

John McLaren

Faculty of Arts, Footscray park Campus, Victoria University, PO Box 14428 MCMC, Vic
8001.

(03) 9688 4449 (w); 9380 1152 (h); 9688 4324 (fax).

John.mclaren@vu.edu.au

Dialect of the Diaspora—Sourceland, Empire and Homelands.

John McLaren

While oil and water are the most important physical factors of international politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the most important human factors are population and migration. Population pressures are intricately connected with poverty and oppression, which in turn lead to the voluntary migration of millions in search of better economic opportunities and the involuntary migration of other millions in flight from tyranny and oppression. Yet this distinction is itself of doubtful validity, when economic conditions are so bleak as to generate activity that produces the threats to life that drive out refugees, and are themselves a form of oppression. The term diaspora, which makes no distinction based on the reasons behind the fact of emigration, is the most useful tool for conceiving this vast flood of humanity that is forcing a complete reconsideration of such concepts as nations, strangers, aliens and refugees, and is generating new forms of oppression masked by such terms as border-control or counter-terrorism. The history and writing of the Indian diaspora offers some possibility of coming to terms with this phenomenon that has now moved from the margins to the centre of the world stage.

The first great Indian diaspora started during the nineteenth century, when Indian labourers were indentured to replace slave labour on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, Africa and Fiji, and to work on the new rubber plantations of Malaya. A second diaspora has occurred during the twentieth century, again of unskilled workers seeking this time to better

themselves on the oilfields of the Middle East and in the cities of Britain. Simultaneously, a third diaspora has taken educated members of the middle or upper classes both from India and from the countries of the first diaspora to seek greater freedom or greater economic and professional opportunities in America, Britain and Australia.

The tales of the first generations of these migrations remained untold outside their families and communities, until in the later years of the twentieth century their descendants joined the third diaspora, travelled the world and started to write the histories of their forebears. Even today, it seems the tales of those who emigrated to Africa remain untold, or at least I have not been able to find them. But there has been a wealth of writing from members of the diaspora in the Americas, in England, in Malaysia and Singapore, in Australia and in the Fiji, where the children of Rama and of Allah, cut off from their sourcelands by the seas of empire, are engaged in the work of building new nations. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in their magisterial work, *The Empire Writes Back*, trace the process of new writing in English through the three stages of assimilation, abnegation and appropriation. These writers from the diaspora belong to the third of these stages. They have appropriated the English language, made it thoroughly their own, used it to tell their own tales. They all write of the diaspora. But they also write to the centre, either from the diaspora or for the diaspora. Finally, many also write back to the source of the diaspora, in the now decolonised nations of south Asia.

Particular writers of course move between these categories, and refuse to be contained by them. VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje have respectively produced the three kinds of writing I have suggested, but all also move well beyond it. Naipaul considers himself an English writer, but he constantly reports from the diaspora to the centre. Rushdie considers that we are all migrants now, and makes the diaspora itself both subject and object of his novels. He writes for the diaspora, looking to its members as both his subjects and his

readers. Yet he also addresses the history and politics of the imperial centre and writes back to his sub-continent. Ondaatje has written in both of these forms, and has written as an insider in his new cultures. But he has also written back to his native country, Sri Lanka, in both memoirs and fiction. The writers I examine in this paper—Shiva Naipaul, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry and Adib Khan—all have a narrower range of work, through which the issues of their relation to the diaspora can be seen more clearly.

VS Naipaul gave us the idea of mimic culture to describe both the habits and institutions perpetuated in the new states formed in the wake of colonialism and the way of life of members of the diaspora who continued to find themselves in minorities within the dominant language and culture that they had adopted, whether in their homelands or abroad. Shiva Naipaul adopts this theme in both his book of essays, *The Dragon's Mouth*, and in his novel *A Hot Country*. His title essay is a reworking of his brother's autobiographical story of *A House for Mr Biswas*, but in analytic rather than comic mode. It is about the author's escape 'from the island whose narrow confines and tropical sameness had always seemed like a prison', his subsequent disillusion, and the causes of his failure to achieve his high ambitions. These causes he traces to the meaningless rote learning, enforced by the leather strap, of his schooldays, and to his constant dreams of escape from the tawdry everyday reality across the seas and the horizon to the exotic lands of his schoolbooks, or into the spectres, unattached to any reality he saw around him, that existed within the covers of the books in his father's glass-fronted book-case or in the arcane bookshop he found in one of the back streets of the Queen's Park Savannah. In one of these books he wrote of himself at the age of eighteen, 'I was haphazardly cobbled together from bits and pieces taken from anywhere ... I had inherited no culture, not particular outlook, no particular form.' His lack of a common culture left him with no collective form to make sense of his existence, to bring together the searchings of his mind and the reality about him. The Hindu culture known to the older

members of his family had disintegrated, as had their links with the countryside. He shared the street he grew up in with Negroes, Creoles or Coloureds, and Chinese, but they remained strangers to one another, 'linked by nothing except ... physical proximity—by the stark, unaccountable fact of ... having been washed up on the same street, one of many, many streets like it, in the capital city of a distant outpost of the British Empire.'¹ He observed without comprehension the stories of those around him, but in this island of stories he remained a man without stories.

In his novel, *A Hot Country*, Shiva Naipaul begins to tell these stories. Many of the characters—the father with his book-case, the bookseller, the abandoned girls, the Oxford sophisticate—seem to come from his essay, but he has changed the setting from Trinidad to the fictional nation of Cuyama. Geographically, this seems to be Guyana, but culturally it is another Trinidad.

The novel begins with the horrific beating a schoolgirl by her schoolmaster father, who sees in her denial of God a denial of everything by which he has lived. His teaching is meaningless cramming for examinations, and without a God to give a purpose to his daily drudgery, his life is futile. This scene foreshadows the plot of the novel, in which nothing happens except the realisation that all of its characters are living lives of failure and emptiness. Although the girl who is beaten graduates from the University of Cuyama with a degree in English literature, it leaves her without purpose. Her husband has returned from Oxford to establish a book-shop and lead an intellectual and political renaissance in his country, but his dreams peter out, his few attempts to actively improve lives end in failure, and the books, unread and unsold, merely gather dust on his shelves. The visit of his friend from Oxford, from which both man and woman expect much, brings only realisation of their failures. The intellectually ambitious bookseller is descended from a family of white slave-owners, his wife is of mixed Indian and Portuguese descent, but they are unable to make any

connection with the blacks who surround them or to offer them any meaningful alternative to the slogans of Black Power to assuage the sullen and resentful anger of their neighbours.

Liberalism, built on the prosperity of the imperial metropolis, is without meaning to the inhabitants of the countries it has discarded as they have become useless.

The brothers Naipaul are victims of a double diaspora that has left them without function in their home country and doomed to remain outsiders, 'mimic men', in the metropolis. The similarities of their works are not due to genetics, but their common upbringing, which taught them to identify with the values of an England that would never accept them as its own. They became instead acute observers of the follies of other heirs of colonialism, but they are no more able to enter into the lives of the actors in the drama of the new nations than they are able to find fullness in their own. Although VS Naipaul applied the term 'wounded civilisation' to India, the term really applies to the British Empire that in the brothers' books continues to resonate in the lives of the characters they create and the people they meet. In the dialectic of their writing, the empire has severed their ties with their source culture and taken from their home countries the possibilities of fullness, but has given them no place in the centre to which they continue to write.

There are alternative ways of producing a post-imperial culture. Derek Walcott gives a voice to the blacks of his native Caribbean. In Omeros and other works, he takes from the empire the instruments that make a universal world from daily life in the tiny islands. By turning their dreams into work, they make themselves heirs of two civilisations. In a very different way, David Dabydeen finds useful intellectual work for the heirs of the diaspora, both in his ancestral home of Guyana and the place of his upbringing, England. First, however, he has had to recover, literally, the voice of his ancestors. To write of the present, in which he has moved from the second to the third diaspora, he has had first to write of the first.

David Dabydeen underwent conventional education in a London grammar school and then at Cambridge, but while he graduated with the ability to write academic prose, he had to teach himself his forebears' creole, the language of the Guyanan canefields, before he could write of either Guyana or London. The creole verses of his *Slave Song* bring together the brutality of the life inflicted on slaves and indentured labourers together with the victims' continuing assertion of their humanity through the traditional Hindu ceremonies they enact and the carnal desire they direct against the white oppressors. Their own language protects them as they fantasise aloud about the white woman who interrupts their ceremony'

White hooman walk tru de field fo watch we canecutters

Tall, straight, straang-limb,

Hair sprinkle in de wind like gold-duss,

Lang lace frock loose on she bady like bamboo-flag,

An flesh mo dan hibiscus early maan, white an saaf an wet

Flowering in she panty.

O Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!²

The hint of TS Eliot in the last line, and the combination of personal name and greeting, suggests the distance between the two cultures of master and slave, mistress and those condemned to serve her in one sense, desirous to serve her in the other.

The language of *Slave Song* leads Dabydeen to his *Coolie Odyssey*, where he uses a standard English to share the experiences of oppressor and oppressed:

Now that peasantry are in vogue,

Poetry bubbles from the peat bogs,

People strain for the old folk's fatal gobs

Coughed up in grates North or North East

'Tween bouts of living dialect,

It should be time to hymn your own wreck,
 Your house the source of ancient song:
 Dry coconut shells crackling in the fireside
 Smoking up your children's eyes and lungs,
 Plantains spitting oil from a clay pot,
 Thick sugary black tea gulped down.³

The bitter satire directed in the first lines against western connoisseurs of the primitive turns back in the second part of the stanza on the people of the diaspora themselves. It is they whom he admonishes to hymn their own wreck, to look at the house which holds ancient song for them, where the crackling fire with its smoke stinging their children's eyes, the plantains spitting and the tea being gulped, are simultaneously images of poverty and sustenance.

Dabydeen refuses to be a victim, and makes of a past resistance to victimhood a source of present strength. His poem, dedicated to the memory of his mother., describes the progress of his contemporaries from boyhood in Guyana to young adulthood in Britain to their present status doing slow trade in their corner shops while they recall the imagined glory of cricket in their youth, while their voices retain the steel band, the freshness of the sea and the beaming of the sun. He then moves back to remember the harsh lives of his grandparents, their long odyssey from India and the brave, defeated walk down the plank from the boat to the jungle, the old man who dreamed of India and died of rum, the constant toil, the 'library of graves' where his grandparents were buried to the sound of Presbyterian hymns, and the continuing dreams of Eldorado and of green night that kept them going. He dedicates his poems, written in English basements, to keeping their memory 'fleshed in the emptiness of folk', earning the plaudits of the plaudits of its listeners like flags at a Hindu ceremony.

In his novels, Dabydeen takes these lives directly into the English present, where the

descendants of the coolies are brought together in a new community. The narrator of *The Intended* has spent his childhood in Guyana, which has given him neither the privileges nor the dreams the Naipauls enjoyed in Trinidad. Brought up in the town of New Amsterdam by a deserted mother, his emotional life has come from his grandparents, whom he visits in the village where they still make their existence from the land. His father sends for him from London, but then abandons him to the welfare, who place him in a cheerless and brutal boys' home. He attends a South London school where he finds himself in a regrouping of the Asian diaspora.

Shaz, of Pakistani parents, was born in Britain, had never travelled to the sub-continent, could barely speak a word of Urdu and had never seen the interior of a mosque. Nasim was more authentically Muslim, a believer by upbringing, fluent in his ancestral language and devoted to family. Patel was of Hindu stock, could speak Gujarati; his mother ... wore a sari and a dot on her forehead. I was an Indian West-Indian Guyanese, the most mixed-up of the lot. There we were in our school blazers and ties and grey trousers, but the only real hint of our shared Asian-ness was the brownness of our skins. Even that was not uniform.⁴

Their Asian-ness is both a bond between them, enforced by the racism they encounter, and a source of shame.

Journeys on the Tube re-enact earlier journeys from their homelands. They are set apart from their neighbours, forced together among themselves. 'I knew ... that I was not an Asian but these people were yet my kin and my embarrassment. I wished I were invisible.'⁵ Their identity as Asians is imposed on them, but they each have to construct an identity of their choice from this and from the scraps of their past and the opportunities offered by the present. The narrator seeks his identity through education, but by telling his story he emphasises his determination to make anew in his life the history of his family. He is not prepared either to

accept the imposed identity of Asian or the acquired identity of English intellectual. Rather, he insists that he and his forebears are a part of English identity. Their labour provided the prosperity of the imperial metropolis; their presence is a constituent part of the post-imperial culture and society of England.

Dabydeen's second novel, *Disappearance*, turns the dialectic of the diaspora on its head. The empire educates its child, the engineer, away from any attachment to home or source culture, and then returns him to the metropolis to protect its shores from the erosion of the sea that first carried its own venturers to establish the empire. At first, it appears that the novel is going to present the reader with a view of England as now being the new nation, the erosion of its own identity being repaired by the emigrant from the colonies. The engineer, born in Guyana of African descent, is the heir of the Enlightenment. His work is to build dams that will protect the land of Guyana and of England from the river and the sea. He represents the straight edge of reason, and comes from the stretch of the empire to shore up the crumbling wall of the heart of the home country. For him the sea represents both the enemy and the unchanging movement that will wash away the past and leave him free from being fixed 'as an African, a West-Indian, a member of any particular nationality of any epoch' (p. 132).

Yet the ambiguity of the sea itself, constantly changing but never finally controllable, suggests the ambiguity of his own work, which finally reveals the corrosive lies at the heart of English order. The sea does not wash away the past, but reveals it. The empire cannot redeem the metropolis either by adopting its reason or by bringing to it a more encompassing mythology. The novel leaves us with individuals caught in their own moments of history, not with any vision of any emerging nation or identity. Dabydeen writes from the diaspora, but he writes not so much for the centre as for those migrants who now belong there but must still construct new identities for themselves and for those to whom they remain strangers.

Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi from Bombay now living in Canada, writes back to his homeland with a sense of loss, but his subject is not the betrayal of an ideal that was brought about represented by the original act of partition. Rather, it is the loss of the hope that came with the birth of the new country. Canada exists in his work mainly as a destination, a place that offers his characters a chance of escape from the despair that traps them. Its importance in the writing is the distance it offers the writer from his subject, which remains grounded in India, and particularly in Bombay. His first published book, *Tales of Firozsha Baag*, a collection of short stories, reads at times as a comic work, but there are already signs of discord beneath the comedy. In the final story, the narrator is a writer struggling to find a place in Canada while coming to terms with his earlier life in India. In between, the stories deal with betrayal, cricket, both violent and natural deaths, the struggle for survival in India and the temptations of emigration. These two threads, survival or escape, are brought together in the central story of the collection, 'Lend Me Your Light'. This opposes two bright young students, one an idealist who takes himself off to a small village where he works to break the hold of poverty on the villagers, the other, Jamshed, a cynic who succeeds in emigrating to pursue a life of material affluence in New York. The climax of the story comes when agents of the money-lenders murder a colleague of the man who has gone to work in the village. When Jamshed hears of this, he can only reply that it proves the truth of everything he had said. 'I told you from the beginning, all this was a waste of time and nothing would come of it.' He advises him again to emigrate to the United States, where 'if you are good at something, you are appreciated and you get ahead. Not like here, where everything is controlled by uncle-auntie.'⁶

Adib Khan is also a member of the third diaspora who now lives in Australia. As I have argued elsewhere, Chaudhary's emigrants do not travel in search of fortune, but to escape tradition. In his first novel, *Seasonal Adjustments*, the narrator, Iqbal Ahmed Chaudhary,

takes his daughter back to meet his family in their home in Bangladesh. Here he is treated as a man of substance. 'My surname bears the proud legacy of a Moghul title bestowed on chosen warriors. I come from a family of landowners. Zamindars. Tyrants and despots, some would say with justification. The fact that I live overseas gives me additional prestige. I live among white shahebs and memshahebs. That in itself is a laudable achievement.'⁷ These secure roots in the history of his family and nation are however immediately challenged. The villagers who accord him prestige cannot understand how he speaks English but does not live in England. The ancestral home has been reduced to rubble, leaving only a single wall standing. He is shadowed by rumours of his great grandfather's dark deeds, including keeping captive dancing girls for his pleasure and having Hindu intruders tortured and murdered. His dreams are tormented by man-horses galloping on the far side of the river. His cousin, now head of the family, is a devout Muslim who lives for material gain. The life of the village is threatened by developers who wish to raze it to make way for a factory.

The order of the nation which has replaced empire is ruptured by the violence at its core, and by the corruption engendered by the global economy that is the contemporary expression of empire. But the new economy has done nothing to alleviate the congenital poverty, and Iqbal finds as little dignity and purpose in the harshness of life as he had when he was a practising Muslim. He recalls his schooldays, when the cultural havoc wrought by the contradictory claims of Catholic brothers and fiery mullahs made him an alien in his own land. His attempts to renew his connection with the life of his native country fail ludicrously. When he leaves the protection of the family guards to drift among the people he finds his life threatened. When he wanders into the countryside he becomes lost. When he seeks out an old student friend, he finds the bond of idealism they once shared irrecoverable, destroyed by time and by his own act of betrayal during the Pakistan-Bangladesh war. He eventually fails in his feeble attempts to save the village from a development that even its victims accept. His

desire to escape from this violence and corruption led the narrator to escape to Australia, but his new home fails to give him the contentment he seeks. It too is corrupted and threatened by globalisation, and his attempt to become a part of its order through marriage is jeopardised by religion. Iqbal can be at home in no country and in no religion. His eventual acceptance of this, and his acknowledgement that the fabric of his life cannot be separated into its individual strands, enable him to return to Australia, where the diaspora, the acceptance of being the stranger between homes, provides the only place he can belong. For his daughter, Australia offers a future where she can acknowledge the dual cultures to which she is heir. Iqbal finally accepts the truth of what his confidant and counsellor, Claire, had told him when she sent him back to :Heal yourself in your spiritual womb': 'The good things from the past can never be taken away. They are a part of you. Don't neglect them. Treat your memories well and they will work for you.'⁸ Accepting that he lives between cultures and religions, he is able to write of the diaspora back to his former country and family, and forward to his adopted country and his daughter. The old imperial centre has become irrelevant.

It seems to me that this is what the writers of the diaspora have to teach us in an age of globalisation, an age in which Salman Rushdie has told us we are all migrants. The ancient home is irrecoverable, the new nations are yet to be made. The empire is dead, but it lives on in the fact of the western culture that it spread world-wide, in the diaspora that has taken the subject cultures to the globe's furthest imagined corners, and in the forces of modernisation and globalisation that threaten universal alienation. These writers have learned that they cannot go back to their homelands or their source cultures, but neither can they belong in the new lands to which they carry their pasts. As nation states attempt to close their boundaries to the latest waves of migrating strangers, they remind us that we are all strangers, and that as we welcome the other strangers in our midst we can make the new nations which will allow

us all to freely choose our identities in a world with homes but no boundaries. The diaspora will not be merely the product of conflict between empire and nation, globalisation and the local, but its resolution, as we learn to direct our energies from the mere recovery of the past to a dialogue of all cultures that will find its fulfilment in the future.

Bibliography

- Ashcroft, Bill. Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, Routledge, London/New York, 1989.
- Dabydeen, David. *Slave Song*, Dangaroo, Sydney/Mundelstrup, Denmark/Coventry, 1984.
- Dabydeen, David. *Coolie Odyssey*, Hansib/Dangaroo, Coventry, 1988.
- Dabydeen, David. *The Intended*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1991.
- Dabydeen, David. *Disappearance*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1993.
- Hodge, Bob and Mishra, Vijay. *Dark Side of the Dream*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1990.
- Khan, Adib. *Seasonal Adjustments*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994.
- McLaren, John. *States of Imagination*, Prestige/Australian Scholarly Publishing, New Delhi/Melbourne, 2001.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Faber, London/Boston, 1992 [Penguin Canada, 1987].
- Naipaul, VS. *The Overcrowded Baracoon*, Deutch, London, 1972.
- Naipaul, Shiva. *Beyond the Dragon's Mouth*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1984.
- Naipaul, Shiva. *In a Hot Country*, Penguin, London, 1985 [Hamish Hamilton, London, 1983].
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands*, Granta/Viking, London, 1981.

¹ Shiva Naipaul, *The Dragon's Mouth*, pp. 23, 31.

² David Dabydeen, 'The Cane Cutters' Song', *Slave Song*, p. 25.

³ David Da bydeen, 'Coolie Odyssey', *Coolie Odyssey*, p. 9.)

⁴ David Dabydeen, *The Intended*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶ Rohinton Mistry, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, p. 192.

⁷ Adib Khan, *Seasonal Adjustments*, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 21.