The Spiritual Sense of Alienation in Diasporic Life: Reading Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri

Dr. Amit Shankar Saha
Kolkata, India.

Exile, in its literal sense, is a physical condition but the sense of exile is not necessarily a manifestation of a dislocated existence. Even if there is a geographical displacement, the exilic condition in many cases is only superficially physical and fundamentally psychological and spiritual. The external exile either compounds or, occasionally, suppresses these internal conditions. The Indian diaspora in the West has experienced a physical displacement but in a globalized world migrants are not treated as aliens, moreover the newer migrants have migrated of their own will, and hence there is little cause for them to feel the sense of being in exile. The world as a global village facilitates the feeling of being at home in the cosmopolitan urban quarters of the world. It is in these situations that the external circumstances of displacement become of less importance and the internal circumstances, that is the psychological and spiritual condition of the mind, gain prominence. Despite being in a diaspora there is little consolation of any hope of escape into any pre-exilic state. It is, as Rushdie says in reference to diasporic writers, a haunting of the mind:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not 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.

(Rushdie, Imaginary 10)
This mental condition can only be tackled by catering to the psychological and spiritual aspects of life – a self-fashioning of the mind and the spirit.

India is not merely a geographical space on the world map. It occupies a well-defined space both in history as well as in culture. Thus, the Indian migrants in the West look back not only at the spatial contour of the subcontinent but at its history, society, and culture too. This looking back is paradoxically aided by technological innovations that help keep intact one’s link with the past – a past that reminds of one’s roots. Films, music, magazines, the cyber communities, and all other media of communications continually keep refreshing the link. Hamid Naficy notes in the essay “Framing Exile: From Homeland to Homepage” that due to “the globalization of travel, media, and capital, exile appears to have become a postmodern condition” (Naficy 4). It is basically this postmodern condition that produces a gnawing feeling of being in exile for the Indian diasporic community despite having the advantages of easy telecommunication and speedy travel.

The trope of exile is a perennial presence in all religions. Its prototypical model can be found in the Jewish “exodus”, the Muslim “hegira”, and so on. Exile plays a pivotal role in both the two great Hindu epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. In fact the Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses is replete with the concept of mobility symbolized by the deities’ “vahans” or the animals on which they ride – the lion for Durga, the ox for Shiva, the peacock for Kartick, the mouse for Ganesh, the owl for Lakshmi, the swan for Saraswati, and others. The psyche of the Indian immigrant fed on the mythologies of movement and exile is preconditioned to succumb to the sense of estrangement, alienation, non-belonging, and dislocation at the slightest pretext. Hence, physical displacement is only a catalyst that generally aggravates a pre-existing psychological and spiritual sense of loneliness. But this generalization is not sweeping because sometimes it so happens that physical displacement
allays the cosmic sense of loneliness. It is because of this complex and apparently paradoxical nature of the exilic condition that it is equated with the postmodern condition.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* traces the story of the eponymous heroine in her American odyssey. Jasmine, the Hindu widow, who leaves India for the US after her husband’s death in a terrorist attack, is found to undergo a cross-cultural metamorphosis in her fractured life as an immigrant. The opening chapter of the novel starts with the words:

> Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears – his satellite dish to the stars – and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns.

(Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 3)

The astrologer goes on to allude to the story of Behula from Hindu mythology. Here Bharati Mukherjee is not just exoticizing the content of the novel through these allusions. She is defining the mental space of her seven-year-old protagonist. Jasmine’s psyche is formed by the stories that her mother recited to her of “the holiest sages”, the “third eye” they develop in the middle of their foreheads to peer “out into invisible worlds” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 5), and their likes. No doubt Jasmine’s mind is spiritually inclined even though she challenges and revolts against customs and traditions.

Jasmine’s decision to fulfill her husband’s aspiration of going to America is guided by her spiritual beliefs as she acknowledges:

> I had not given even a day’s survival in America a single thought. This was the place I had chosen to die, on the first day if possible. I would land, find Tampah, walking there if necessary, find the college grounds and check it against the brochure photo. Under the very tree where two Indian boys and two Chinese girls were pictured, smiling, I had dreamed of arranging the suit and twigs. The vision of lying serenely
on a bed of fire under palm trees in my white sari had motivated all the weeks of sleepless half-starved passage [...] (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 120-21)

The village girl from Hasnapur survives in America. She does not immolate herself because after landing on the Gulf Coast of Florida she is raped, and in turn she murders her rapist. This defiles her mission and death is denied her: “Lord Yama, who had wanted me, and whom I’d flirted with on the long trip over, had now deserted me” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 120).

The transformation of Jasmine from the archetype of Sati to that of Goddess Kali as she towers over the man who violated her chastity, with blood oozing out from her sliced tongue, is a dramatic and violent imagery of self-assertion. The critic Nagendra Kumar notes that Jasmine’s “decision to kill herself first, is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills Half-Face is prompted by her will to live to continue her life” (Kumar 110). Jasmine’s journey from Punjab, through Florida, New York, and Iowa, to California depicts the various stages of her exilic condition. But these exilic locations are also representation of the spiritual states of her mind. Jasmine assumes different mythological avatars in her various exilic states: “I have been reborn several times” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 126). She shuttles between identities: “Jyoti [was] the Sati-Goddess, Jasmine lives for the future” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 176). Jasmine emancipates herself from being an illegal immigrant into a self-assured American woman but her spiritual call comes from India: “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness” (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 240).

The “old-world dutifulness” forms the spiritual make-up of Indian migrants to the West. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* the Bengali diasporic community in Boston religiously celebrate Durga puja and Saraswati puja. But for characters like Ashima such celebrations are less about religion and more about rejuvenation of the link with the old world – the home they have left behind. Ashima’s life in exile is eased by the spiritual frenzy
brought about by religious festivities. On the other hand, Gogol and Sonia, who are born and brought up totally in the West, find their parents’ spiritual leanings intensifying their exilic condition. Their self-fashioning as Westerners receive a jolt each time they encounter certain aspect of their ancestry either corporal or spiritual. Sometimes the second-generation migrants revolt against their ambivalent position. The Gangulis celebrate “with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 64). But once Sonia, in one of her growing-up years, refused her Christmas gifts after taking a Hinduism class in college, “protesting that they weren’t Christians” (Lahiri, *Namesake* 285).

In Lahiri’s short story “This Blessed House”, Twinkle fervently collects the Christian paraphernalia left behind by the previous occupier of the house that is newly procured by her husband Sanjeev. For Sanjeev, his wife’s idea is outlandish. When Twinkle finds a “plaster Virgin Mary as tall as their waists, with a blue painted hood draped over her head in the manner of an Indian bride” (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 146) she decides to put it on the lawn to the shock of her husband:

“Oh God, no. Twinkle, no.”

“But we must. It would be bad luck not to.”

“All neighbors will see. They’ll think we’re insane.”

“Why, for having a statue of the Virgin Mary on our lawn? Every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We’ll fit right in.”

“We’re not Christians.”

“So you keep reminding me.” (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 146)

For Twinkle, her external exilic state suppresses her internal spiritual exile by giving her an alternative mode of belonging – to “fit right in.” Twinkle’s relic hunt in her newly possessed house provides her a mental connection with the past of the house to secure her sense of
belonging. Salman Rushdie says that “the broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects” (Rushdie, Imaginary 12). Though in Twinkle’s case the objects discovered are not exactly common and have no relation to her past, they still bring peace to her mind. Whereas, Sanjeev’s psyche closes options for him, taking him to a spiritual isolation compounded by his external displacement. The psychological build up of each migrant is different and hence the varied responses to a similar situation.

It is often seen that the physical shift from one’s place of origin to a new place of residence does little in itself to arouse the sense of being in exile. In Sunetra Gupta’s novel Memories of Rain the protagonist Moni is the quintessential romantic who “had loved Heathcliff before she loved any man” (Gupta, Memories 177). She finds in Anthony a hero figure straight out of the novels of Jane Austen or Thomas Hardy. Anthony is to rescue her from India – “a bizarre and wonderful land” – to England – “this island, this demi-paradise” (Gupta, Memories 6). Incidentally, John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, in Act 2 Scene 1 of William Shakerpeare’s play, King Richard the Second, composed in the 1590s and dealing with the subject matter of the early 13th century, speaks in very similar words (“This other Eden, demi-paradise”). This echo of lines spoken more than 750 years before Moni, and before Sunetra Gupta, show that for many middle class Indians, England is a cultural and spiritual state rather than a mere physical space. England is a space in Moni’s subconscious mind. Moni has, as Amit Chaudhuri alludes, “the vague, intense longings of the feminized, adolescent imagination” (Chaudhuri 583). So, when Moni arrives with her English husband to an England that is vastly different from the England of her English literature class, she is in for a rude shock. Moni’s psyche is fashioned by a life of sensation and when encountered with the bleak reality of a fast paced modern day England her sensibilities are brutalized. It is the irreconcilability of the life of action with the life of sensation that compounds Moni’s
exilic condition. Even the romantic consolation in sorrowful memories is denied her by the indifference shown to her by her husband, who is having an affair with another woman. Anthony is no Heathcliff and her dream of “wandering as a spirit with her beloved upon English moors” (Gupta, Memories 177) remains unfulfilled.

It was in the rains of 1978 Calcutta that Moni’s brother had brought home his English friend Anthony. Anthony had been enamoured by Moni, the second year college student of English. Later he had recited from John Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy” – “No, no! go not to Lethe, neither twist wolf’s bane, tight rooted . . .” (Gupta, Memories 17) – and then to Moni’s utter embarrassment he had asked her to translate for him the Bengali song that she had been singing in the morning.

Many years later, huddled in the deserted tin mine on the Cornish coast, she translated the same song for him, staring into the sheets of rain that ran by like frozen phantoms across the crumbling entrance, and he sat back against the moldy walls, paying only half heed to her eager, nervous translations, mesmerised instead by the duet of the storm and the sea, until, like the sudden spray it hit her that he was not listening, he was not listening at all [. . .] (Gupta, Memories 10)

Anthony is lost in his amorous musings of adulterous lovemaking with Anna and is blatantly indifferent towards Moni. It is the denial of even the “Beauty that must die”, the “Joy [. . .] bidding adieu”, and the “aching Pleasure” that bars Moni from entering Melancholy’s “sovran shrine” (Keats 248). The psychological constraint of being deprived of the aesthetic response that one craves for in pain makes Moni’s exile acute. So, when Moni decides to return to Calcutta a week before Durga puja, she reminisces how “every autumn she had watched the city burst into joy to welcome the Goddess Durga to her father’s home” (Gupta, Memories 173) and realizes that “this year she will return with the Gods, a daughter come
home” (Gupta, *Memories* 174). Moni reverts to her native spirituality as a consolation for her condition.

Anita Desai’s novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* has the Indian migrant Dev disillusioned by an England represented by the London of the 1960s because his mind has the image of an England as depicted in English literature studied in schools and colleges. Dev’s psychology aggravates his exilic condition because his aesthetic sense cannot identify with reality. But when he visits the countryside he finds:

this was the England her poets had celebrated so well that he, a foreigner, found every little wildflower, every mood and aspect of it eerily familiar. It was something he was visiting for the first time in his life, yet he had known it all along – in his reading, in his daydreams – and now he found his dreams had been an exact, a detailed, a brilliant and mirrorlike reflection of reality.  

(Desai, *Blackbird* 170)

Dev decides to stay in England after making this mental identification that eases his exilic condition. In St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey, Dev finds “little religious aura” (Desai, *Blackbird* 68) and “has an uneasy feeling that these are no temples of Christ, but temples dedicated to the British Empire” (Desai, *Blackbird* 68). It is in the countryside that he visits an “old, small and silent village church” (Desai, *Blackbird* 172) and on touching “the rounded pillars felt soft to his hand as do the stones in Hindu temples that have been touched by so many devout foreheads. The stone tiles were curved beneath his feet as are those of temples on which Hindu worshippers kneel and walk incessantly” (Desai, *Blackbird* 171). Dev wishes that “he had a stick of incense to burn, a handful of jasmine or marigold to offer, Hindu fashion, to the grace of Christianity” (Desai, *Blackbird* 172). It is the aesthetic and spiritual familiarity that suppresses the psychological sense of exile.

In Sunetra Gupta’s novel *A Sin of Colour*, physical relocation from India to England becomes too easy a form of exile to produce any sort of detachment. Debendranath wants to
exile himself from his thoughts of forbidden love for his elder brother’s wife Reba. Years later Debendranath’s niece Niharika finds herself in a similar predicament when she commits the sin of loving a married man Daniel Faraday. Niharika also exiles herself though, unlike Debendranath, not away from the person of her love but rather with the person she loves. In both the cases their exiles are not mere physical dislocation but exile from society, exile from relationships, exile from a familiar world, exile from a former self, and an exile into anonymity. After twenty years when Debendranath comes back to Mandalay, the almost deserted house, Niharika summarizes his absence thus: “You were able to reinvent yourself entirely” (Gupta, Sin 134). This self-exile from one’s identity, echoing the “agyatavasa” that the Pandavas suffered in The Mahabharata, transcends the concept of material displacement and takes exile to a metaphysical level. Exile becomes a panacea for the soul ailing from existential alienation. It is not only the contingency of the world but also, the contingency of one’s very will that baffles. Debendranath and Niharika need to isolate themselves from the world of action because to act is to assert one’s will. Hence, by faking death they somehow extricate themselves from the sin of their desires. The psychology behind their displacement becomes all the more important.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “A Temporary Matter” has Shoba and Shukumar in their diasporic life grieving for their stillborn child. They find solace by isolating themselves from friends and relations and starting to live life a little differently, fashioning themselves anew, and creating new identities for themselves. For them their exilic condition is superficially due to their diasporic status and is rather fundamentally psychological. At different levels this is precisely the case with most of the diasporic characters. Since by birth human beings are exiled from the womb; one’s home, one’s family, one’s country, one’s culture, and so on stand as metaphorical imagery of that natal refuge. This inherent mental condition either acts in conjunction with physical displacement or in opposition with it – either compounding the
exilic state or suppressing it. That is why exile is taken as a human condition – some are exiles from happiness, some are exiles from peace, some are exiles from love, and some from their Maker.

**Works Cited**

**Primary Texts**


**Secondary Texts**


