



Toward a Line of Flight: Art and the Modern Migrant

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Abstract

The present study examines the significance of art as it emerges in novels by a selection of Indian diasporic writers from V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie to Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri. Art will be examined at three levels:

1. Recreation of the homeland in the private sphere through remembered songs and poems in the native language, the preservation of paintings in the native style, etc. In studying this private level, attention will be given to how this fixation with the homeland reveals the fissures in the *individuum* of the deterritorialized subject and the pliability of the idea of the homeland as an effect of deterritorialization.
2. *Simulation* (as in the theory of Jean Baudrillard) of native festivities and observances, sacral images and configurations, within the host milieu. In scrutinizing this public, communal level, the paper will look at how these images come to form a voice of opposition against the inviolability of borders and how they reflect the cultural psychology of the community.
3. Reinscription of borders and binaries through the creation and transmission of art. While art is directed against the regime of borders in the second level, in the third, art is directed away from it. The study examines how these works on the migrant experience as events with participation (audience/readership) from around the globe become *lines of flight* (as in the work of Gilles Deleuze) directed away from border-centric or binaristic readings of migration.

Keywords: Diaspora, Migration, Homeland, Poststructuralism, Contemporary Fiction, Literary Criticism

I. Art in the Interstitial Space: Method and Methodisability

“How does newness come into the world? How is it born?” inquires the narrator in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. A resounding question which forms upon the narratorial lips at the precise moment in the narration when the protagonists flout the frontier. What is the nature of this newness generated by the transgression? Is this newness born of the severance of idolaters and heretics from their old images and old loyalties as they fall thrall to the outrageous modernity of “one one one”? Is it born, rather, of the happy confluence of old accents, old rhythms, the canonical space, and the images of difference, of challenge, in the extra-canonical space? Or, is it both a rejection or severance as well as a convergence and interanimation?

The newness engendered by the crossing of the border is a constantly shifting, processual newness with its immunities and rejections, its nostalgic regressions, its lurid

openness and its undaunted dialogism. Newness is processual, in constant, rhizomatic growth. This newness is encoded in the works of Indian diasporic writers in the images of diverse forms of art. The artistic impulse of the subject made new by the transgressive act of stepping across the line brings the cadences of the homeland into chimerical combinations with the music of the hostland. In one part of the complex of the migrant imaginary, repetitions and translations of Indian songs, recreations of Indian carnival images and rituals and the reprisal of Indian cuisine attests to the jingoistic separatism of the migrant. In the other half, the merry cosmopolitanism of the polyvocal, spatio-temporal hodgepodge of migrant art and literature celebrates the openness of borders and the interillumination of cultures. The question is, do these planes exist in opposition, in separate temporalities, one as pre-event to the other event, as past defined against a perceived present or imagined future, or exist in isolated spaces as a purist, essentialist, separatist, binarist beginning and the other a happily hybrid, multilingual and multicultural, accommodative and well-adjusted end, the trajectory separating them being more or less linear, the identity remaining unitary and coherent? Does the linear narrative of unitary identity and progressivist “integration” really work in the globalist, multicultural metropolis?

The experience of the Indian migrant in the Global North as presented in selected novels examined in the following sections presents three-levels of engaging with the home/host - or alternatively originary/adoptive - which establish a politics of identity which is processual, temporal, contingent, political and creative. This is the “beyond”, the hither side of the future, the interstitial site of creative possibility, that Homi. K. Bhabha contemplates in his *The Location of Culture*. This transit space where contingency and vulnerability become the promise of an emancipatory dialogue - Bhabha’s cultural translation and negotiation - is the temporality to which the modern migrant defers in his art, his performance of identity and enactment of culture. These three-levels of the complex of identitarian, socio-cultural and artistic performance, in no way form linear, successive or mutually exclusive categories - they are the conscious and unconscious negotiations which - in Derridean terms - exist on a plane of absent signifiers and endless play where the signifiatory and scientific certainty of isolatable categories is only a strategy for making analysis communicable.

II. Art in the Age of Globalist Migration: The Three Levels

II.i. The Personal-Identitarian Plane: Reprisals and Reinscriptions

Novels that engage with the life of the Indian subject abroad are interspersed with references to the cultural life of the subcontinent. In the oppressive hustle and bustle of the foreign city, for instance, the old Hindi song is born afresh as Biju in Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss* croons, “O, yeh ladki zarasi deewani lagti hai. . . .” The song is transformed, given new significance and purpose, in the American street as he deploys it to attack – albeit in an oblique manner – the assimilationism of the thoroughly Americanised Indian girls. The process of negotiation and cultural translation in its reactionary, originary-essentialist-monoculturist moments is encoded into the reprisal of the native note. This is the first level in the artistic complex – the level of the individual subject, his private living space, his intimate utterances and coping mechanisms. In this level, the subject reproduces the songs of the subcontinent, transfiguring them with the imprecise instrument of memory, reinventing them in the altered background of the host country. Nevertheless, the deference to the culture of the recollected - and therefore reimagined - homeland de-centres the homeland, if unconsciously, by its context of articulation, the signifiatory process against which it is measured. The attitude toward Americanisation in the metropolis, the confrontationist politics and hybrid confluence in the city, reinvent the old, threadbare song, ignite it with new meaning. It becomes at once a song of resistance to perceived foreignness and Westernisation while also

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simultaneously a distinctively unheroic anthem of unwarranted sexual attention. As the sexual politics and cultural performance is enunciated within the city, within the impersonal metropole, the space becomes reinscribed with the change in its landscape. The gendered temporality of Indian romance and that of class resentment and resistance brings different, even untranslatable, weaves into the multicultural tapestry of the metropole. Desai's presentation of the young man in his structures of identification and non-identification, of presupposed and historically resurgent patterns of class, gender and qualificational positioning, revisits India with irony, frames the First World city in elitism and superficiality, and destabilises with parodistic vigour the paradox of a man who desires ascendancy engaging in polemics about the much-desired end of his very journey.

Salman Rushdie laces his work the cadences, the desires and deferrals, of the transit space, the frontier where cultural claims and identitarian iterations are negotiated across ethnic groups. In *The Satanic Verses*, the reprisal of the subcontinent's rhythms at the very moment of breaching the border marks the opening of the novel. Gibreel Farishta, as he tumbles into new territory, arranges the carnival of Indian cadences, the rhythm of the tabla, between obsolescent patterns of English verse to generate a pastiche notable for its outlandishness. He goes on to sing the popular Hindi song "*Mera joota hai Japani*" in its English translation, transmuting the India of his mind once again against the on-rush of the new space. While Gibreel enunciates the languages and cadences of the India left behind, he places it alongside "obsolescent" English verse from the memory of and England left perhaps further behind. This is where the linearity of postcolonial thought finds its poststructuralist *aporia*: the Hindi song suggests an always-already multiculturalism which precedes and intercedes in Farishta's experience of the borderline, as also the learned, weathered-down English verse acquires new life and meaning in its utterance by an outsider at the frontier. The purism of nationalist-patriotic narratives of the postcolonial time is destabilised by evoking negotiations, interventions, creative miscegenations and chimaeric reinventions which seem to always have existed in the age of essentialist, patriotist or repatriationist discourses. Farishta's reimagining of India and Britain, his resurrection of the lost and the forgotten, his revisionist retelling of the history of cultures cast into opposing positionings, refining and undermining the spatialisation of difference with irony and parody. It is also in this level of the complex that Jhumpa Lahiri's description in *The Namesake* of the painting of the Rajastani landscape which Ashima hangs up in her new American abode is positioned. This painting by her father assumes the renewed significance of a portal to an alternative time-space, renders the homeland palpable in a way. At the same time, while experiences with non-identity and non-Indianness are consistently deferred to this reimagined and pastoralised Indian landscape, the host landscape becomes engaged in a negotiation, in a politics of translation and reference, rendering all articulation of art, and of the performance of identity in general, intertextual and hybrid.

The repetition and reprisal of art from the subcontinent by the migrant subject is marked by gaps and fissures. Stripped of the everyday reality of his upbringing, the subject latches on to snippets and splinters of *the-once-and-forever-home*. The half-remembered songs from the subcontinent are fragments which reflect the fault lines in his *individuum*. Once he can no longer feel the bounce of the familiar waves on his body, he is reduced to probing the shells gathered at the shore for answers. The songs, the verses, the paintings, are meagre consolation for the migrant soul, falling pitifully short of the encompassing Indian reality. Nevertheless, despite the multitudinous limitations, this poor residue of the Indian cultural life blunts the edges of the rupture in selfhood effected by the abrupt shift in time-space. It cushions his falls as the subject struggles to navigate the alien terrain, tottering along in the process of adaptation. The familiar harmonies of history make it easier for the subject to ease himself into the new accents of the First World host. As the subject adapts, as the

Whiteness of his new space settles upon him, he comes to terms with these gaps and fissures effected by deterritorialization upon his subjectivity, and embrace the forked-tongue dialogism of his existence. It is at this point that the dialogic eye becomes equipped to see into and see beyond this narrative of adaptation and integration, the grand imaginary trajectory which the migrant takes as he travels linearly through binaristic cognitive and experiential categories on the way to the political goal of citizenship and lived nationhood. The trajectory is not linear or uni-directional in its temporality - it is rather a confounding of all categories and sequences which intercept, interanimate, and reinvent the subject and his positionings in the transit space between undulating pasts, presents and futures. The native notes are given new shape and sense as the nature of their dialogue with new sounds and syllables shifts, as comfort is born out of conflict and consternation, and out of this negotiatory engagement, the performance of the culture of the new space is transformed and charged with the creative energy generated by confrontation, conciliation, and happy confusion, or ambivalence. The watercolour of the Rajastani landscape on the wall repudiates its significance as idol, effigy, image of *the-once-and-forever-home*, re-images itself in the American home to be another partner in the ceaseless dialogue between the “roots” in India and the rest in the US. Like the play-within-the-play in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, the landscape-within-the-landscape, or the space-within-the-space, in Lahiri’s novel serves to establish identifications for the disoriented protagonists. While Hamlet’s inability to reconcile the resurgent Classical learning (in which the avenging hero was noble, duty-bound, honourable, and moral) and the Christian teachings (in which, revenge is the Lord’s to execute, vengeance being immoral for men to engage in) of Renaissance Europe condemns him to madness, slaughter and degeneracy, the modern migrant in the contemporary novel navigates the opposing discourse of the times with an intuitive or learned tendency for negotiation, reconciliation and interillumination, with the wisdom of the relativity, radical political and creative possibility of the transit space, the “unhomely” space of Bhabha, which is the very temporality of the globalist contemporaneity which in being recognised emancipates them.

II. ii. The Ethnic-group in the City: Resurrections and Reinventions

The second level is the public, communal level wherein native festivities and observances, sacral images and impressions, are reincarnated within the host milieu. This is the where the collision of codes, the bungled translations, the make-do of the migrant’s cultural life, become all the more evident. As the subject moves from the first to the second level, from the private to the public, small-scale to the dimensions of the public square, the home culture is thrust further into the realm of *simulation*. *Simulacra*, as proposed by Jean Baudrillard, refer to empty copies that no longer refer to an original. The sign is disrobed, stripped of significance, in a process characteristic of the age of the image. The Indian carnival in the American square is a *simulation* of the lost original in the untranslatable subcontinent. The celebration of Durga Pujo in Boston in *The Namesake* is a chaotic congress centred on the worship of a cheap cardboard reproduction of the goddess. The whole ritual takes place in a pre-booked hall rather than in the festive Indian street. The Bengali tradition is recreated, reinvented, re-imaged into a strange tableau of claustrophobia and carnival. The *simulation*, divorced as it is from the devotion and drama of the Indian original, is still art: the labour of the migrant to chisel the India of his mind on the body of America is certainly a meritorious manifestation of his inexhaustible creative energy - and America yields to the craftsmanship of the migrant. America becomes the rough, jagged material out of which the migrant artist as *bricoleur* carves out the reimagined signifiers of an India - the reimagining and reimagining processes themselves a consequence of negotiations with the socio-cultural, sacral-mythical identifications and associations of the adoptive space. This relentless dialogism, this back-and-forth between the pre-event of India and the event of America, between the India-in-America and the Boston-in-Bengal, homeland-in-metropole and foreign-in-native, that

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establishes the chimaerical configurations of migrant temporality: God-in-cardboard, the time of religion within the impersonal urban time of the clockwork city of scheduled, itineraried modernity, plays with the ambivalence of cultural identifications in the moment of cultural translation at the social level, precipitating a recognition of ambiguity, hybridity, and a collapse of the binarist significatory system in the face of reinventability and reinscribability of the historical space through artistic identitarian performance.

The description of the dancers in V. S. Naipaul's *In a Free State* illustrates artistic enunciation of social identity on the second level of the public level which makes simulation inevitable. The men are bare-footed and saffron-clad, the women draped in saris and sporting shoes that are strikingly Indian in their design. They dance and chant Sanskrit verses in praise of Lord Krishna. All the same, they look "half-caste", their pronunciation of the Sanskrit lines testifies to the time of their exile: their performance is the merest *simulacrum* of the Indian original. Art, in this instance, is extra-canonical, a potent pastiche which appeals to and then appals the watching protagonist. It employs codes from the (reimagined) musculature of Hindu art and ritual to carve out of the (two-dimensional perceived image of) American clay a distinctive model of the India of the mind. The model, generated by hands that have forgotten, lost the reality that was to be marked in material, is a confusion of codes and cadences from the India of the imagination, imaged within historical self-rationalisations and reimaged within Western working-class autodiegesis and the America of the lived performance. The bhangra beat shows that Rushdie alludes to in *The Satanic Verses* is something quite similar: it is *simulation*, it is pastiche, it is a mongrel – which embodies the boundless creative potential of the interstitial site and prefigures and then enunciates the radical political activity of the migrant subject.

Where exactly does the power of this plane lie? The re-imagining and re-imaging of India in this public, communal level within the Western space is a potent argument against the inviolability of borders. India, in this second level, is articulated within the foreign space in the foreign tongue, born out of foreign as well as native codes of art, ritual and performance. References to the reimagined and recreated glory of India are woven into the host fabric with the resourcefulness of the mind-as-*bricoleur*. The awkward body of the hybrid collective is carried with surprising grace and gusto.

While in the second level, art comes to constitute a challenge against the regime of borders, a counterpoint to the absoluteness of the frontier; it also reveals the fault lines in the cultural psychology of the immigrant community. Nationalism, obsolescent fantasy as it is, is on increasingly volatile ground. Forgetfulness and fiction rob the soil from under the feet as the migrants contemplate the idea of India. The sacrilegious cardboard replaces the fertile Indian earth out of which the goddess is given form. Fictions and *simulacra* intersect with loyalty to the imagined ancestral body without toppling it altogether. Nevertheless, the polysubjective corpus of the community with its mongrel accents, its mangled tongues, robust regressions and assimilation anxieties, cleaves in time to the form of the First World, having mastered the material from across the Atlantic - for the difference between two transit spaces is, ultimately, a deferral to a spatialised imaginary of opposition - in which the goddess can be re-imaged, reincarnated. This, however, is the general paradigm and to assess the trajectory of every single migrant character in the Indian diasporic novel in relation to it would be fallacious. It is important to reiterate here that this trajectory is impacted by the range of variables alluded to in the discussion of the first level. The disruption of the second, communal level of expression forms a critical aspect of racist and repatriationist upheavals. In *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, the *Hot Wax* nightclub and the Shaandaar Cafe, both of which are hotbeds of migrant political activism and artistic expression, come under the xenophobic fire. It is to be noted that in the devastation caused by the hate and the fire, the

body of Britain lies intertwined with the disembodied communities at the margin, man and demon are both stripped down to the pathos of skin and bone. Death and destruction replace the polyvocal dialogism of immigrant life, and the irrevocably altered subject is pushed over the precipice.

II. iii. Globalism Becomes Art: The Line of Flight

The third level, the level of the global community, is where the creation and transmission of art is played out. This is the level wherein: 1. the character-as-artist generates, performs, transmits, art, and 2. the diasporic writer writes, and the reader responds to, the concrete novel. On this plane of art, it is directed away from, rather than against, the regime of borders. The second level was marked by the expropriation of alien material to articulate an India of the imagination, the India of the unyielding goddess, of Sanskrit verses and saffron-clad trances. The third level, in contrast, is conscious of the pliability of the India of the mind, the porousness and permeability of the antique bars at the border, the conscious and unconscious hybridity of the transit space. At this juncture, the merry relativity of the myths, melodies, images and imaginings from both sides to the border is realised. The result is, of course, a happy eclecticism. In Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*, Draupadi illustrates this post-ethnic, post-national proclivity for poetry. Her art is inspired by both the Draupadi dancers of Tamil Nadu as well as Peter Brook's production of the Mahabharata. This form of eclectic, syncretic art, which embodies the endless dialogism between the East and West, becomes a *line of flight* away from the autocracy of the frontier. The *line of flight* proposed by Gilles Deleuze in this context suggests a leakage, an outflow, through the chinks in the canonical armour of, for instance, the discourse of nationalism, of cultural absolutism. This movement is driven by creativity, the limitless capacity for regeneration, reconstitution. The principle of "one oneone" as in *The Satanic Verses*, of monotheistic allegiance to the unified, frontiers nation, the narrative of the originary homeland as the singular centre to the concentric world, and the exilic thesis of return, are problematized by the art as *line of flight*. A new realm of relativity and eclecticism is opened up, a fresh horizon of hereogeneity and dialogism. Gibreel Farishta's visions, which eventually are made into movies, also illustrate this point of heteroglossic dialogue, wherein the doctrinaire formula of Islamic practice in the East is perspectivised and relativised in a conception that straddles opposing spaces, times, philosophies. It is interesting to note in these novels the spatial-cartographic configurations of polysubjective dialogue and the temporal-historical representations of ambivalent hybridity. Space and time come together here in combinations which evoke and emote the peaks and plateaux in the rhizomatic process of transnational-trans-frontier life.

The novel-as-art forms a second level to the plane of the creation and transmission of art in relation to the diasporic experience. These novels, much like the fictitious works of art within them, are *lines of flight* away from the classical doctrine of insuperable absoluteness of nation and allegiance. They re-image the India of the common imagination in the iconoclastic fabric of the West. They reincarnate the harmonies of native history - the nativeness and unitariness of identity being portrayed with a genial irony - in the adoptive cultural lingo. They reperspectivise and reinterpret the *grand narratives* of the subcontinent from the hawk-eyed vantage point of the new *episteme* of conscious alterity and ambivalence. A heteroglossic polyvocality is generated as the *immigrant-as-victim*, the embodiment of passivity, engages continually with the *immigrant-as-creator*, the symbol of possibility. Art in the third level, art as *line of flight*, illuminates the possibility of the post-border world, the world of meetings and confluences, of difference and dialogue.

In the third level of the complex, art – the diasporic novel, for instance – rediscovers and reevaluates the border, the stubbornness of space, the absoluteness of allegiance. They

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often employ potent motifs which problematise the ideas of origin, an originary temporality, and the spatial bounds to history. In *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh's narrator discovers the portal to London in Bengal in the grand cartographical narrative of the *Bartholomew's Atlas*. With material from his cosmopolitanist uncle Tridib, he forges the London of his longing from the book. It is in terms of this London of the imagination, as Indian as it is British, that the narrator encounters the city in his adulthood. The inherited image of London from his childhood in India is reconcretised, rehistoricised, reincarnated, in the English city. Where, in this case, does the frontier lie? Does it lie in the *Bartholomew's Atlas*, the polyvocal motif which embodies the nation as well as the *transnation*? Does it lie in the airport, at the moment of embarkation, as the narrator's father maintains? Does imagination precede the borderline or is it insurmountable to the mind? Does space precede substance? Are life, loyalty and longing circumscribed by cartography? Unlike the second level of communal resistance, of counter-narrative, the third level is marked by its open ambivalence, its willingness to engage with uncertainty and. The novel as *line of flight* marks a polysubjective move away from the classical, border-centric, separatist interpretation of migration.

In *The Satanic Verses*, Saladin Chamcha's history in *Vilayet* has its originary moment in the streets of Bombay when he finds the wallet of pounds sterling, another motif of the *transnation*, the beginning of transfiguration and reincarnation. Rushdie's novel, with diverse character trajectories in collision and conversation, is another remarkable dialogic consideration of the classical exilic narrative. *Vilayet* is murder and masquerade, disinheritance and diabolism; it is also reinvention, renewal – it is “newness”. This is the dialogic polyvocality which makes the work a *line of flight* away from the old binarist fixation. In *The Namesake*, the *transnation* is embodied in the confluence of the originary Indian trainwreck, the seminal shade of the Russian writer Gogol and the heteroglossic American present. It is the interanimation of these separate-yet-inseparable spaces that confers upon the novel its power as a *line of flight*, as an event wherein old frontiers are destabilized and the non-territorial *post-nation* of the modern migrant is made palpable. It is thus that representation of the modern migrant embodies a leakage, an outflow, from antiquated frameworks of reading the exilic experience – embodies, in a word, the “newness” that has come upon the world of the migrant.

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