



Diaspora and Migration in Contemporary Indian Poetry in English: Voices of Dual Identity and Transnational Belonging

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian poetry in English has increasingly become a literature of movement, displacement, and transnational negotiation. With large-scale migration from India to Europe, North America, the Middle East, and other parts of the world, Indian-origin poets writing in English have articulated complex experiences of diaspora, cultural hybridity, and dual identity. This research paper examines how diaspora and migration shape the thematic, linguistic, and aesthetic concerns of contemporary Indian English poetry, with particular reference to poets such as A. K. Ramanujan, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Imtiaz Dharker, Vikram Seth, Eunice de Souza, Dom Moraes, and Ranjit Hoskote.

The study argues that diasporic Indian poetry does not merely reflect physical relocation but explores deeper psychological and cultural dislocations. These poets negotiate multiple belongings—between homeland and hostland, memory and reality, tradition and modernity—resulting in a poetry marked by ambivalence, nostalgia, critique, and creative renewal. Themes such as exile, home, language, memory, gender, and cultural inheritance recur across their works, revealing the migrant's struggle to reconcile past and present selves.

English, as the chosen medium, becomes a site of cultural translation where Indian idioms, myths, and emotional registers reshape a global language. Rather than expressing cultural loss alone, contemporary diasporic poetry frequently celebrates hybridity and fluid identity. By situating these poetic voices within postcolonial and diaspora studies, this paper demonstrates how contemporary Indian poetry in English offers a nuanced literary response to global modernity, foregrounding shared human experiences of migration, belonging, and self-redefinition in an increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Contemporary Indian Poetry; Diaspora; Migration; Dual Identity; Indian English Poets; Transnational Literature

Introduction: Indian English Poetry and the Diasporic Turn

Indian poetry in English has evolved significantly from its early nationalist and postcolonial phases to a more global and transnational orientation. Since the late twentieth century, migration has become a defining condition for many Indian poets writing in English. Poets of Indian origin living abroad have transformed

Indian English poetry into a diasporic discourse, engaging with questions of belonging, displacement, cultural memory, and identity negotiation.

Diaspora, in this literary context, is not merely geographical movement but an existential condition. Contemporary poets articulate the sense of living “in-between” cultures, languages, and histories. This shift has expanded the scope of Indian English poetry, enabling it to address global concerns while remaining rooted in Indian cultural memory.¹

Diaspora studies emphasise hybridity, fragmentation, and the continuous reconstruction of identity. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of cultural hybridity is particularly relevant in understanding diasporic Indian poetry, where identity emerges in the “third space” between cultures.²

Migration destabilises fixed identities, producing what may be termed dual consciousness. Indian-origin poets often perceive themselves simultaneously as insiders and outsiders—emotionally attached to India while negotiating life in foreign cultural environments. This tension becomes a central poetic concern, shaping both theme and form.

A. K. Ramanujan, one of the earliest and most influential diasporic Indian poets, lived and worked in the United States while remaining deeply engaged with Indian cultural traditions. Poems such as “*Self-Portrait*,” “*Looking for a Cousin on a Swing*,” and “*Small-Scale Reflections on a Great House*” explore memory, familial inheritance, and cultural dislocation.

Ramanujan’s poetry reflects a divided self—intellectually situated in the West yet emotionally anchored in India. His engagement with Indian myths, folklore, and domestic spaces reveals how diaspora reshapes cultural memory rather than erasing it. Language itself becomes a metaphor for migration, as English carries the weight of Indian experience.³

Sujata Bhatt’s poetry powerfully articulates the anxiety of linguistic and cultural loss experienced by migrants. In poems such as “*Search for My Tongue*” and “*A Different History*,” Bhatt foregrounds language as a marker of identity.

Living in Europe, Bhatt reflects on the erosion of the mother tongue and the dominance of English as both necessity and threat. Her poetry expresses fear that cultural roots may wither in exile, yet it also celebrates resilience and continuity. The metaphor of the tongue vividly captures the migrant’s struggle to sustain cultural inheritance in an alien environment.⁴

Meena Alexander’s poetry is deeply shaped by experiences of migration across continents—India, Sudan, England, and the United States. Her collections such as *Illiterate Heart* and *Raw Silk* portray exile as both personal and political.

Alexander’s poems often present identity as fractured, shaped by histories of colonialism, gendered violence, and displacement. Memory in her poetry is painful and unstable, reflecting the trauma of migration. Yet, her work also affirms poetic expression as a means of survival, allowing the self to be reassembled through language.⁵

Imtiaz Dharker’s poetry examines migration through the intersecting lenses of gender, religion, and nationality. Living between India, Pakistan, and Britain, Dharker addresses themes of border-crossing and exclusion in collections such as *Postcards from God* and *The Terrorist at My Table*.

Her poems interrogate the violence of political borders and the vulnerability of migrant bodies, particularly women’s bodies. Dharker portrays diaspora not as privilege but as a site of insecurity and surveillance. At the same time, her poetry imagines alternative spaces of belonging rooted in empathy and human connection.⁶

Vikram Seth's poetry, particularly in *Mappings*, reflects a cosmopolitan sensibility shaped by extensive travel and residence abroad. His poems move across continents, cultures, and emotional landscapes, presenting identity as mobile and adaptable.

Similarly, Dom Moraes, who lived much of his life outside India, explores alienation and rootlessness in poems such as those collected in *Serendip*. Moraes's poetry often expresses a sense of cultural homelessness, revealing the psychological cost of perpetual movement. Both poets exemplify a global Indian identity that transcends national boundaries while remaining marked by displacement.⁷

Eunice de Souza's poetry, though not always geographically diasporic, addresses cultural alienation within and beyond India. Her poems critique patriarchal norms, Catholic upbringing, and cultural constraints, revealing how migration can be internal as well as external.

In poems such as "*Catholic Mother*" and "*Women in Dutch Painting*," de Souza explores the negotiation of identity within restrictive cultural frameworks. Her work broadens the understanding of diaspora to include psychological and cultural exile.⁸

Contemporary Indian diasporic poets experiment with poetic form to reflect migratory experience. Fragmentation, non-linear structures, and shifting perspectives mirror the instability of migrant identity. English is reshaped by Indian rhythms, metaphors, and cultural references, producing a hybrid poetic idiom.

As Jahan Ramazani argues, transnational poetry resists singular national frameworks and embraces multiplicity. Indian English diasporic poetry exemplifies this trend, situating personal experience within global networks of movement and exchange.⁹

Conclusion

Diaspora and migration have profoundly reshaped contemporary Indian poetry in English. Poets such as A. K. Ramanujan, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Imtiaz Dharker, Vikram Seth, Dom Moraes, and others articulate the complexities of dual identity, cultural negotiation, and transnational belonging.

Their poetry reveals that migration is not merely a story of loss but also one of creative transformation. By blending memory with movement, local culture with global experience, contemporary Indian diasporic poetry expands the imaginative and ethical scope of Indian English literature. It offers a powerful literary response to a world defined by mobility, border anxieties, and the continuous redefinition of self.

Footnotes

1. Diasporic Indian poetry reflects cultural and psychological displacement rather than simple relocation.
2. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity explains the "in-between" identity of migrants.
3. Ramanujan's poetry embodies the tension between cultural memory and diasporic distance.
4. Bhatt foregrounds language as a crucial marker of diasporic identity.
5. Alexander's poetry links exile with trauma and gendered experience.
6. Dharker critiques political borders and cultural exclusion.
7. Seth and Moraes represent cosmopolitan yet unsettled identities.
8. De Souza highlights internal exile and cultural alienation.
9. Ramazani's transnational poetics contextualises diasporic Indian poetry.

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