



## Theory of Diaspora and Stephen Gill's *Immigrant*

Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal

Associate Professor

Department of English, Feroze Gandhi College, Rae Bareilly (UP), India

Email – nilanshu1973@yahoo.com,

**Abstract:** *The issues of diaspora-- nostalgia for the imaginary homelands and alienation in foreign lands—are well represented in Stephen Gill's novel Immigrant. His novel Immigrant depicts the tangling problems which a newcomer to Canada encounters. In a way, the novel is presenting before the readers the psychological strife which Gill himself faced while settling in Canada.*

**Key Words:** *Diaspora, Nostalgia, Alienation, Hegemony.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

In Pramod K. Nayar's book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, the term 'diaspora' has been explained thus:

Diaspora can be the voluntary or forced movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. Having arrived in a new geographical and cultural context, they negotiate two cultures: their own and the new one. This diasporic culture is necessarily mixed and an amalgamation of the two cultures (189).

One invariable element of all Postcolonial/ diasporic literature is the element of nostalgia in it. In an interview given to me Stephen Gill had pointed out: "Diaspora and nostalgic memories are inseparable (125)." The diasporic scholars, critics and novelists seem to be in tune with Keats' celebrated expression in 'Ode to a Nightingale':

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn (*Fifteen Poets* 361).

The authors in exile are 'sick for home', and they are 'in tears amid the alien corn'. Pramod K. Nayar has commented thus about the presence of nostalgic experiences in the diasporic writings, "Much of diasporic writing explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost—due to their exile—is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual/ community. Nostalgia is therefore a key theme in diasporic writing (191)."

Salman Rushdie is one of the chief initiators of these nostalgic moods in his fiction. It is this obsessive affection for the past homeland that encourages him to have the portrait of his ancestral house in his room. His *Imaginary Homelands*, called "(an) assemblage of Salman Rushdie's seminar papers, television broadcasts, book reviews, movie reviews, public lectures, interviews and articles" by Robert Towers, begins with the artistic description of the just-mentioned portrait: "An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work. It's a picture dating from 1946 of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. The house is rather peculiar—a three-storeyed gabled affair with tiled roofs and round towers in two corners, each wearing a pointy tiled hat (9)."

This nostalgic emphasis on the memory of the past is the focal point of Rushdie's creative and critical works. Most of the Indian writers, who have left for the West, have this feeling of nostalgia for the homeland and Rushdie is no exception. An Indian writer, living in alien land considers his present to be a foreign land, while the past is a home though lost in the mists of the lost times.<sup>1</sup> The feeling of displacement in a new country haunts the author and he looks towards the past. This feeling of alienation coupled with the nostalgia is too common in the diasporic authors of India. For example, V.S. Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival*, a hauntingly brilliant novel talks about the theme of exile. In the aforesaid novel of Naipaul, the nervousness of the speaker is evident in the following expression:

After all my time in England, I still had that nervousness in a new place, that rawness of response, still felt myself to be in the other man's country, felt my strangeness, my solitude. And every excursion into a new part of the country--what for others might have been an adventure-- was for me like a tearing at an old scab (13).



In the aforesaid statement of Naipaul, the role of memory is stressed. The authors are generally experiencing the psychological turbulence because of their displacement and nostalgia. Diasporic authors emotionally harbour the memories of their past and are not completely acclimatized to new culture. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* also brings out this diasporic sensibility in the lives of Ashima and Ashoke. Mark the following example from the novel:

As their lives in New England swell with fellow Bengali friends, the members of that other, former life, those who know Ashima and Ashoke not by their good names but as Monu and Mithu, slowly dwindle. More deaths come, more telephone calls startle them in the middle of the night, more letters arrive in the mailbox informing them of aunts and uncles no longer with them. The news of these deaths never gets lost in the mail as other letters do. Somehow, bad news, how ever ridden with static, however filled with echoes, always manages to be conveyed. Within a decade abroad, they are both orphaned; .....In some senses Ashoke and Ashima live the lives of the extremely aged, those for whom everyone they once knew and loved is lost, those who survive and are consoled by memory alone. Even those family members who continue to live seem dead somehow, always invisible, impossible to touch. Voices on the phone, occasionally bearing news of births and weddings, send chills down their spines. How could it be, still alive, still talking? The sight of them when they visit Calcutta every few years feels stranger still, six or eight weeks passing like a dream. Once back on Pemberton Road, in the modest house that is suddenly mammoth, there is nothing to remind them; in spite of the hundred or so relatives they've just seen, they feel as if they are the only Gangulis in the world (63-64).

Moreover, the displaced individual in the alien lands does not find the situation to be favourable to his plans and desires. The intensity of anguish is enhanced by the fact that the person had come to the West, considering it to be a place of enlightenment. But, the displacement to the west is marked by the feelings of alienation and sorrow in the hearts of the immigrants. The diaspora experiences the worst type of racial prejudice in the West. The writers of Indian Diaspora represent in their writings the psychological

problems of dislocation and displacement faced by the immigrants in alien lands. According to Abdul Shamim A.Khan, "The Diasporas also face cultural dilemmas, when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their cultural identity (64)." Ranu Uniyal has also analyzed the theme of Diaspora in the following manner:

Writers from the Indian Diaspora reflect the yearning and the anxiety of many men and women who continue to feel marginalized and disadvantaged in the developed societies. Subject to racial bias, treated as objects of ridicule because of their dress code, food habits, colour, language and the spoken English, writers tend to expose injustice and inequity through their works (48).

In his 'The New Empire Within Britain', Rushdie outlines the fact that the immigrants face racial bigotry everywhere in Britain: "The fact remains that every major institution in this country is permeated by racial prejudice to some degree (134)". In a way, the diaspora has the notable feature of 'double consciousness'—nostalgia for the imaginary homelands and alienation in foreign lands.

Pramod K. Nayar has written thus about the presence of anti-imperialistic tendencies in Postcolonial literature, "The violence of colonialism—epistemic, cultural, economic, political, and economic—is so integral to the history of 'Third World' nations that no literature or critical approach, as far as I know, has been able to ignore it. Postcolonial literature seeks to address the ways in which non-European (Asian, African, south American, but also settler colony) literatures and cultures have been marginalized as an effect of colonial rule, and to find, if possible, modes of resistance, retrieval, and reversal of their 'own' pre-colonial pasts. That is, this literature seeks to understand, negotiate, and critique a specific historical 'event'—colonial rule—while looking forward to a more just, socially egalitarian world order. It is a literature of resistance, anger, protest, and hope. It seeks to understand history so as to plan for the future (1)." Of course, Postcolonial literature is evidently marked by this resistance, anger and protest against the imperialistic tendencies of the Empire.

The Empire delights in justifying the colonization of the East. According to Pramod K. Nayar, "The nineteenth century, the heyday of European empires, was also the period of formulation of race theories. Science, medicine, anthropology, and other disciplines formalized theories of race that justified imperial presence in Asian and American lands. Such theories postulated and proved that the non-European races occupied the lower end of the scale of human development (development being measured through parameters created by and in Europe). The native races were primitive, child-like, effeminate, irrational, irreligious (since pagan religion was deemed to be no religion at all), criminal and unreliable. Since the native race could not take care of itself, it must be taken care of by the European. This process of racializing enabled and justified European colonial presence in Asia and Africa (3-4)." This racial prejudice of the West, which validates the Empire and denounces the East, can also be seen in the extremely biased account of Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Tagore by William Walsh, Emeritus Professor of Commonwealth



Literature at the University of Leeds. In his book *Indian Literature in English* Walsh comments in a typical imperialistic manner:

...there is Vivekananda's profound belief that this Indian spirituality is to be contrasted with Western materialism, out which came his lively concern with India's spiritual mission to the West. The assurance of spiritual superiority and the attendant missionary impulse existed in all the influential thinkers of Vivekananda's time—in Tagore and Aurbindo as much as in Vivekananda himself. It was present too in the early Congress Party as well as later in the policy premises of the Government of India, particularly in Nehru's cabinets and most markedly in his leadership of the non-aligned nations and in his relations with Britain...This phenomenon has been studied most closely by Dr. Ursula King who notes that there is no word either for religion or spirituality in any of the Indian languages. 'There is only dharma, referring to the complex interdependence of the universal, social and individual order'. Dr. King sees the idea of the essential spirituality of Indian civilization as part of the Hindu Renaissance, a reinterpretation of Hinduism based, in fact, on the work of British orientalis (36-37).

To support his excessively imperialistic ideas about Indian culture and civilization, William Walsh further quotes Ursula King:

A contrast with the West had to be sought in order to compensate for both Western political and economic dominance, and to fight Western contempt for India's material retardation. In this situation, to affirm, vindicate, and glorify the superiority of Indian spirituality was the Hindu reformers' and proto-nationalists' particular way of opposing the West's own technological and organizational superiority: spiritual triumph was set over material domination; spirituality could conquer even more than materialism had done (Walsh 39).

Both these issues of diaspora-- nostalgia for the imaginary homelands and alienation in foreign lands—are well represented in Stephen Gill's novel *Immigrant*. Stephen Gill is an expressive voice of Canada, India and Pakistan. He believes strongly in a democratically elected world government and peace through peaceful means. Global peace and social concerns are the main areas of his interest. He has authored more than twenty books, including novels, literary criticism, and collections of poems. His poetry and prose have appeared in more than five hundred publications, mostly in Canada, the United States of America and India. He writes usually in English. Once in a while, he writes poetry in Urdu, Hindi and Panjabi languages. Some of his Urdu/Hindi poems have been sung with music by prominent singers of Pakistan and India. Gill was born in Sialkot, Pakistan, where he passed his early childhood and grew in India. After teaching in Ethiopia for three years, he migrated to England before settling in Canada.

His novel *Immigrant* depicts the tangling problems which a newcomer to Canada encounters. In a way, the novel is presenting before the readers the psychological strife which Gill faced while settling in Canada. R.K.Singh has aptly pointed out in this connection:

As he portrays a new Canadian's plight-language barriers, ethnic prejudices, cultural discrepancies and a longing for the motherland- he seems to offer a factual record of his own experiences in Canada (117).

In an interview given to Jaydeep Sarangi, Gill had himself confessed:

Every piece of my writing is my child and every child inherits some traits of his or her father. Like any writer, I need material for the construction of my house. The closest place to collect that material is from the field of my own life...It is true that Reghu Nath goes to a University as his Creator goes, and he is from India as his creator is. It is true that *Immigrant* has my blood-it expresses my philosophy on several aspects (92-93).

To be very precise, through the character of Reghu Nath in the novel, Gill has elaborated the emotional theme of racial prejudice. Here, it will be proper to remark that there are a number of novelists who have portrayed these themes of racial antagonism, East West encounter and alienation in a foreign country. E.M.Forster's *A Passage To India*, Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown* and Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* are some other important novels, which also talk about this racial prejudice.

In *Immigrant*, the novelist has exhibited the strained relationship between East and West by explicating 'the hopes and the fears and the struggle of a newcomer from Indian setting in Canada.' The novel also portrays 'an insight into the views immigrants hold of white people and vice versa.'

The protagonist of the novel Reghu Nath encountered this reality of the racial discord when the receptionists, in the beginning of the second chapter "made no attempt to carry on a conversation... whereas he was anxious to discuss many things with them (9).

He came to Canada having a rosy picture of the West. The hopes and aspirations of an Indian, who is about to settle in Canada, are realistically portrayed through the character of Reghu Nath:



He had heard that people in States and Canada were honest and very hard working, as compared to easterners. They abandoned their cars, or sold them to the poor of Asian and African countries at nominal price. He was certain that if he were nice to his Professors one of them would reward him with his car....

Still tossing in bed, he visualized the University, where he would be studying ...He saw Professors and students of both sexes outside classes at social functions, mixing freely and casually. It would be an ideal place, entirely different from those of India where segregation of the sexes was a norm (10).

Reghu had never been able to express his feelings of love to girls in India due to his shyness. In his fantasy, Reghu visualized that many girls in the West were ready to welcome him "with open arms (11).

However, the dreams of Reghu are dashed as he finds numberless problems in acclimatizing himself to an alien culture. For example, he was asked to telephone the head of the department for an appointment before leaving the University. As he was not aware of the telephone manners, he hesitatingly dialed the number and the call was answered by a lady Professor in 'unintelligible English.' He thought "his student life would be tragic if everyone spoke as she did" (12). The future looked disastrous to him because of this language barrier, created by his ignorance of 'the accent or colloquial expression of English speaking countries.'

Then entering the registration hall, Reghu Nath felt uncomfortable because he found that everyone except himself was in an informal dress. The novelist paints the predicament of Reghu thus:

He had come in his business suit, as was the custom of his own country's intelligentsia, who appeared in public well-groomed. He seemed to be the centre of attraction because of his clothes, obviously not tailored in a North American style, and also because he was wearing them in stuffy suffocating weather (13-14).

In D.Parmeswari's view, "Reghu... experiences a cultural shock, the one that he could least digest (137)." Gill presents the tormenting experiences of Reghu Nath thus:

Within a week, Reghu found himself surrounded with many different problems. Financially, his position was not sound; educationally he did not know where he was headed; psychologically he was not adjusted to his new environment. At the University, he found himself in a mess... (15)

Similarly, when he held the hand of a compatriot, he quickly found out that it was a sign of perversion in the West. Reghu Nath's awkward position is artistically described by Gill in the following expression:

After this incident, Reghu began to observe others. He never saw a man holding hands with other men. He also observed men seldom shook hands, a very common practice in his country. This affected his own habit of shaking hand warmly and frequently (20).

Besides, Reghu had come to the west harbouring romantic illusions about the place. He had seen an American movie. The dashing hero of that movie had left an indelible imprint on his psyche. In that movie, the hero told a girl in the first encounter, "I love you." The words of the hero produced the magical effect on the girl; the hero used the same words on several other girls and every time he had the success in winning the hearts of the girls. Gill describes Reghu's imaginary romantic illusions thus:

He thought it was the way of real life in the west, particularly in America. Reghu had had some love experiences in India, but he was never able to express his feelings to girls. Perhaps it was his shyness or his male ego which stood in his way....In any case, he was now in the West where he was free to practice what he had heard and read (10-11).

To be very precise, Reghu Nath had the fantasy of many western girls, welcoming him with open arms. But, these romantic and illusory ideas are dashed to the earth, the moment he reaches the West. The young women puzzled him because they exhibited interest on the first date, but delayed subsequent ones. They were not ready for intimacy too early. Their only interest in becoming friendly with the men was to enjoy life by dining out and riding in cabs. They never shared the expenses and disliked to be touched on the first date. In a way, the girls were not there with open arms. The approach of these girls is presented realistically in the novel thus:

Surprisingly, nearly all the girls showed a few characteristics. For instance, they expected to be treated as special, almost as China dolls, and disliked being touched on the first date....If he made any move towards intimacy, it was always the same story, "I do not know you yet" or "We have to understand each other before going further"(22).

Thus, the novel presents the shattering of Reghu's romantic and imaginative illusions about the much hyped west. The Western culture, civilization and ethos are considered rational, empirical and scientific by the Indians and Reghu Nath is no exception. Talking about Gramscian concept of hegemony, Rajnath too points out in his article 'Edward Said and Post Colonial Theory':

Indian were so brain washed by educational, cultural and religious activities of the West that they began to reckon themselves as inferior and as such developed a propensity for everything Western...(78).



Reghu Nath too had the visions of a glorious West. But his dreams are evaporated, when he reaches Canada. He finds that racial antagonism cannot be easily eliminated from the minds of both the Westerners and Asians. W.F. Westcott has written thus about the conflict of the novel:

Gill's novel traces Nath's trials and tribulations as he suffers cultural shock, demanding professors, difficult women, Canadian bureaucracy and haunting memories of his native India. Many times, Gill draws on his personal knowledge of Asian life to illustrate Nath's difficulty adapting to a totally foreign racial climate (116).

Stephen Gill's Reghu Nath also finds himself marginalized and disadvantaged in the new social order. The hydra-headed monster of Diaspora leaves Reghu's soul wounded. The forlorn lands are just presenting before him the image of 'leaden-eyed despairs.' In a way, he has fallen 'upon the thorns of life'; and 'a heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed' his spirits.

#### Notes

1. However, Indian born novelist Sunny Singh (creator of novels like *Single in the City*, *Nani's Book of Suicides* and *With Krishna's Eyes*) has a different opinion about this issue of displacement. This creative faculty member from London Metropolitan University told me in an interview: "...when you are discussing everything from the price of potatoes in the local mandi and the panchayat level politics in the village with friends and family on a daily basis, it is very difficult to feel disconnected. And I do that daily via skype or chat, where I know what is happening in Azamgarh and Lucknow and Tehri as much as I do about London, where I am currently based. Besides, I am involved on a daily basis with people—through my project, through family and friends—who are in India, in its metropolitan centres, as well as in its small towns and villages (192)."

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