Home, Exile and Beyond – Indian and African Literary Narratives of Modernity and Mobility

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Introduction

This sketch of a number of writers displaced from an imagined home will outline landscapes of representation, which share outlines with landscapes of real-life mobility. Literature is deeply implicated in knowledge production relating to home and exile, displacement, migration, diaspora and multiple belongings. The field of literature dealing in this area is vast. This paper discusses mainly examples from Indian and African literature, written in English. The thematic of the paper is home, exile and what may lie beyond. The argument is that an earlier literature of place, linear mobility between places and dual identities, related to colonialism and modernity, is being challenged by a new postcolonial literature of spaces, characterised by multiple belongings and less systematic mobility. A literature, which shares features with postmodern art forms.

The Creation of Home

It has often been noted that for exiled writers the central artistic activity of being in exile is the creation of home. In *Writers in Exile* (1981) Andrew Gurr discusses three colonial exile writers: Kathrine Mansfield, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and V.S. Naipaul from New Zealand, Kenya and Trinidad. They all sought towards the metropolis, and in 'all cases the flight into exile was followed by the painstaking reconstruction in fiction of the home in near-autobiographical form' (17). Mansfield wrote about the New Zealand of her childhood and youth from her self-exiled existence in Britain. Ngugi wrote of rural Kikuyuland during the colonial period in the grip of tensions between local morals and customs and Christianity, from his existence as a student and teacher first in Uganda, then in Britain. In *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul reconstructs the Port of Spain neighbourhood of his childhood. Their forerunner, according to Gurr, is James Joyce, another colonial, this time from Ireland. *Ulysses*, written from his Italian exile, recreates the Dublin meanderings of its protagonist with such precision that a city map can be constructed by tracing the routes. Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, signals home in its title. All these writers are preoccupied with place, home, identity and nation.

In Gurr's view those writers who are well established in the metropole, like Virginia Woolf or E. M. Forster, are concerned more with individual sensations and social relations than with the search for identity, reflecting their secure position at the centre of things. 'Englishness' was a concern of marginalised and provincial writers like D. H. Lawrence and George Orwell. The provinces and perhaps even the lower classes are outposts in ways, which are similar to the distant regions of the (crumbling) empire.

This very centred and uni-directional representation of relations between home and exile, in which the metropole is the undisputed centre, has been challenged not only by real life diffuse mobility and by post-colonial theorists celebrating hybridity, deterritorialisation and multiple centres and identities, but also by the practices of recent writers of fiction. I shall approach this literature by discussing the work of the Amit Chaudhuri.

Calcutta and the New World

Amit Chaudhuri is a young Indian writer who divides his time between Britain and India. His sequence of novels takes us from childhood experience in Calcutta and

Bombay, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1992) to rootlessness and home-making efforts among Indian students in Britain, *Afternoon Rag* (1994) back to the politicized, increasingly communal Calcutta of *Freedom Song* (1998). In Chaudhuri's latest novel, *A New World* (2000), the alien and disenchanted urban interors and cityscapes are consequences of the protagonist's long and continuing exile in the United States.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address* home is a safe four-storey building in old Calcutta, teeming with members of an extended family. They live through what from the perspective of the child Saandep is a comfortable routine, in which each day of the week opens up new possibilities, ending in a leisurely Sunday which inaugurates the seemingly never ending succession of brand new weeks: 'There are several ways of spending Sunday evening', leads happily to 'Monday morning came like a fever' (10, 15). 'Abroad' is another world, caught on the radio, which 'cackled in an evil witch-like way' (74), reporting from the Test Match in cricket between India and Australia, played in far-away Australia:

> The voice of the Australian commentator would come through, loud and urgent one moment, weak and distant the other, as if a few words were being carried off, on their passage towards India, by a cormorant crossing the ocean (74-5).

Afternoon Raag is divided between a cold present in Britain and warm memories of India, whereas the setting and ambience of *Freedom Song* is not only entirely Indian, but more particularly Bengali. It is the story of two large intertwined families, who are pushed by the big politics of decolonization and the fight for an independent Bangladesh from the eastern part of the province of Bengal to Calcutta. At Independence and the ensuing Partition India and more specifically Bengal lost the eastern part of the province to Pakistan, and thus the divided Bengal was created. The movement of Khuku and her younger brother Bhola from Sylhet in East Pakistan to Calcutta in the wake of the creation of Bangladesh, is like a personal reunification – a deliberate choice of the cosmopolitan capital city of Bengal as a home. Khuku's younger brother Bhola reflects on his displacement from the country of his childhood:

> Who was he? Time and Calcutta seemed to pass through him like water. He had come here and fallen in love with Gariahat, its fish and vegetable market with its shouting community of vendors and darting basket boys. That was Calcutta. Then in 1971, not far away, Bangladesh was created, and the refugees who had come to the city set up their small stalls in Gariahat. It was his life. No one else would know it (53).

Other forms of exile are part of the past, present and future. With her husband Ship, who was a student of engineering, Khuku lived for several years in London in the

early 1950s, 'rainswept and with six hours of sunlight' (112). After their return to India the couple spent most of their working lives away from Calcutta in Delhi and Bombay. Their only son and several nephews are part of the exodus of bright middle class students from India who after being educated there have settled in the United States.

In *A New World* the perspective on Calcutta is that of a grown-up returnee from the United States, Jayojit, who visits his parents with his young son after a failed marriage. His former wife lives 'elsewhere on the vast American map, with someone else' (7-8). His father, the son of a landowner in Chittagong in East Bengal, was not a refugee, but came to Calcutta to pursue his studies. He came at the same time as the huge numbers of refugees from East Bengal who left the Muslim state of Pakistan at Partition in 1947.

In the case of Jayojit and his son returning for at visit to Calcutta distance is covered not by cackling wireless nor is it disturbed by a cormorant, but seamlessly by air. This is the description of their arrival to his parents' home, a 4th floor Calcutta flat, in 'a nice area' with associations of 'immemorial middle-class constrictedness' (54, 6):

> They had come with one heavy suitcase and a large shoulder bag slung around Jayojit's neck; in one hand he was carrying an Apple laptop and a one-litre bottle of Chivas Regal in a duty-free bag. The boy was wearing a bright-blue t-shirt and shorts, and on his back was a kind of rucksack; he walked with the mournful loping air of a miniature expeditioner (5).

When Jayojit's mother opens the door he 'bent his big body to touch, in one of the awkward but anachronistic gestures that defined this family, her feet' (6), still with 'two Bangladesh Biman[1] boarding cards stuck out from his shirt pocket' (5). She addresses her grandson Vikram or 'Bonny', a 'strange Western affectation from the old days, to call children names like these' (4) in Bengali, but quickly remembers that he 'might want to speak in English' (6).

Jayojit and his son are beyond home and exile but not beyond dislocation. The 'New World' of the novel's title refers not only to the classical new world of the United States. It also refers to a Calcutta which is made new by the glance of Jayojit, removed doubly by being an expatriate, and by being adult and noting his own awkwardness following the loss of childhood certainties.

[1] Bangladesh's Airline Company

Twice Displaced

In his influential essay from 1991, 'Imaginary Homelands', Rushdie writes about exile being 'not an infertile territory' in that it provides the writer with 'new angles at which to enter reality' because of 'distance and long geographical perspective' (15). He notes that the identity of the (self) exiled writer from India is both plural and partial: He is free to claim parentage from Great Britain or India, but at the same time he is forced to renounce the position of a 'sage' – he is 'forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths' (12). He can only see fragments. The whole essay is a polemic against notions of the stability of the home-exile nexus.

The memory of being 'twice displaced' makes for the uncertain grasp on 'home' or 'place', which is characteristic of the protagonist of *A New World*. Similarly it informs the writings of V. S. Naipaul, whose ancestors, as is well known, came to Trinidad as indentured labourers for the sugar plantations. His father settled in Port of Spain and became a first generation urbanite. Naipaul's second or perhaps third displacement is evoked in *The Enigma of Arrival*, dealing with the writer's long spell in rural Briain. Here in the depths of Wiltshire by an act of will the writer with the 'insecure past, peasant India, colonial Trinidad' (92) roots himself by painstakingly detailing his natural surroundings. As Rushdie writes in 'V. S. Naipaul', his essay on the novel, 'the immigrant must reinvent the earth beneath his feet' (148). The tension between home and exile leads to cognitive collapse: The 'abstract and arbitrary nature of my education' meant that in Trinidad the 'signs were without meaning' (131). But travelling between Trinidad and Britain means that referee and referent are brought together again:

> Cows and grass and trees: pretty country views ... though I hadn't truly seen those views before or been in their midst, I felt I had always known them. On my afternoon walk on the downs there was sometimes a view of one particular slope of black-and-white cows against the sky. This was like the design on the condensed-milk label I knew as a child in Trinidad, where cows as handsome as those were not to be seen (36-7).

In Trinidad the young man dreams of England. Once there, he learns 'another language' and is offered 'a second life in Wiltshire, the second happier childhood, as it were, the second arrival at a knowledge of natural things together with the fullfillment of the child's dream of the safe house in the wood' (88). In England he stops dreaming. What the novel creates is a bizarre homecoming, the colonial education comes home to roost.

Naipaul returns to the theme of the unreality and irrelevance of 'colonial education' in *Half a Life* (2001), whose British section is an exploration of the relations between knowledge and power as experienced by a young student and budding writer in the London of the 1950s. Willie, the half-caste protagonist whose father is Brahmin and whose mother belongs to the backward castes, ends up at a fake Oxbridge educational institution in North London. Here he gets acquainted with a plethora of invented traditions 'that the students and teachers were proud of but couldn't explain'. He initially experiences a total inability to absorb knowledge, because a piece of knowledge always presupposes familiarity with another preceding piece. He had been 'swimming in ignorance' in a manner similar to that of backward castes in India who did not even know anything of 'the religion of the people of caste, whose serfs they were' (55). In order to be at home in the world the knowledge of the metropole has to be appropriated and that of the margin left behind, in spite of the foundation of metropolitan knowledge being as shaky as that of marginal knowledge:

> Yet something strange was happening. Gradually, learning the quaint rules of his college, with the churchy Victorian buildings pretending to be older than they were, Willie began to see in a new way the rules he had left behind at home. He began to see ... that the old rules were themselves a kind of make-believe, self-imposed. And one day ... he saw with great clarity that the old rules no longer bound him (60).

Willie, 'playing with words', as behoves an aspiring writer 'began to remake himself. It excited him, and began to give him a feeling of power' (61).

The place of the self-exiled writer in the imperial heartland is part of a larger global pattern of dislocation and migration, which is traced in both novels: The autobiographical protagonist in *The Enigma of Arrival* experiences a constant unease the deep rural hinterland of Wiltshire: 'I felt that my presence in that old valley was part of something like an upheaval, a change in the course of the history of the country' (15). It was not a natural thing, something rather of the character of a natural disaster. It leads to semantic uncertainty - the relation between referee and referent is not stable. The new language, which is being learnt is not the undisturbed English of the centre, but something more broken, like a discourse of mobility. Naipaul points towards this impact of mobility where he states that when writing about Africa, as he did for *A Bend in the River*, from his position in rural England what he recreates is a Trinidad of his memories: 'The Africa of my imagination was also Trinidad' (171).

Utopias and Dystopias

A different kind of exile, which does not imply crossing borders, but may displace in

similar ways, is that which propels persons in search of livelihood, love or education to the city. As we saw, to Andrew Gurr exile is 'the flight to metropolis by a provincial or colonial writer'. In *The Enigma of Arrival* Naipaul describes himself in Britain as 'another peasant arriving in the big city'. From classical migration theory we know, however, that rarely is it the case that migration to the city is once and for all. Mobile persons and groups may straddle between two or more places; migration is 'stepwise', circulatory or oscillating – in fact as fluid and ambiguous a process as that which writers on modern transnational theory has alerted us to between nations. Rural hinterlands are deeply marked by urban institutions and practices, and rural community based discourses and institutions find their home in the city.

Literary genres representing rural idylls are invented in urban spaces. As Raymond Williams has analysed in his *The Country and the City* (1973), on the basis of mainly English literature, rural idylls, pastorals and utopias are created from the loss of moorings, resulting from city life. The Kenyan novelist Grace Ogot's *Land of Thunder* is an example. The backward-looking memory-based invention of home, gives rise to forward-looking ideal social utopias – future spaces free of the dislocations and violence stemming from the kind of world historic upheavals Naipaul pin-pointed. The Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah's fantasy of a community of good men and sooth-sayers in *The Healers* represents such a conflict-free space - an absolute contrast to his dark novel of a newly idependent African nation, *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born.* Kwei Armah is one of the African writers dealing with exile I shall return to. Jomo Kenyatta's ethnography of the Kikuyu people, *Facing Mount Kenya*, though not fiction, may be a third example.

In 'Imaginary Homelands', referred to above, Salman Rushdie writes of creating invisible villages and cities, imaginary homelands or 'Indias of the mind'. If we return to Chaudhuri's Calcutta the urban childhood land he creates in *A Strange and Sublime Address* and sections of *Afternoon Raag* is such a utopian India of the mind. But what of the dystopian Calcutta of *A New World,* his later novel? The grown-up protagonist bears the burden of history, particularly Partition as it affected Bengal. Although, as we have seen, he is not himself a refugee or a child of refugees he is still haunted by the collective loss of home. He walks through one of the once prosperous now run-down neighbourhoods, passes a salesman whose 'brown-grey eyes ... held a little of the twilight of another town in them', and notes the name of an East Bengali landowner outside a deserted house which 'no one had even bothered to sell'. To him as to millions of Calcuttans, 'East Bengal had long ago been transformed into fantasy' (53).

Mirrors, Memory and Fragments

Another famous Calcutta writer, Amitav Ghosh, strikes a similar note when in *The Shadow Lines* (1989), he writes of the history of unrest and violence in East Pakistan and West Bengal. The whole of Bengal is 'a land of looking glass events', in which governments 'traded a series of symmetrical accusations' across the arbitrary border, one of the 'shadow lines' of the title (225). Partition moved around ten million people from India to Pakistan, East and West, and from Pakistan to India within a very short time and to the accompaniment of both violence and unselfishness and sacrifice.

The point Ghosh makes is that Partition was separation at the state level whereas a myriad of threads kept binding the populations of the different regions together. Describing the unforseen effects in Calcutta of far-away religious riots in East Pakistan in 1964 he writes:

> They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland (233-4).

The result is, however, that

> There had never been a moment in the 4000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines – so closely that I, in Calcutta, had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka (234).

I return to Partition and its consequences not only because of the magnitude of that event in the history of migration, nation building, violence and the dismantling of Empire. It is certainly one of the 'upheavals' Naipaul writes about which has shifted the course of history. But also because the question of its representation especially in literature but also in social science research has given rise to much debate in India. For a long time, according to some Indian intellectuals, Partition and its consequences were silenced, censored away, ripped out of public discourses. Maybe because of ordinary people's complicity, maybe because it was too painful, but also because what happened did not make sense witin the truth claims of hegemonic discourses.

Writing on the unknown and unnoted riots in Dhaka and Calcutta in 1964 Ghosh makes the general point that

> The theatre of war, where generals meet, is the stage on which states disport themselves: they have no use for memories of riots .... The madness of roit is a pathological inversion, but also therefore a reminder, of that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments, for it is the logic of states that to exist at all they must claim the monopoly of all relationships between peoples (231).

Communal riots have 'disappeared from the collective imagiation of "responsible opinion" ... dropped out of memory into the crater of a volcano of silence' (231), because 'we can only use words of description when they happen and then fall silent, for to look for words of any other kind would be to give them meaning, and that is a risk we cannot take any more than we can afford to listen to madness' (228). Ghosh's radical novel from the late 1980s was one of the texts responsible for breaking the silence on Partition. During the 1990s a great deal of research into memories of Partition has been undertaken, and a series of books of collections of Partition narratives have been to be published, one well known collection being *The Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia from 1998. Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition*, 2001, is based on oral history and concerned primarily with Partition as it affected Punjab.

In the case of Partition literature was central in putting mass migration and its consequences for ordinary people on the public agenda, in creating a language in which suppressed discourses came to the fore. Discourses of lost homes and permanent exile represented in ways, which underscored the inderterminacy and enduring character of that experience. The 'beyond' of home and exile is the ongoing social processes between the two and the states of mind, which are forever altered by the migratory experience. However, in countless other cases of violent displacement of people a language has not been created and given space in public discourse. I shall turn now to a discussion of home and exile in African writing, in which the "beyond" is less clearly articulated than in the writers I have dealt with up to now.

Creating the Nation Abroad

One of the most well-known and influential pieces of African exile writing is *Facing Mount Kenya* (1938), written by the future president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, during his long stay in Britain, which spanned the period between 1930 and 1946. *Facing Mount Kenya* is an ethnographic monograph on the life and customs of Kenya's largest population group, the Kikuyu. It was written as a doctoral dissertation at the London School of Economics under the supervision of of one of the most prominent antropologists of the time, Bronislaw Malinowsky. *Facing Mount Kenya* is not usually regarded as exile writing. But doing so for at moment may alert us to several features of this pioneering work, among them its complex

authorial stance.

In hindsight the work can be seen as the platform not only for Kenaytta's recognition as a scholar and a peer of western intellectuals, but as a piece of cultural nationalist writing, creating the Kikuyu nation as the other' of European polities, replete with institutions, organisation, norms and values – a mirror society demanding recognition. Kikuyuland is represented as a cohesive and well-ordered society, characterised by functional interplay between hierarchical groups and environmentally sound exploitation of the natural resources and habitat. Conflicts are absent. The monograph can be seen both as a pastoral in the sense discussed earlier, and as the result of a certain antrhopological way of knowing. It is a metropolitan piece of writing, creating 'home' under the tutelage of the hegemonic and trendsetting producers of the scientific knowledge of the 'other'. The careful, tutored creation of *Facing Mount Kenya* was manufacture of 'home' from abroad and meant for consumption abroad.

In his Introduction Malinowski claims the opposite. He writes that the work exemplifies that 'anthropology begins at home', and represents a new trend within the social sciences (vii). In his own preface Kenyatta is sarcastic when he offers to give 'the African point of view'. He claims to be 'glad to be of service', and insists that he will 'let truth speak for itself'. He knows that some 'professional friends of Africa' will be offended when reading the book, because they would prefer to remain friends of Africa for eternity, 'provided only that the African will continue to play the part of an ignorant savage so that they can monopolise the office of interpreting his mind and speaking for him' (xviii).

The African nationalist, inventing his nation in the heartland of Empire in the discourse of a discipline which has been highly complicit in the very process of colonisation, is a kind of knowledge producer, which reflects a global scene that is already radically destabilized.

After Kenyatta returned to Kenya in 1946 to take a leading part in the conflicts of power leading to Kenya's independence he never revisited this particular ethnographic genre. He wrote political treatises in the modern language of advocacy and analysis, which detailed economic inequality, encouraged opposition to colonial authority and arrogance, and contributed to creating a nation broader than Kikuyuland, and most importantly of all, Independence.

In 1942 another African exile, Peter Abrahams, reached London. He was a South African, classified as a coloured by the Apartheid regime. He had been politically active, and increasingly found life in South Africa constricting and meaningless. His early life is dealt with in his autobiography *Tell Freedom:* 'Perhaps life had a

meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had I could not find it in South Africa. Also there was the need to write, to tell freedom, and for this I needed to be personally free' (311). After a long trek mostly on foot from Cape Town to Durban he boards a ship bound for Britain. 'I walked briskly down to the docks. And all my dreams walked with me' (311).

In his remarkable novel *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956) Abrahams portrays the milieu of distinguished African and Caribbean political and artistic exiles he found and became part of in Great Britain. It included Kenyatta, Nkrumah, the West Indian intellectuals George Padmore, C. L. R. James and others - in fact most of the people active behind the decisive 5th Pan African Conference, which was held in Manchester in 1945. This milieu certainly was an African diaspora in the sense that all energies were directed towards the creation of independent nations and homelands – successfully, as it turned out. Peter Abrahams' representation of the political exile milieu is that of an insider – another African, and *A Wreath for Udomo* is definitely a *roman à clef* even to the extent that it is a valuable source of the real-life discussions surrounding the Conference, and proto-typical post-independence political rivalry in the new African nation states. The fiure of Udomo is obviously strongly inspired by the charming and charismatic young Jomo Kenyatta, who in certain ways was at the height of his powers in the early 1940s.[2] Abrahams' pan-African perspective reflects a point in time and space where home' was colonised Africa and 'exile' was colonising Europe. In this case they were large historically constituted configurations - examples of enduring areas of identification. In *A Wreath for Udomo* nation was being carved out and forged as a space of identification.

Neo-colonialism and Fragments

Another example of African literature where 'home is the whole continent is the writing of the Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah, mentioned above. He anticipated Rushdie's view of the splintered world by calling his second novel from 1970 *Fragments*. Its protagonists Baako and Juana have both been displaced by colonialism or neocolonialism, as Armah has it. Baako has spent five years as a student in the United States; Juana whom he falls in love with, is a refugee from a Latin American country. They are both messed up. Global displacemet and inequality becomes a disturbance in the individual psychological constitution, making both the coloniser and the colonised warped and one-sided. This perspectve is obviously that of dependency (theory), prevalent in the 1960s, strongly influenced by Franz Fanon. In his subsequent novel, *Why are We So Blest?*, dealing with the

[2] The historian of Ghana Richard Rathbone, however, finds strong similarities to the young Nkrumah and identifies Kenyatta with the novel's Southern African revolutionary figure: "The doomed, unnhappy figure of Mhendi matches in some respects the ultimately less doomed and unhappy Jomo Kenyatta." (Rathbone 2000 p. 8)

psychological consequences of colonialism the analysis is spelt out:

> This loneliness is an inevitable part of the assimilationist African's life within the imperial structure. Because the way informmation is distributed in the total structure – high information in the centre, low information on the peripheries – overall clarity is potentially possible only from the central heights. The structures in the peripheral areas are meant to dispose low, negative or mystificatory information (Armah 1972: 33).

Here we have a totally different understanding of 'fragmentation' from that of Rushdie. In the case of Kwei Armah there is a central perspective, but it is firmly situated with the imperial powers, mostly the United States. Those who are colonised or victims of neo-colonialism are prevented access to it; they are only allowed to see and know fragments of the whole. In the case of Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh there is no central perspective, but only numerous smaller centres, which are mirror images of each other; if the mirror is not splintered as in Rushdie's radical version. The contemporary global condition is not one of systematic exploitative neocolonialism, but one of diffuse, unsystematic but still disempowering and psychologically debilitating post-colonialism.

Postmodernism in East Africa

Finally I want to discuss one of the emerging post-colonial writers of Africa, M. G. Vassanji. He was born in Nairobi in 1950, but grew up in Tanganyika/Tanzania. His forebears are Asians, part of the early 20th century migration to East Africa of Indian labourers, most of whom stayed. Like many writers from the Indian subcontinent he now lives in Canada, in self-exile. Similarities with especially his contemporary Amit Chaudhuri catch the eye. The opening of the short story 'In the quiet of a Sunday Afternoon' from his collection of stories *Uhuru Street* (1991) goes like this:

> Sunday afternoon languor descends over the streets as usual. The day is hot but clear and a soft breeze blows bits of paper about. The street gradually empties of people and business comes to a halt. The last strains of Akashwani on the airwaves from India mingle with the smell of hot ghee, fried onions, and saffron that wafts down from people's homes (1).

Here is the same insistence on immutability and permanence, coexisting with a heightened sense of the exotic, or the exaggeratedly Indian. The inhabitants of Uhuru Street - *uhuru* is the Swahili for freedom - hope for no change. Of course the political and econiomic crises of post-colonial Tanzania mean that change will come and bring upheaval and conflict. 'Refugee' is about a young Asian man who feels threatened by economic recession and the East African anti-Asian sentiment of the 1970s. He is 'pushed out, ever so gently' by his family, to initiate a refugee route

through Germany to Canada. His family are persuaded that 'All Worlds Are Possible Now', the title of the last story of Vassanji's collection.

The latest novels by Amitav Ghosh and M. G. Vassanji have many similarities. They explore multi-space settings: Ghosh's *The Ice Palace* is set in Burma and South India. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets* (1994) spans the imaginary and real spaces of colonial East Africa, Goa and Great Britain. They both trace the fortunes of generations of a transnational family and thus combine two wonderfully compelling and popular genres, that of travelogue and that of family saga. In contrast to earlier works by the two writers these novels are large books, written for a broad global public with strong overtones of Latin American reader-friendly magical realism of the Isabel Allende and Gabriel Marques variety.

I do not wish to suggest that similarities between the early fiction by Vassanji and Chaudhuri have more to do with being somehow Indian than with knowing the condition of exile. Nor that an essential 'Asianness' comes out in the latest novels by the two exiled writers, Ghosh and Vassanji, one from India, one from Africa – now both resident in North America. Like other writers they have been influenced by global market forces and by trends within the general knowledge production, not least within the social sciences, preoccupied with mobility, transnationalism, displacement and lost homes. *The Glass Palace* and *The Book of Secrets* are complex narratives of global historical forces playing games with the destinies of individuals and families. They appeal to the tastes of cosmopolitans and global travellers, who need the expertise of locating and understanding difference in time and space. They are also big enough for serious long-distance travel.

Conclusion

Aijaz Ahmed, a Marxist critic of post-colonial discourses in critical theory as well as in literature, makes a point of describing writers like Vassanji, Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Ben Okri, and especially Rushdie etc. as *self*-exiled. They flee a country not because they are in danger and being persecuted by state agents, but because they feel 'suffocated' (134). Their primary commitment is to the 'milieu of (their) productive work' and the place where they find their audience, i.e. their exile, rather than their left-behind home (131-2). In their cases, as in the cases of the exiled representatives of high modernism - Henry James and Joseph Conrad, Pound and Eliot - Ahmed has very little sympaty for the losses which are the consequence of exile. He pin-points Rushdie as the key example of the later postmodernist wave of self-exiles: 'The upper class Indian who chooses to live in the metropolitan country is called "the diasporic Indian" and exile itself becomes a condition of the soul, unrelated to the facts of material life. Exile, immigration and professional preference

become synonynous' (130).

His contention is that contemporary Indian diaspora writers understand their situation as being similar to that of early 20th century European modernists. For them the condition of exile was a metaphor for the alienation characteristic of the human condition in general. The latter-day exile writers similarly thrive on an 'aesthetic of dispair' (155).

If we look at the topics of these writers it is easy to see that this understanding is not accurate. They are preoccupied with space, mobility, belonging, connections and identity, not with the loneliness and alienation of the individual in an impersonal capitalist society. Ahmed's formulation echoes the older dual understandings of home and exile, which are not sensitive to new conditions of economically and politically conditioned migration and mobility and multiple belongings. These attachments are not always the consequence of personal preferences but of multi-facetted complex global displacements.

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