

THE LITERATURE OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA

THEORIZING THE DIASPORIC IMAGINARY

VIJAY MISHRA

Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures

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This book begins and ends with references to a heritage that has been referred to as the indenture *girmit* experience. I have carried memories of that experience, thanks to my late father and mother, my brother Hirday and my sister Shiro. Although removed from that experience, my children Rohan and Paras have not been unaware of their father's working-class indenture heritage and have sensitively engaged with it. For our granddaughters, Anjali and Tara, diaspora as read here would be a matter of archive fever only. For our daughter-in-law Kylie it will be a similar matter of understanding another history. The book is dedicated to my wife Nalini, herself part of the diaspora, but always careful not to become too

sentimental about it. She has valued the work of the mind and has unfailingly provided me with the necessary stimulus for scholarship.

Before my father died in 1989, he reminded me about a promise I made to him many years before. I confessed again that I was not a creative writer because I had no capacity for metaphor but, as promised, I would make up for this lack through scholarship as intellectual autobiography. I said I would write a book on Australian literature because finally I had made Australia home; I would write a book on an aspect of English literary history because this was my discipline; I said I'd work around religious texts that I remembered from childhood and construct a devotional poetics; I said I would write about films, Indian films, that created India for us in the diaspora. Finally, I said I'd write something about our own lives, about diaspora. This book completes the promise made then. The promise could be made and executed because, with all his limitations, my father (basically a self-taught man still struggling to get out of the detritus of indenture) valued education and the place of the intellect in our lives.

My mother died a few months after I had completed writing the longer version of this book. She, too, was part of indenture life, married young at 16 and part of a family of eight sisters and two brothers, not unlike the Tulsi family in Naipaul's great novel. I left Fiji when she was barely 40, but when she died years later in Sydney, although I had seen her often enough, I never managed to say a final goodbye. This is a deep regret, for I missed my chance to talk, finally, with the only person who would have understood the deep anxiety about loss that pervades this book. Like my father, she, too, had hoped to die in Fiji, her homeland, but she didn't. After her funeral rites, I entered her room and found that she had left behind a red exercise book. It was a book written in the hand of a young child beginning his first year in school. The book had numbers and alphabet, simple arithmetic, simple sentences in English and Hindi, and a few facts about the world. It was my first book at school, and she had preserved it all these years. I held that book in my hands, and that's when tears fell. To her that book was more valuable than anything else.

Many years later I write another book, and this book is also as much about myself as about the works of writers of the Indian diaspora. But it is a limited book in its scope. It is not an exhaustive account of the literature of the Indian diaspora and it is certainly not encyclopaedic. Large swathes of the bibliography are missing from the study, and many writers are treated too lightly, perhaps even dismissively. I regret these gestures which became necessary once the project became more concerned with an understanding of the theoretical underpinning of the diasporic experience than with comprehensive critical commentaries on books written by the diaspora. Although the archive, in however truncated a form, is primarily Indian diaspora, and has a strong Fiji Indian bias, the theoretical apparatus has a much broader application, especially for people who are moved by the words with which the Bollywood film *Veer-Zaara* (2004) ends: *ghar cale* ('let's go home'). The Fijian narrative may require slight adjustments in the light of the December 5, 2006 military coup led by Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama. Although his motives

remain murky – a combination of personality clash between a prime minister and his military commander, complicated by the traumatic aftermath of a mutiny within the army in the wake of the 2000 George Speight-led coup against Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour government – what is clear is a resurgence of tribal power struggle in the Fijian establishment once the Fiji Indian had been effectively neutralized. It is for these reasons that there is, as I write, no clearly defined objective of the Bainimarama coup nor a predictable end-game scenario in spite of the Commodore's claim that his coup is no more than an exercise in establishing 'responsible and accountable governance'.

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Vijay Mishra

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Prologue: ‘That time is past’

Many years ago – in 1966, to be precise – I was asked by my English tutor at Victoria University of Wellington (one Mr Wright, if I recall correctly) to explain references to an ancient Indian text in Matthew Arnold’s poems ‘Resignation’ (1843–8) and ‘The World and the Quietist’ (1848). The tutor presumed that I had some cultural understanding, some familiarity with the language, and could, for once, make an unusual contribution to English tutorials in which I had been largely a silent participant. I suspect this was because, in the days before theory reached the antipodes, readings of texts were often bland exercises in critical evaluation. The latter required, after F. R. Leavis, a sensibility peculiarly English, of which, in those early years, I wasn’t a part. The request caught me unawares. I was literally stumped; I simply didn’t know. I told the class that I’d check my facts and return with an answer in the next tutorial. That afternoon I took the cable car down to Lambton Quay to purchase two books from Whitcombe & Tombs (now Whitcoulls), New Zealand’s best-known bookseller. My weekly scholarship allowance was £7 (US\$13), and the books I bought – *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* edited by Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, 1965) and *The Bhagavadgītā* translated by S. Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963) – cost me £1.18.0 (\$3.50) and £1.4.6 (\$2.30) respectively. In other words, I spent almost half my weekly scholarship allowance to purchase these books. There were reasons for this. My University Arnold selection was a basic student text; and, as for the *Bhagavadgītā*, although I carried a pocket edition of the *Bhagavadgītā* (in Sanskrit), it was more like a good-luck charm given to me by my mother when I left for New Zealand in February 1964. And since I didn’t read Sanskrit then (I learned it many years later) the *Bhagavadgītā* existed for me simply as a Hindu religious text known to me through only one verse which I had learned by rote. The verse – ‘yadā yadā hi dharmasya ...’ – promised the return of Krishna whenever *dharma*, or the eternal law, was threatened by evil forces.

I can’t recall much of what I said in the next tutorial a week later. But since I have the books I bought some 40 years ago with me as I write this prologue I can at least attempt to re-create my points of entry, however imprecisely or inelegantly. In the notes to ‘Resignation’ Kenneth Allott made the connection between the poet’s detachment (‘The poet,

to whose mighty heart / Heaven doth a quicker pulse impart') and the *Bhagavadgītā* with reference to the poet's ability to 'admire uncravingly'. Allott glosses 'uncravingly' as follows: 'Like an Indian sage the poet mixes with mankind but is emotionally detached from its concerns. Cp. Arnold's letter to [Arthur Hugh] Clough 4 March 1848 (*The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough* [CL] 1932: 71), "The Indians distinguish between ... abandoning practice, and abandoning the fruits of action and all respect thereto. This last is a supreme step, and dilated on throughout the Poem."' Allott then gives a typical instance from *Bhagavadgītā* 6.9–10. I give the passage as it appears in the Radhakrishnan translation: 'He who is equal-minded among friends, companions and foes, among those who are neutral and impartial, among those who are hateful and related, among saints and sinners, he excels. [Let him] try constantly to concentrate his mind (on the Supreme Self) remaining in solitude and alone, self-controlled, free from desires and (longing for) possessions'. Arnold's own encounter with the *Bhagavadgītā* came via a curious route. He read an account of the text in V. Cousin's reading of the poem (in French) in 1845 from which he also gathered that Wilhelm von Humboldt had composed an influential analysis of the poem in two lectures (1826). The latter immediately occasioned G. W. F. Hegel's less than complimentary review of them published in 1827. It is unlikely that Arnold actually read Humboldt's lectures or Hegel's review. He did, however, read (in 1847 or early 1848) G. Lassen's Latin translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* (Bonn, 1846), 'a corrected version of A. W. Schlegel's Latin rendering of 1823'.

As Allott informs us, Clough was not impressed by Arnold's mystical claptrap. Arnold wrote to Clough in March 1848 (?): 'I am disappointed the Oriental wisdom pleased you not' (CL 69). Later Clough was to censure Arnold's Indian 'quietism' in a review of Arnold's poems (July 1853): '... for the present age, the lessons of reflectiveness and caution do not appear to be more useful than ... calls to action ... the dismal cycle of his rehabilitated Hindoo-Greek philosophy ...'. In response to Clough's misgivings Arnold wrote a poem, 'The World and the Quietist', specifically for 'Critias' (Clough). The opening lines of the poem are given to Critias:

*Why, when the world's great mind
Hath finally inclin'd,
Why, you say, Critias, be debating still?
Why, with these mournful rhymes
Learn'd in more languid climes,
Blame our activity
Who, with such passionate will,
Are, what we mean to be?*

Glossing lines 4–5, Allott writes: 'The mental detachment, i.e. freedom from the world's "passionate will", which Krishna preaches to Arjuna (while urging him to act) supplies one element of A[rnold]'s conception of the poet's contemplative

role in “Resignation”.’ In the end, though, Arnold is more Greek than Hindu, more comfortable with the figure of Sophocles, to whose mind an earlier ‘Dover Beach’ (the Aegean) brought ‘the turbid ebb and flow/Of human misery’, than with a Krishna emphasizing that even the renouncer acts.

I cannot recall or re-create what more I would have said in the tutorial – certainly a few words on ‘Learn’d in more languid climes’ which undercuts the message of the *Bhagavadgītā* by emphasizing its pastness (playing on the meanings of ‘learn’d’) and its slackness (the meanings of ‘languid’) but perhaps also a reading of the well-known one-verse manifesto (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.47) ‘karmaṇi eva adhikāras te/mā phaleṣu kadācana’ (‘Your entitlement is only to the act, never to its fruits’) as well as a word or two on *Culture and Anarchy*. Nor can I remember whether there was any occasion to reflect on my own encounter with the texts of Indian high culture. After all, I belonged to a people still recovering from the detritus of indenture, still trying to find a proper language because our own was like an anti-language, a demotic created to survive and known only to those who had been part of Fiji Indian plantation history. Arnold was alien to me, but so was the *Bhagavadgītā*. We did not know its metaphysical resonance (beyond its place in our own reading of Hinduism as affirming the comforts of a tribal religion) and certainly we did not know the austere demands it made on our need for salvation. In the ‘Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse’ (1852–5) Arnold had written: ‘Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born.’ This was more like our lives as we, too, hovered between two worlds, our own, which even then seemed dead, and another, of the diaspora, not quite capable of being born in a world where the cultural logic of assimilation was the norm. And because my commentary on Arnold had to be framed in the discourse of English literary criticism (‘detachment’, ‘quietism’, ‘resignation’, ‘cycle’, and so on were the key words) the matter of declaring difference, of affirming a new knowledge and making the *Bhagavadgītā* itself the centre of critical knowledge (above and beyond Arnold) never arose.

Then – all those years ago – I read the *Bhagavadgītā* as a footnote to Arnold, not as a text in its own right. In composing a commentary I read whatever was relevant to literary criticism, not how the text may have affected me. The fact that it did is beyond question; but that I cannot recall how it did is a testimony to the degree to which non-Western knowledge was seen to possess only instrumental, footnote value. There was no place for a radical rethinking of the (Western) past, no critical disavowal of it, no proper hatred of it (after Adorno). Matthew Arnold was what he was; the *Bhagavadgītā* simply happened to supply him with additional ideas as creative icing on an already strong preoccupation with the links between culture and poetry.

Years on, I write again with a different freedom; much of it should be evident in this book on the literature of the Indian diaspora. But the newfound assertiveness and critical certitude cannot be totally divorced from first encounters. For me the moment of the Arnold–*Bhagavadgītā* commentary was decisive even if in my commentary I simply re-confirmed the hierarchy of the two texts. I end by correcting

a loss, or the failure to address the impact of the text on me. I no longer read the *Bhagavadgītā* as the eighteen-chapter relatively autonomous text that just happens to be embedded in the great Sanskrit epic the *Mahābhārata*. I now read the ‘*Bhagavadgītā*-in-the-*Mahābhārata*’, a work that grows out of the concerns of the larger epic, a work that tries to transform this maddening epic into a metaphysic, into a theory of epic action (where all heroes are failures and die needlessly). But it cannot win; it cannot transform lived human behaviour into a metaphysic, and its offer of salvation through a redefinition of what it is to act, and who finally acts, does not redeem the epic which, in the end, affirms not Krishna’s directive that action should be removed from the world of *prakṛti*, of phenomena, and based on complete understanding (of the *puruṣa/brahman*), but Arjuna’s fear that action, even of the detached, selfless variety has the same consequence: the destruction of humankind. The scene at the end of the epic is bare, harsh, meaningless, severe: a man and a dog ascend the steep slopes of a mountain only to find their brethren in worlds to which they do not belong, only to find that the rhymes were indeed ‘mournful’.

I have read the *Bhagavadgītā* many times, in the original Sanskrit and in most English translations. I read it again while writing this prologue and I read it, as force of habit now dictates, as verses embedded in the great epic. The poem ends, the great matters of the epic must continue since the decision to fight has been made. Arjuna has been persuaded by Krishna, although in the context of the epic’s own diegesis, even before the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, the blind king Dhṛtarashtra has been informed that the battle nears its end as the great Bhishma is dead. But in terms of linear time Arjuna’s elder brother, Yudhishthira, must now inform the elders of the opposing side of his intention. Furthermore, as custom demands (as these elders are also his grand-uncles and teachers), he must seek their permission to fight. Yudhishthira is the eldest of the five Pandava brothers forced to fight to regain what is legitimately theirs. He comes into the epic, though, as the son of Dharma, of the law itself, and is referred to as the Lawgiver or the Lord of the Law. Upholding the law is the message of the epic; when heroes die, the law itself becomes topsy-turvy, and social dissension and disorder follow. So the request to fight is also part of the law, a duty, and who better to fulfil this duty than the person who stands for the law, Yudhishthira. He approaches his grand-uncle Bhishma and gets his permission to fight. He also receives from him information about how he can be killed, for if he isn’t the battle cannot be won. Bhishma foretells his death but declares that the moment will be of his own choosing. Then Yudhishthira approaches Drona, the great archer and his teacher. Again he seeks his permission to fight and information about how he can be killed. Great archer that he is, he cannot be killed, but he declares that if the moral order becomes cankerous, then there is no point for him to live. ‘How could that be?’ asks Yudhishthira. Drona replies, in those grand lapidary lines:

śastraṃ cāham raṇe jalyāṃ śrutvā sumahad apriyaṃ
śraddheyavākyaṭ puruṣād etat satyaṃ bravīmi te

And I swear to you, I shall lay down my weapons only when I have
heard a great untruth from a man whose word I trust.

And Drona does put down his arms, and prepares to die only when he is falsely informed by Yuddhisthira, the lawgiver, the upholder of truth, that his son Asvatthaman is dead. I am moved whenever I read these lines; no other lines from the *Mahābhārata* (including of course the *Bhagavadgītā*) move me as much. This kind of aesthetic judgement was not available to me in 1966 and, even if it were, it would have required a disavowal of a mode of literary analysis and reading, a 'hating' (after Adorno) of the hierarchy of text and commentary, for which I was ill-equipped. Just emerging from the constraints of a colonial education and essentially peasant upbringing, I had no cultural or intellectual resource with which to make a counter-claim. To do so would have required a different engagement with modernity, which I undertake in the ensuing pages with reference to a literary corpus written in 'less languid climes'.

tāpas beṣa biseṣi udāsi
caūdāhā bārisa rāmu banabāsi

Bereft of goods, as mendicant, as slave
Rama to spend fourteen years in the woods

Tulsidasa, *Rāmacaritamānas* II.29

afraid to leave the familiar temporariness

V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* 174

we hide our secret identities beneath the false skin of those identities

Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* 73

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Introduction: The diasporic imaginary

There needs no ghost . . . come from the grave
To tell us this.

Hamlet I. v. 131–2

All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport. Diasporas are people who would want to explore the meaning of the hyphen, but perhaps not press the hyphen too far for fear that this would lead to massive communal schizophrenia. They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. Diasporas are both celebrated (by late/postmodernity) and maligned (by early modernity). But we need to be a little cautious, a little wary of either position. Celebrating diasporas as the exemplary condition of late modernity – diasporas as highly democratic communities for whom domination and territoriality are not the preconditions of ‘nationhood’ – is a not uncommon refrain. In the late-modern celebratory argument on behalf of diasporas, diasporic communities are said to occupy a border zone where the most vibrant kinds of interaction take place, and where ethnicity and nation are kept separate. In this argument, diasporas are fluid, ideal social formations happy to live wherever there is an international airport and stand for a longer, much admired historical process. The tension between this position and the earlier modern, reactionary reading is evident in a classic Hollywood film, *Casablanca* (1942). In it, as Catherine Portuges has pointed out, the opening sequence presents the spectator with ‘polyglot crowds of hopeful refugees awaiting the miracle of an exit visa to a better world’ (50). Placed against Hollywood’s own tendency to produce a cultural product that is homogeneous and unproblematically ‘American’, the ‘irreducible particularity of their [the characters’] ethnic and regional voices’ (53) suggests that Michael Curtiz, the film’s director and himself a Hungarian émigré, was introducing a discrepant diasporic narrative, a discordant, dialogic eruption, into the film as a statement about diasporic labour in the formation of Hollywood filmic practice and about alternative, unhappy, irreconcilable narratives embedded in voices that *Casablanca* dare not interrogate. After all, it is in *Casablanca* that Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), when asked about his nationality, replies, without any ironic intent: ‘I’m a drunkard.’

The narrative of *Casablanca* posits escape to liberty as the universal ideal even if the ideology is encased in a mushy romance. Ideology, by virtue of its connection with the aesthetics of romance (which is how the film *Casablanca* has been popularly received), deflects a fundamental aspect of diaspora: its irreducible complexity at the level of lived social and political expression. The point, hidden from the film's diegesis, is that diasporas have a progressivist as well as a reactionary streak in them. Both forms of this 'streak' centre on the idea of one's 'homeland' as very real spaces from which alone a certain level of redemption is possible. Homeland is the *desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign, or *videsh*; it is the source of homesickness, that which 'gives rise to the adventures through which subjectivity (whose fundamental history is presented in the Odyssey) escapes from the prehistoric world' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 78). When not available in any 'real' sense, homeland exists as an absence that acquires surplus meaning by the *fact* of diaspora, so that Sikhs in Vancouver and Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto clamour for a homeland (Khalistan, Tamil Eelam) or, in some quarters, Muslims seek a pan-Islamic utopia in the European heartland. It is not unusual for the two versions (the physical and the mental) to be collapsed into an ahistorical past going back to antiquity. We need to make an important qualification, though. This reading of the homeland must be placed alongside another truth about diasporas: as a general rule – and the establishment of a Jewish homeland is the exception and not the rule – diasporas do not return to their homeland (real or imagined). Throughout the dark years of South African apartheid few Indians (the Mahatma is the notable exception) returned to India; nor have Fiji Indians, in spite of recent troubles there.

The generalist argument, however inelegantly presented above, acts as a template for a quite specific archive. To get my narrative right, to be able to say things about diasporas as exemplary as well as reactionary sites of late modernity, I want to home in on the 12-million-strong Indian diaspora – in the history of migration a comparatively recent phenomenon, although it may be argued that the modern Indian diaspora has a longer history which is in fact contiguous with an older wanderlust, the *ghummakar* tradition, that took the gypsies to the Middle East and to Europe, fellow Indians to South-East Asia and Sri Lanka as missionaries and conquerors, and traders to the littoral trading community around the Arabian Sea.¹ Rethinking the argument that 'it was poverty at home that pushed them [Indians] across the ocean [to Africa]', M. G. Vassanji writes in his recent novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* 'but surely there's that wanderlust first, that itch in the sole, that hankering in the soul that puffs out the sails for journey into the totally unknown?' (2004: 17). This Indian diaspora (excluding the Tamils of Sri Lanka) is a complex social formation, in fact an extraordinarily rich archive, which, in Ranjana Khanna's words (after Derrida) is 'both collective memory and the origin of memory' (Khanna 2003: 271).

To explore the narrative of the Indian diaspora critically, we may want to read it as two relatively autonomous archives designated by the terms 'old' and 'new'. The old (that is, early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically,

nineteenth-century indenture) and the new (that is, late modern or late capitalist) traverse two quite different kinds of topography. The subjects of the old ('before the world was thoroughly consolidated as transnational' [Spivak 1996: 245]) occupy spaces in which they interact by and large with other colonized peoples with whom they have a complex relationship of power and privilege as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam; the subjects of the new are people who have entered metropolitan centres of Empire or other white settler countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA as part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration.² The cultural dynamics of the latter are often examined within a multicultural theory. There are, of course, Indians, part-comprador, part-indenture, with long histories in many parts of Africa, notably East Africa, whose life-worlds have been the subject of some very fine writing by the twice-displaced Indian-Canadian writer M. G. Vassanji. As is clear from Vassanji's treatment of 'Shamsi' traders of Gujarat who migrated to East Africa, the binary of the 'old' and the 'new' offered here is not meant to isolate communities or to situate experiences within non-negotiable or exclusive frames. It should be self-evident that the 'old' has become part of the 'new' through re-migrations such as Fiji-Indians to Vancouver or Trinidadian-Indians to Toronto (one thinks of the transnational life of Ms Neela Mahendra of Lilliput-Blefuscu, the unhappy South Pacific isles inhabited by the Indo-Lilly in Salman Rushdie's novel *Fury*) and that the old has not been immune to a general electronic media culture that has tended to redefine subjectivities along different lines of what Manuel Castells (1996) has termed the 'net and the self'. I keep the distinction of the 'old' and the 'new' not because the binary has to be defended or that the binary is incontestable; it is made because Indian intellectuals of the diaspora (Appadurai, Radhakrishnan and Bhabha, among many others) presume that the lives of the Indian NRIs (the 'new' diaspora of 'non-resident Indians') constitute the self-evidently legitimate archive with which to explore histories of diasporic subjectivities. They have also tended to presume that the 'new' presents itself as the dominant (and indeed the more exciting) site for purposes of diasporic comment. The binary therefore has a strategic function: it recognizes an earlier phase of migration, the psychic imaginary of which involved a reading of India based on a journey that was complete, a journey that was final.

The 'old' and the 'new' Indian diasporas (as I have called them) reflect the very different historical conditions that produced them.³ The distinction between the old and the new becomes clearer when we note that the 'new' surfaces precisely at the moment of (post)modern ascendancy; it comes with globalization and hypermobility, it comes with modern means of communication already fully formed or in the making (airplanes, telephone, e-mail, the internet, videocassettes, DVD, video-link, webcam) and it comes, since 2003, with the gift of dual citizenship from India (the Indian Citizenship Act 1955 has been amended to allow the Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Italy to retain dual citizenship). In a thoroughly global world the act of displacement