

The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary

Vijay Mishra

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Vijay Mishra's latest book returns to one of his earliest subjects of research—the literature of the Indian diaspora—with particular attention to those communities shaped by experiences of indenture. With sustained and insightful readings of individual authors including V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and M.G. Vassanji positioned alongside investigations of less well-known diasporic writers and careful archival research, this book will appeal not only to those students and scholars with an interest in South Asian diasporic literatures and communities, but also to those with an interest in Canadian and Caribbean literature, as well as in subaltern studies.

The introduction to *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* provides a cogent overview of the idea of diaspora, introducing the complex interplay between continuity and discontinuity that is inevitably the lot of the diasporic subject. One of its particular strengths is its recognition and examination of the link between current postcolonial diaspora studies and the origin of the notion of diaspora in discussions of Jewish history and culture. Though the origins of the term are well-known, the theoretical shift implied in utilizing “diaspora” to refer to such disparate groups as those of Indian descent living outside India and those of African descent living outside Africa rarely receives such theoretically nuanced discussion.

The first two chapters focus on the ideologies and aesthetics of those Indian diasporas formed by indenture, with particular emphasis on Fiji and Trinidad, along with Mauritius. In bringing together archival research and an examination of the material and political conditions of India's varied diasporas along with careful attention to the aesthetics of the literature produced by these communities and their writers, Mishra's book responds to the need for specificity so often reiterated within postcolonial studies, while simultaneously attending to the texts he examines as works of art, an approach which some scholars critical of the direction of postcolonial studies argue the discipline tends to neglect. In so doing, he strikes a difficult balance.

The third chapter focuses on the work of V.S. Naipaul, with particular attention to what Mishra terms “traumatic memory.” This section unpacks the controversy that has surrounded Naipaul's writings about both India and Islam, arguing that, rather than revealing an odious, pro-colonial stance, Naipaul's contentious comments actually reveal the extent of his

diasporic trauma, evident in both his fiction and his nonfiction. The first three sections of this book also provide insight into the complex relationship between those of Indian and African descent in the Caribbean, helpfully elucidating the relationship of the Indian diaspora to a variety of nationalisms in Fiji, Trinidad and, of course, South Asia.

Chapter four, “Diaspora and the Multicultural State,” focuses specifically on Canada, its official policy of multiculturalism and attendant debates about recognition which rely heavily on the work of Charles Taylor. While much has already been said on the subject, relatively little attention has been paid to how questions of recognition impact the Indian diaspora in its cultural and historical particularity, an omission which Mishra addresses. Some of Canada’s most celebrated authors, such as Rohinton Mistry and M.G. Vassanji, are analyzed alongside emerging voices such as Yasmin Ladha. This chapter will be of particular relevance to Canadianists, and to anyone with an interest in debates over multiculturalism.

Chapter five continues the investigation into “the law of the hyphen” and, like the previous chapters, provides a nuanced and balanced discussion of authors—Bharati Mukherjee and Hanif Kureishi—whose depictions of the Indian diasporic community and statements on identity and belonging have sometimes proven controversial. Indeed, Mishra directly and sympathetically engages and contextualizes the unease that communities feel when works of fiction depict these communities, their members or their beliefs in an unflattering light, while unpacking and challenging cultural claims to the autonomy of the work of art and the unimpeachable right to free speech. Mishra’s attention to the complexity of the hyphen carefully sidesteps easy celebrations of both hybridity and authenticity, and offers suggestive ways of understanding the dynamics of diaspora culture sure to be of relevance to students and scholars of other diasporic communities and literatures.

Mishra’s inquiry into diasporic responses to highly charged works of literature continues in chapter six, which examines the work of Salman Rushdie, with particular attention to the content and reception of *The Satanic Verses* (1989). Despite Rushdie’s status as the most oft-examined postcolonial writer, and the extensive extant body of work examining the so-called affair surrounding the publication, banning and burning of *The Satanic Verses* (and of course the resultant *fatwa*), Mishra’s analysis still breaks new ground. In particular, Mishra demonstrates that as the attention to Rushdie’s novel intensified on a variety of fronts the positions expressed on its status as fiction, on the question of free speech and a variety of other issues became more and more rigid and incommensurable.

Mishra’s conclusion returns to familiar postcolonial territory, as he evaluates a novel written in Fiji Hindi with an eye towards the question of subaltern speech. Reiterating other scholars such as Harish Trivedi, Mishra agrees that it is not the subaltern’s ability to speak in and of itself that is in question, but his/her ability to speak out to us, the elite. Here, for Mishra, is the crux of the diasporic condition: “All diasporas are unhappy,

for if and when the subaltern absolute Other speaks, she can speak only to herself” (255). While this book provides ample evidence for the unhappiness of the diasporic condition, it also makes it clear that the diasporic condition can be spoken about to a wide audience—thoughtfully, usefully and provocatively.