain*” by Suruchi Sharma, investigates how the infidelity of Moni’s husband leaves a bad impact on Moni’s psyche. Suruchi’s chapter explores Moni’s inner turmoils, emotional outburst, and her strong decision to leave her husband for good.

Through the fifth chapter titled, “From Roots to Routes: A Deep Dive into M.G. Vassanji’s *No New Land*,” Kusum Kangar analyses the novelist’s exploration of the immigrant experience and the quest for identity and belonging through a couple—Nurdin and Zera. Kusum Kangar’s chapter elucidates the bitter experiences of Canadian immigrants, specifically from the Shamsi community of India, who largely migrated from East Africa. They grapple with the erosion of their ancestral identity in an unfamiliar milieu. The themes, such as identity crisis, racial prejudices, rootlessness, in-betweenness, cultural displacement, quest for assimilation, etc. have been explored in this chapter.

Shramita Pandey’s chapter titled, “Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Harvest as a Futuristic Play*,” reveals futuristic elements and other recurring themes of the play. Through a close analysis, Shramita examines the socio-political implications of the play, presenting a thought-provoking perspective on the future of humanity, technology, and society. It has been people’s eternal desire to conquer death, even if it meant manipulation and ruthless exploitation of economically weaker sections of society. Manjula Padmanabhan has presented a realistic view of desperate, ignorant, frivolous, and poor Third World, which falls victim to the First World’s ambitious desire to lengthen the life-span and live as long as possible. All this has been explored by Shramita Pandey in her chapter.

In the next chapter titled, “The Vicarious Womb: A Layered Reading of Amulya Malladi’s *A House for Happy Mothers*,” Meenu Dudeja discusses the emotional intricacies of surrogacy and motherhood. The ethical dilemmas, cultural and economic disparities, personal sacrifices, the impact of surrogacy on both the surrogate mother and the intended parents, etc. themes have been explored by Meenu Dudeja in her chapter.