



**The Diaspora Sensibility in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*
and M. G. Vassanji's *The In-between World of Vikram Lall***

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The postcolonial text focuses on migrations, forced or voluntary, in socio-political and cultural contexts and both at individual and collective levels. The forced migration for indentured labour, slavery and sometimes under the compulsion of existence scattered the people of colonies across the world. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define diaspora as hereunder:

“...the notion of diaspora of people's has become increasingly common in describing the combination of migrancy and continued cultural affiliation that characterizes many racial, ethnic and national groups scattered throughout the world. Where immigration connotes the travel from one country to another, diaspora is scattering throughout the world from one geographical location.” (Ashcroft 425)

According to Pramod K. Nayar, the Greek term diaspora means “to disperse in the voluntary or forced movement of people from their homeland into new regions. In the endeavour to straddle between two cultures; the old one which is lost and the new one which is acquired, diasporic writing is characterised by dislocation from and relocation to a new place.” (Nayar 184)

One of the most relevant terms in the post-colonial literature is the diaspora, which deals with displacement and shifting of millions of people, not just on physical, but also psychological and emotional grounds. In fact, the term was initially used to describe the Jewish dispersions after the Babylonian conquests. But, later on, the term gained prominence due to the Imperial process. In the beginning, the European forces intruded in the colonies as traders and to establish themselves, they needed cheap labour. As a result, the poor illiterate people from colonies were transported as indentured labours to diverse locations. These mass migrations disrupted the existing order and it proved a moment of exhilaration as well as trauma for both the immigrants and the indigenous people. Thus the diaspora denotes a sense of scattering and loss. These forced migrations created a sense of ‘otherness’ and the dislocated people never felt at home in alien lands. Their urge to go back to their homelands perished by and by with their deaths or further dislocations. As a result the whole world got divided into a geographical and social binary system of native/foreign, home/alien and so on. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins refer to diaspora in *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies* as below:

“Diasporas, the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions, is a central historical fact of colonisation. Colonisation itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions.”
(Ashcroft 69)

Under the colonial rule, the compulsory mass-migrations created a number of diasporic communities across the world. The native people are distanced from their homeland. The immigrants understood the significance of their homeland only when they viewed it from a distance. Such migrations resulted in diverse issues such as mixing of cultures and hybridisation of identities. As Abha Pandey states, “Diasporic writing reveal the experience of unsettlement and dislocation, at some or the other level. A diasporic text can be examined in terms of location, dislocation and relocation.” (Pandey 121) The diasporic writers portray the anguish and trauma of dislocation of the immigrants. They convey the pain of their separation from their roots, which is either out of compulsion or out of choice. The roots of a tree support and strengthen its existence and growth, and the deeper the roots, the stronger the tree’s existence will be. Similar is the case of the tree of human existence, when deeply rooted in its own soil, the growth is fast and

spontaneous, but when uprooted and planted somewhere else, it mars its growth and makes the existence more challenging and that marks the pain of the Diaspora. The wistful yearning for the lost home and nostalgia for the past become a traumatic experience. As Benedict Anderson states,

“Diasporas need to be grasped as de-territorialised imagined communities which conceive of themselves, despite their dispersal, as sharing a collective past and common destiny, and hence also a simultaneity in time.” (Anderson 14)

These dislocations are not only geographical, but psychological and emotional as well. The yearning for homeland is not just for some geographical country, but also for a passionate landscape of mind, the emotion-filled reservoir of memory. The diasporic communities are not able to correlate their identity with any of these places neither with their homeland nor with the host country, and it creates a split in their existence. The host seems to be always hostile to them. As Edward Said reflects on the state of exile in *The Mind of Winter*, “He dwells the sense of loss, the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home.” (Said 173) This rift between the self and true home is very subtle. In this sense, memory plays a vital role in the lives of these communities. The memories of the homeland give birth to nostalgia for the roots. They suffer from a sense of alienation and loss. This is not one-time pain of dislocation, but a loss which migrants bear throughout their lives. The common sharing of history gives a sense of belonging to one’s motherland.

The present paper underscores the representation of the Indian diaspora by Amitav Ghosh and M. G. Vassanji. They both dive deep into the pain and anguish of the diasporic individuals and communities. The loss of ‘home’ is a big loss, because when there is no home, there is no security, people without home are open to all the dangers of the world. Their novels travel across the colonial and post-colonial times and the scattering and dispersion of the people go hand in hand with historical changes, especially the changes in the geographical boundaries, under the colonial regimes. The various issues of the diaspora, memory, loss and feeling of otherness get an intense exploration through the lives of characters in several works of fiction. Through the mesmerising tales of their characters they visit and revisit their origins and try to relive and return to the lost home. In his *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie tries to revisit his parental home and contemplates thus:

“It reminds me that it is my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.” (Rushdie 9)

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* is a significant diasporic novel. It explores an array of characters who suffer from the anguish and trauma of dislocation and dispersion. People are displaced repeatedly from one place to other as a consequence of imperialistic expansion. According to Dipanjoy Mukherjee, “It is a novel about various places, displacements, identity conflicts, wars, subjugations and exiles.” (Mukherjee 71) *The Glass Palace* opens with the introduction of a displaced orphan, Raj Kumar. The story takes a move with devastation and dislocation. The Indian orphan, Rajkumar, is enchanted by the glory of the Royal Palace, but that glory does not stay for long. On November 14, 1885, the English Empire hit Burma and attacks the Royal Palace. The Royal family is forced to leave Burma overnight. Everything happens so smoothly that the kingdom changes hands and people could not even resist all that. The novel takes real history along with its plot to portray the stories of fictitious characters. The imaginary characters dive deep into the history and explore the pathetic tales of diaspora. The fall of the Burmese kingdom and the uprooting of the Royal family is a real event from history:

“This is how power is eclipsed: in a moment of vivid realism, between the waning of one fantasy of governance and its replacement by the next; in an instant when the world springs free of its mooring of dreams and reveals itself to be girdled in the pathway of survival and self preservation.” (TGP, 41-42)

When the Royal Family enters the mansion built for their stay in Madras, the king never steps out of his room as he becomes apprehensive of his unprecedented future. As a part of their never ending unpredictable journey, the family is shifted to Ratnagiri, there is only one maid servant left with them from the palace, Dolly, who has served the Royal family for more than twenty years. It is a never-ending exile that not only uproots the Royal family from their motherland, but even the family loses its identity forever. In the beginning, the administration takes care of their status but gradually, the living conditions deteriorate. The loss is not only of the Royal

identity, but even as individuals they are not free to choose a better and dignified life for them. Throughout their lives the members of the Royal family feel the pain and nostalgia for their lost home, motherland, power and status. In this sense of loss, the king always remains aloof from the world around. He never meets people and has stopped all sort of communication with the family. He has an undying urge to go back to his homeland one day, when the appropriate time comes. Tapas Chakraborty mentions, “The writer reminds one how inseparable is the text of colonialism, imperialism and the forced first wave of diaspora.” (Chakraborty 137) For the first generation diaspora, the sense of loss is more intense and deep because the experience of physical dislocation makes the pain unbearable. Similar is the suffering of the Royal family. Rest of the family members start adapting to the new environment and change their identity, costume and culture accordingly:

“In their early years in India, the princesses usually dressed in Burmese clothes – aingyis and htameins, but as the years passed their garments also changed. One day, no one quite remembered when, they appeared in saris – not expensive and sumptuous saris, but simple and green and red cottons of the district.” (TGP, 76-77)

The Glass Palace reveals the large scale devastation done by the colonial rule to nations, cultures, families, individuals which change the whole course of their lives. In this novel, Amitav Ghosh moves interestingly from macrocosmic to microcosmic details, from the global upheaval to the individual turbulence. The novelist also moves from gross destruction to the subtle losses that are irreparable. Individuals as well as families go off track for centuries to come.

The Glass Palace sweeps through three generations who endlessly suffer in the hands of colonial power. The colonial domination first of all leads the Royal Burmese family to exile and then the Empire indulges in the World War-II. With the passing years, ‘Outram house’ (name of the house where the Royal family is staying in Ratnagiri) turns into a slum. The queen is outraged at such conditions and many a time she complains to the local officials, but no one takes the responsibility of the worsened conditions of the captive family. Once they had been the rulers of Golden land, Burma, and now they are reduced to mere prisoners and going to die in the same condition. Amitav Ghosh profoundly displays the greed of the Colonial Empire by interweaving fiction with history. As a result of their greed, people are not only losing their roots, but their national identity and properties also. The Empire spreading across the world gives birth to the large

scale dislocation of people. The uprooting of the Royal family, their captivity and exile are the result of colonial greed and lust. The British invasion in the city of Mandalay makes it a 'city of ghosts'. King's own army that has escaped the countryside starts invading and attacking the city. The Royal family as well as the common people become homeless and they struggle to find a 'home'. The scattering and dispersion gives rise to the diaspora consciousness. Under the colonial rule everyone's life is dislocated from the 'centre'.

Rajkumar shows an undying urge for survival. He remembers with a heavy heart that he also had a family, but now he is left all alone in the world. He is approximately ten years old and has lost his parents during their migration from Chittagong to North Burma. Raj Kumar is mistreated by the natives and they call him 'kaala'. The story of displacement starts with this orphan Raj Kumar. He starts working at Ma Cho's (half Indian lady) food stall for survival. His life is shaped and reshaped by the colonial forces. Apart from an individual character he is a representative of those countless people who are left as homeless wanderers under the colonial process. The colonial invasion on Burma, devastation of the Royal Palace and migration of the Royal family are the circumstances that force Rajkumar to fight against all odds and to survive in every situation. In the meantime, Ma Cho leaves her food-stall and elopes forever. Rajkumar has nowhere to go, so he decides to join Saya Jones (a teak trader) in his business. Rajkumar and Saya Jones' association highlights the extreme of the British greed and lust. In a broader perspective the British Empire exploits not only the natives but also the natural resources. Rajkumar Raha becomes a small part of this large network of exploitation. In her review of *The Glass Palace*, Rukmini Bhaya Nair describes the situation:

“Colonialism had movement built into its definition: troop on the march, drastic changes in administration, large scale transfer of goods and reconfiguration of political boundaries. Consequently, any writer who sought to present the human soul under colonialism was therefore condemned to record the existentialism dilemma wherein the subject has been necessarily partitioned, a bewildered immigrant never quite in focus nor contained within the frame.” (Nair 173)

Ghosh has given a minute detail of how everything, human resources and natural resources are exploited to fulfill the colonial greed. After few years, teak has been replaced by oil wells and

thus, the natural resources remain the primary target of exploitation. Charu Sharma rightly observes, “The Empire always struck at and stayed in nations which were mines of natural resources—be it India or Africa.” (Sharma 93) The colonial rule reflects the extreme of human greed for material pursuit. Be it people or material wealth, everything is looted, uprooted and destroyed very brutally.

Same is the state of mind of the main character in M. G. Vassanji’s *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*. The novel begins with the sense of diaspora of the main character, Vikram Lall. He starts with his own sense of loss, he honestly admits that he has lost his integrity of character and he is the most corrupt man in Kenya. Farrukh Faizan Mir states, “For Vikram, this obscurity of his identity continues to cripple him morally as well as emotionally way into his later years.” (Mir 4) The story moves to past reminiscences, the time when he is eight years old and lives in Nakuru, Kenya with his whole family. He starts his story in his innocent time of childhood. He and his sister Deepa used to play with British and African Playmates, Bill, Annie and Njoroge, hardly aware of the difference of identity and belongingness. He does not know that they are the subject of the repressive colonial rule. It is only the family atmosphere which makes him realise that his own identity is drifted apart in between Britain and Kenya. His family runs a provisional store in the market where, Indian community has set up their own shopping centre. It is India in miniature, as depicted in the lines below:

“At the other end of the mall from us, Lakshmi sweets was always bustling at midmorning, Indian families having stopped over in their cars for bhajias, samosas, dhokras, bhel-puri and tea, which they consumed noisily and with gusto.” (TIWVL, 6)

Vikram’s family is so nostalgic for roots that they eat Indian food, wear Indian dresses and sing Hindi film songs. His parents also order their snacks from ‘Lakshmi Sweets’. Vikram’s family has been living in Kenya for the last three Generations. His grandfather has been transported to Kenya to work as an indentured labourer, who later on decides to stay in Kenya only. Many a time his grandfather reminds the circumstances under which he had to cross ‘Black water’, as the exiling oceans are called in his homeland. “What makes a man leave the land of their birth, the home of those childhood memories that will haunt him till his death bed.” (TIWVL, p. 17) Dada ji always

narrates stories of exploitation and sufferings of his early life in Kenya as indentured coolly. But so far as Vikram Lall is concerned he has never been to India, and it is a fantasy land for him:

“India was always fantasy land to me. To this day, I have never visited my dada’s birthplace. It was the place where that strange man with the narrow pointed face, bald head, and granny glasses, Gandhi ji.”
(TIWVL, p. 19)

As Farrukh Faizan Mir remarks, “This book unravels all the quintessential contours of diaspora, and the immigrant’s heart jolting search for his place, identity and completeness in the world around one thing, that stands out, in this work, is the account of people who are caught ‘in-between’. It validates how an individual is torn between the pressure of race and nation.” (Mir 5)

Vikram Lall knows nothing much about India which is very deep down in the consciousness of his family. No doubt his father is proud, being a British subject, but his mother can never give up her yearning for her motherland, India. There is the problem of assimilation and adoption with the new place and culture. The motherland always remains alive in her memory and the ups and downs of life make her sense of diaspora more intense. She always wants to go back to Peshawar, her birthplace. She is not able to connect to Kenya, it is not her country. It always remains a hostile foreign land for her. Even she complies with the situation in another manner. This is a home made by marriage, the county of her husband and children. Vikram reminds her of the time when on all Sundays there has been family gatherings, where all his family members, his dada, dadi, uncles, aunties and cousins gather. It seems as India becomes alive in that little drawing room. All have their own opinion regarding their subject hood to the Empire and their relocation in Kenya. It is the time of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation and all people living in colonies are ‘Her’ subject. Vikram’s father is a loyal subject of Queen Elizabeth. He is proud on being ruled by the British. Many a time mother objects him being so prudent but that never makes a difference:

“Mother and her brother shared a deep sense of exile from their birthplace, Peshawar. And since Peshawar was the ancestral home also of my dada Anand Lal, the rest of our family could somehow share in that exile, though not with the same intensity.” (TIWVL, p. 85)

The prevalent theme of exile in the novel creates the concern of place and displacement in the minds of the characters. But, for Vikram, the place where he is living is his very own. It is his birth place and how could he think about being the 'other'. Finally, in 1965, Kenya gets independence but the sense of otherness haunts all Indians. Independence does not come as a change which has been dreamt by the people. Not only the natives, but the Indian diaspora also realise that the independence is just an eyewash even a state of crisis for them. They are neither the British subject nor the Kenyans now. In 'Na Aane Wala Post-colonialism', Jaidev observes aptly,

“By paralleling two socio political systems, Vassanji brings home the fact that post-colonialism denotes continuity with the colonial era, rather than a break.” (Jaidev 182)

In fact, Vikram and his people always remain the 'other'. The difference is that only the ruler is changed. Gradually the close ties of friendship start changing as their present makes them totally different beings. They have different ideologies. They have started understanding the difference of their roots, belongingness and colours of their skin. They have their own past and different future in their lot, Vic mentions it like “we all carry the past inside us in some way. Njo, I said we can't help it.” (TIWVL, p. 160) The colonial ruler has just left and in this time of conflict and upheaval, people are trying to fix their identity and loyalty too. All previous identities are lost. They are neither the British subject nor the Kenyan. The predicament is not only of Indians, the Kenyan natives also feel dislocated and displaced in their own country. At the time of freedom struggle, Mau Mau fighters have laid down their properties, as well as their lives. But Independence comes as an instrument of exploitation in the hands of shrewd elite class. The suffering and exploitation of the common man almost remain the same. Vassanji very convincingly knits the national history with the individual histories of the characters. The state of 'not-at-homeness' makes lives of the natives more miserable. Diaspora is not only physical, but the psychological too, which is very intense.

In the novel, the author not only discusses the pain and diasporic anguish of the Indian migrants, but of the Kikuyu immigrants also, who are placed and displaced repeatedly due to colonial oppression and post-colonial bad governance. Those simple people are tortured brutally for no genuine reason. Mwangi, only the suspect of Mau Mau rebellion is detained and brutally

tortured. Mwangie's departure from Nkuru explores the adverse situation under which people have to leave their homeland. Here the question of survival becomes so prominent that their belonging to their homelands become secondary: "it is when the mother, that is the land says to her children, go elsewhere to fill your belly." (TIWVL, p. 105) Charu Sharma finds it as,

"A tragic romantic story; about the expatriate and immigrant community, be the Indian in Africa or the Asian in Canada or as a whole the South Asians who remain at a perpetual loss without their homeland."(Sharma 84)

No home means no security and this is the predicament of all diasporic migrant communities. Vassanji not only talks about the physical displacement, but also about the repeated process of location, dislocation and relocation. The second generation diaspora try to relate to the host country, but time and again they find themselves in the state of in-betweenness. The host is hostile and their roots are severed. The present becomes alien and the past is lost in time and space. In such conditions the abode of peace is lost somewhere. While narrating the tale of displacement and diaspora, Vikram is in Canada on his self-imposed exile, introspecting the course of events in his life. He realizes that the diasporic communities lose control over their lives as he has lost, and now at this moment of realization he is a mere helpless onlooker. Vassanji's apathy lurks through his protagonist Vikram Lall, who is pained by his state of in-betweenness and aimlessly wandering for his true identity. As Javed K. Shah opines,

"The diaspora's typical problem of identity is depicted in the novel by the inbetween position of the Asian community in Africa, as they were sandwiched between the whites and the blacks. Both Vassanji and his protagonist Vikram are diasporic and both turn to the West for stability and belongingness." (Shah 53)

Thus the above mentioned writers themselves share the status of the migrants. They have travelled through the colonial and the post-colonial periods and have lived and experienced the pain and suffering of the diaspora. The Indian diasporic writers are still in search of roots. In four hundred years of colonial history, it seems that time has stopped in the past. The presence of

colonial hegemony in the lives of the people of ex-colonies still run their lives. Past always remain alive in the memory, whether the gap between the present and the past roots is of generations but the yearning to go back never dies. 'Home' is not always glorious, but separation and distance makes it so. The sense of being 'other' in alien land, makes the home more enchanting. The memory becomes dominant with the first-generation diaspora who have spent a small span of life in their homeland, but the second and third generation frame a passionate mindscape to find an escape from the hostile host. Makrand Paranjape observes,

“The writers of the Indian diaspora have shifted grounds physically no doubt, but they still seem to be frozen in time, in their memory consciousness. Their stories reflect immigrant consciousness at work. The India that they create in their works is an India of the mind. The affiliation with the land of their ancestors occupied a permanent place in their mindscape and diasporic fiction is an attempt at articulating the past and replicating that space.” (Paranjape 9)

The past is not dead; it is very much alive in the present though full reclamation is not possible. The authors revisit the past through the diasporic communities in search of their roots. They research from the external to internal, from geographical to psychological, from social to individual, from gross to subtle. The dilemma of the lives of the immigrants is that they can neither uproot from their past nor relate to it. Diaspora is the very state of mind, which is in the endless quest for home.

In the present world, there are several mass movements for various reasons such as professional, economic, social and individual. The writers feel the pangs of displacement and they reflect the pain in their novels through the traumatic ordeals of their characters. They recall the challenges of the first generation of diaspora and at the same time the process of assimilation. Now the sense of diaspora is not as intense and deep, but home always denotes security and stability. The circumstances have changed, the migrations are not forced now-a-days but the crisis of identity is still a challenge for the migrants. The identity is torn apart between the land of origin and the land of adoption. In the contemporary times when the world has become a global town, home still symbolises security. The people as well as the authors long for security. The world is still grappling with the state of dislocation and displacement. But, at the same time, there may be

another angle of looking at the whole situation, divided between the physical locations. One can be homeless in both the cases or can establish a home at both the places, which leads the world towards global citizenship.

Abbreviations Used

TGP: *The Glass Palace*

TIWVL: *The In-between World of Vikram Lall*

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