RAMLEELA AND BON BIBI: RETHINKING SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA

> And we: spectators, always, everywhere,
> looking *at* everything and never *from*!
> It floods us. We arrange it. It decays.
> We arrange it again, and we decay. (*Duino Elegies*, 59)

These words by Rainer Maria Rilke serve to underscore the argument that informs my paper, namely, that the diasporic experience is often about a kind of emptiness, a despair that is both traumatic and empowering.[1] To be diasporic might well mean many things, but I would like to foreground a state of mind that recognizes a disconnect between the kind of fullness that birds and animals – or to put it differently, lilies in the field and birds in the air - Comfortable in their habitat, demonstrate and the fragmentation and loneliness of diasporic human existence. It is hardly a coincidence that diasporic authors – Amitav Ghosh from the States, Rienzi Crusz from Canada, and K.S. Maniam from Malaysia are recent examples – often invoke animals, either literally or metaphorically, as a way of establishing the fundamental homelessness that accompanies human migration. To say this is not to claim that diasporic literature can easily be accommodated in any totalizing paradigm, since historical context determines the specificities of how diaspora is configured and experienced. However, there is a need to recognize that literary representation of diaspora in a South Asian context often occupies its own space in which the depiction of the everyday might well be less important than the aesthetic representation of absence. In a world that has been, for the most part, abandoned by gods, and rendered chaotic by the rationality of science, animals are often a counterpoint to the terror experienced by humans who are displaced. In some senses, this notion of despair is not new. Vijay Mishra begins his impressive study of the diasporic imaginary by saying "All

[1] It is possible to argue that Rilke himself was not diasporic in the conventional sense of the term. In fact that is at least partly the point I am trying to establish in this paper about the subjectivity that accompanies diaspora. Amitav Ghosh in his novel *The Hungry Tide* makes constant intertextual reference to Rilke. The constant interplay between the narrative and Rilke's poetry in the novel has influenced my own thinking on the subject.

diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way" (1). More eloquently, perhaps, Derek Walcott says, drawing attention to his Afro-Christian predicament, "we had lost both gods, and only blasphemy was left" (8). Ghosh argues in an important essay that "there is no greater sorrow than the recalling of times of joy" (10). I think they are all correct in their own ways, although the points of convergence among them are not always easy to locate. Fiji, St. Lucia, and India have different narratives to tell, but they are all stories of displacement.

My speculation about a pervasive sense of anguish that underpins diasporic subjectivity has been prompted largely by a reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), in which the tiger is both a predatory beast and a symbol of the terror produced by an existential sense of loneliness. In a wonderfully suggestive scene in the novel that depicts the rational, self-assured, and eloquent character Kanai confronting the tiger, there is nothing but sheer terror for the character and the reader. We are never told whether Kanai actually saw a tiger or imagined one. Kanai is convinced that he did see the tiger, and his listeners are equally certain that the tiger is a product of Kanai's terror at being left alone. In the end, it does not matter. In this moment of Blakean vision, the tiger is at home, and humans are not. Again to quote Rilke:

> Every angel's terrifying.
> So I control myself and choke back the lure
> of a dark cry. Ah, who can we turn to,
> and the animals already know by instinct,
> we are not comfortably at home
> in our translated world. (5)

One is reminded of Blake, D. H. Lawrence, J.M. Coetzee, or K. S. Maniam. For Maniam the tiger is at once the spirit of the land and a powerful symbol of destructive nationalism in the contemporary Malaysia. Equally important is Salman Rushdie's use of the image of the human panther at the end of *Shame*, where humans, unable to resolve their sense of confusion and helplessness, seem distraught and vulnerable to the onslaught of the beast. Admittedly, not all of these writers are diasporic, at least in the way we conventionally define diaspora. To be confronted with anguish is perhaps part of being human, but I do believe that diasporic authors experience this trauma with a much greater sense of immediacy.

For the present purpose, my focus is the South Asian diaspora, an increasingly problematic term, and I will try to argue that notwithstanding the fundamental differences between the old diaspora and the new, there is a need to see the multiple disparities within an ontological frame that is, curiously enough, both terrifying and empowering. I am not less concerned with or dismissive of the pragmatic dimensions of diasporic life. They are real and they do matter. But social scientists are generally far more capable of mapping its myriad trajectories. Sociologists and psychologists, for example, have told us a great deal about how we have fared as hyphenated communities, and what challenges we face in the lands we have made our home. Literature too is about a time and a place, and its ethical and social responsibility has become increasingly apparent from the time Salman Rushdie, arguably a watershed figure in diasporic studies, published his novels. But literature also stands at a remove from such empirical concerns, and from this space it looks at

ontological conditions that govern subjective lives. Even while we grapple with classifications, it is important to step back and look at literary representations. For reasons that are not always clear, diasporic South Asian authors choose to write about a home that they left behind rather than one in which the find themselves. Uma Parameswaran admonishes fellow-writers: " I would hope that we write about the world around us and not about the world we have left behind," (291) but writers are determined to do otherwise, thereby signaling a departure from the world of social scientists who prefer to look at diasporic subjects in diasporic settings.

Taxonomies about this phenomenon have become increasingly confusing at a time when the IT professionals in Silicon Valley on a two-year contract, and even the US soldiers in Iraq are sometimes called diasporic. K. Satchidandan argues that in the present context, definitions of diaspora may have to be more fluid: "Now that the old concept of a unisonant nation with a single unified culture is being challenged, it may be possible to extend the concept of the 'diaspora' at least in relative, linguistic and regional-cultural terms, within the country: the Malayali diaspora in Delhi, the Tamil diaspora in Bangalore, the Bengali diaspora in Bombay, or a Santhali diaspora in Calcutta, for example' (20). Maybe the diasporic hat comes only in one size, but literary critics are not necessarily trained in establishing taxonomies. I would argue that, from the perspective of literary representation, who is diasporic is probably less important than what diaspora means, in existential terms and in forms of literary representation. I would also assert that it is possible to experience the pangs of diaspora even without being displaced to another country. Moving from Kerala to Delhi might or might not be a diasporic experience, depending on how one experiences that displacement. Diaspora, then, is about that disorienting feeling when the familiar becomes strange, and the world that one takes for granted suddenly appears alien and unsettling.

Let me clarify this anecdotally. About a year ago, I was having a conversation with a leading painter from Sri Lanka, arguably one of the finest artists among the Tamils.[2] We talked at length about what it meant to be diasporic, and I pointed to several attributes that figure in diasporic literature, suggesting the possibility of creating a paradigm that might bring together this unwieldy body of South Asian writing. He listened patiently and then said that he agreed with everything I said, except that for him, and thousands like him, caught in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the experience of fragmentation and despair was no different. His paintings are a testimony to that pervasive sense of dislocation arising from being wrenched from the familiar. Obviously, diaspora can take many shapes, and internal displacement can be as destructive as crossing the ocean. But that said, we need to be mindful of historical contexts, and the range of diversity we seen in South Asian diasporic writing. And the distinction between old and new diasporas is a useful starting point.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Derek Walcott begins by drawing attention to an event in Trinidad that is, in cultural terms, alien to him. His reflections on the event are all the more important precisely because he is admittedly an outsider to the occasion. As he passes through a village called Felicity and notes the celebration of *Ramleela,* he wonders whether the reenactment of the Indian epic has the capacity to transcend memory and nostalgia, although the representation implies and invokes both. Ritual, as Mircea

[2] The artist is T. Shanaathanan. For his recent collaborative work, see works cited.

ontological conditions that govern subjective lives. Even while we grapple with classifications, it is important to step back and look at literary representations. For reasons that are not always clear, diasporic South Asian authors choose to write about a home that they left behind rather than one in which the find themselves. Uma Parameswaran admonishes fellow-writers: " I would hope that we write about the world around us and not about the world we have left behind," (291) but writers are determined to do otherwise, thereby signaling a departure from the world of social scientists who prefer to look at diasporic subjects in diasporic settings.

Taxonomies about this phenomenon have become increasingly confusing at a time when the IT professionals in Silicon Valley on a two-year contract, and even the US soldiers in Iraq are sometimes called diasporic. K. Satchidandan argues that in the present context, definitions of diaspora may have to be more fluid: "Now that the old concept of a unisonant nation with a single unified culture is being challenged, it may be possible to extend the concept of the 'diaspora' at least in relative, linguistic and regional-cultural terms, within the country: the Malayali diaspora in Delhi, the Tamil diaspora in Bangalore, the Bengali diaspora in Bombay, or a Santhali diaspora in Calcutta, for example' (20). Maybe the diasporic hat comes only in one size, but literary critics are not necessarily trained in establishing taxonomies. I would argue that, from the perspective of literary representation, who is diasporic is probably less important than what diaspora means, in existential terms and in forms of literary representation. I would also assert that it is possible to experience the pangs of diaspora even without being displaced to another country. Moving from Kerala to Delhi might or might not be a diasporic experience, depending on how one experiences that displacement. Diaspora, then, is about that disorienting feeling when the familiar becomes strange, and the world that one takes for granted suddenly appears alien and unsettling.

Let me clarify this anecdotally. About a year ago, I was having a conversation with a leading painter from Sri Lanka, arguably one of the finest artists among the Tamils.[2] We talked at length about what it meant to be diasporic, and I pointed to several attributes that figure in diasporic literature, suggesting the possibility of creating a paradigm that might bring together this unwieldy body of South Asian writing. He listened patiently and then said that he agreed with everything I said, except that for him, and thousands like him, caught in the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the experience of fragmentation and despair was no different. His paintings are a testimony to that pervasive sense of dislocation arising from being wrenched from the familiar. Obviously, diaspora can take many shapes, and internal displacement can be as destructive as crossing the ocean. But that said, we need to be mindful of historical contexts, and the range of diversity we seen in South Asian diasporic writing. And the distinction between old and new diasporas is a useful starting point.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Derek Walcott begins by drawing attention to an event in Trinidad that is, in cultural terms, alien to him. His reflections on the event are all the more important precisely because he is admittedly an outsider to the occasion. As he passes through a village called Felicity and notes the celebration of *Ramleela,* he wonders whether the reenactment of the Indian epic has the capacity to transcend memory and nostalgia, although the representation implies and invokes both. Ritual, as Mircea

[2] The artist is T. Shanaathanan. For his recent collaborative work, see works cited.

Eliade rightly points out, is at some level, a reactualization of a primordial event, and Walcott is clearly aware of the element of faith that drives these festive occasions. But the perpetuation of faith or historical memory is not Walcott's concern in his essay. He is struck by the indifference of a number of participants to anything but the present. The point he makes about the exuberance of the present is subtle but important in that the event itself is possible only because of memory and tradition. If there is nostalgia at one end of the spectrum and exuberance at the other, this event appears to lead toward the latter. For the participants, including the boys practicing their archery, the present is all that matters. The sheer excitement of participation is what appeals to them and not the origins of the ritual. It is almost as if there is an assertion about spontaneity, about the impulse to naturalize a transplanted event, and while the process is not entirely free of memory, it does not entail any trauma or longing. The ritual of *Ramleela* is one of the many moments when the community comes together to celebrate its own identity, to claim membership in an ethos that is bounded by its own unique sense of time and space. Says Walcott: "Here in Trinidad I had discovered the one of the greatest epics of the world was seasonally performed, not with that desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but with an openness of belief that was steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni plain." Walcott adds: "The sigh of History meant nothing here. These two visions, the *Ramleela* and the arrowing flocks of scarlet ibises, blent into a single gasp of gratitude. Visual surprise is natural in the Caribbean; it comes with the landscape, and faced with its beauty, the sigh of History dissolves" (n.p).

Walcott's claim is an important one, but one that stands in contrast to the bleak vision of, say, V. S. Naipaul, in *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Ritual, whether remembered or reinvented, does not comfort the oppressed and beaten Biswas, who is finally left with nothing but his sense of failure. We remember that Naipaul who, at the end of *The Enigma of Arrival*, returns to Trinidad to confront a numbing sense of loneliness. The juxtaposition of Walcott and Naipaul would, in some senses, demonstrate the dichotomy between the comforting presence of ritual in a landscape that allows for its naturalization and the deeper awareness of the fragility of that presence. Walcott and Naipaul are both right, in their own ways. Ritual provides the illusion of community, of belonging in both a national and ontological sense. Literary representation, paradoxically, creates a community only to project the absence of fulfillment. For South Asian writers in the West, this sense of unease comes more naturally.

There is, however, a more fundamental point that might be worth making at this point. Walcott's assertion about ritual and the implied connection with the landscape is not fortuitous. Walcott is using *Ramleela* as a particular sign – to borrow a term from semiotics – that now has a very different signifying function from the past. At the time of indenture, the ritual recalled India in specific terms, and emphasized the sense of diaspora. Now, with the passage of time, the old connotations have been eroded and new ones have taken their place. By connecting Ramleela with the flight of birds, Walcott effectively naturalizes the ritual. In other words, when the people who perform the ritual think of themselves purely as Trinidadians, not as Indians or hyphenated West-Indians, the state of diaspora ceases to exist. A crucial dimension of diasporic experience, I think, is precisely this relation between the community and the nation state. When the community and the nation merge, diaspora vanishes. If this argument holds, then the old diaspora that took thousands of people to the Caribbean and Fiji and Sri Lanka must be identified as a historical event,

framed within temporal boundaries, rather than as a continuum. It can be argued that the Indians who travelled to Fiji and Sri Lanka in the 19th century were never allowed that naturalization. If that is the casc, then these need to be seen as anomalous situations rather than the norm.

This argument then begs the question: why do we then think of Naipaul, Selvon, Dabydeen and Bissoondath as diasporic writers? There might be two reasons, one more important than the other. Many of these writers began to write at the time of independence, when the issue of nationality and belonging became increasingly urgent in Caribbean countries. The racial conflict in Guyana, for example, suddenly brought to the surface the issue of who belongs and who doesn't. People were suddenly made to feel diasporic. More importantly, many of these writers left the Caribbean and pursued their writing careers elsewhere. They became diasporic by leaving the Caribbean and going to the West. To identify them as part of the old diaspora is probably not accurate. I would contend that the old diaspora needs to be theorized carefully within temporal boundaries. To go to the Caribbean is not to be consigned to everlasting diasporicity.

As a field of study, diaspora theory acknowledges the differences between, say the Jewish diaspora and the Black or Indian diaspora, but it also reiterates the need to adopt a holistic approach on the strength of nomadism, displacement, identity politics, and so forth. The terms within which diaspora is often theorized allow for a universal reading, although such readings veer away from a linear trajectory that locates itself in a past event to ones that allow for disjunctures of various kinds. Theorists have warned us, quite rightly, against the dangers of generalization, and showed us the parameters we need to make up our classifications. In general terms, the shift has been from a kind of primordialism or fixed identities that goes with classical diasporas to one that stresses contingent imaginings. There is much to be said for the relevance of such comparative models and approaches, but the South Asian diaspora has its own contours, its context-specificity as it were, that has shaped its particular features. Unlike other migrations, the South Asian diaspora, more recent, and perhaps equally traumatic, has been reflected and reshaped in literature to express a kind of existential despair.

To make this point is also not to imply that South Asian diaspora is an easily definable category. There are more than eleven million diasporic South Asians in more twenty countries, and to even attempt an overarching frame about their subjectivities would be probably a futile exercise. In terms of typology there is a tendency to speak of diasporic writing in fairly homogenous terms, although distinctions do exist and they are probably of some relevance. Generalizations often tend to be simplifications, but it is useful to underscore the fundamental point that while diasporic writing might well deal with political turmoil, social dislocation, individual tragedies, and so forth, the underlying concern is of the inability to represent a sense of wholeness, a naturalness of existence, that is as much an occasion for fear as it is for despair. Displacement is key feature of diaspora, and while all forms of displacement may not be called diasporic, all forms of diaspora, within or outside the nation, have to be theorized as displacement.

From the perspective of South Asian literary history, the post-Rushdie era has been a period of remarkable growth. Even a cursory overview of Indian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan writing would indicate that some of most prominent writers are in the West. In Canada alone the list of writers is impressive. Taken together, they offer a range that makes any taxonomy almost impossible. How does one account for the differences between, say,

Anita Rau Badami and Suniti Namjoshi, or between Rohinton Mistry and Michael Ondaatje? Maybe Amitav Ghosh is right when he posits a fundamental difference between the idea of exodus and the notion of expulsion. Voluntary movement, according to him, is a form of exodus and forced movement is a kind of expulsion. Surprisingly, he puts himself in the latter category, thereby problematizing the notion of expulsion. He does not make exodus and expulsion a simplistic binary, but he uses it as a way of claiming that the literature of exodus is about arrival while the literature of expulsion is about departure. One is tinged with hope and the other is laced with despair. Says Ghosh: "In the experience of an exodus there is an unspoken ambiguity: the sufferings of displacement are tinged here with the hope of arrival and the opening of new vistas in the future. An expulsion offers no such consolation" (8). It might be possible to extend this thesis further and suggest that while one body of literature is about a sense of community, the other is about the individual. If the emphasis on community leads to fixity the stress on the individual leads to quest. What brings them together is a profound sense of grief, more overtly found in those works that suggest a preoccupation with expulsion. A text such *A Hero's Walk* does not easily fit this pattern and is curiously ambivalent about arrival and departure, but its dominant note is one of sorrow and despair.

There is a level of abstraction in this hypothesis that begs a fundamental question. Surely, diasporic or not, novels have a great deal to do with mundane events. Children are born, people get married, go to work, meet with accidents, and so forth. Their mundane and varied activities constitute the phenomena of living. We do not disregard these moments, but we are never deceived into believing that the author's objective was to document the everyday.[3] The passion that drives these works and the obsessive images that transform these texts are crucial to the sadness that accompanies displacement. In a remark about *Midnight's Children*, Zulfikar Ghose makes the astute comment that it is a text "in which autobiographical experience is transformed into an exuberant and colorful mask behind which is to be glimpsed the author's own sadness." [4] We look for these moments in texts when that disconnect becomes most apparent. Rushdie takes his hero to the Sunderbans to explore this dimension. Strangely enough, two decades later, Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide*, does the same.

There is a memorable moment in *The Hungry Tide* when Kusum, a refugee in the Sundarbans, a person who has never left India but has consistently been displaced, says that "our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human being could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land, and by planting the soil" (262). In short, she wants to live as animals do, in harmony with the land. She finds out that for a diasporic person, that might be too much to ask for. She is destroyed by human beings, and the land itself is destroyed by the hungry tide. No one escapes unscathed in the novel, and the prophecy at the beginning of the novel that the river will rise and obliterate all monuments to excess becomes true. Not even Bon Bibi, the

[3] In an interesting article (see works cited), Markarand Paranjape makes the observation that Rohinton Mistry projects a particular vision of Bombay as a way of belittling India. By the same token it is possible to argue that certain writers may depict a colorful India in order to exoticise it. My own perspective tends to be different.

[4] Personal letter, dated 22 March 1992.

goddess who saves hapless human beings from predatory tigers and who reigns over the Sundarbans can withstand the onslaught of nature at the end. Quite literally, Bon Bibi's shrine is torn apart by the hurricane at the end. Unlike *Ramleela*, Bon Bibi does not endure. In this vision, the gods offer very little metaphysical comfort.

It is this aspect of literary representation that sets it at a remove from other disciplinary approaches to diaspora. In a broad sense, many other disciplines are concerned, quite rightly, with the here and now, with the empirical realities of diaspora. Textual representations, whether in English or in the so-called vernaculars, need to be seen from a different perspective in that the diasporic condition of homelessness, in the broadest sense of the term, forces them to return imaginatively to the land they have left behind, not to reactualize it in nostalgic terms, not to recreate it as a form of fantasy, but to find ways to prevent that sense of erasure which threatens their existence. It is of some relevance to the present context that diaspora theorists seldom deal specifically with literary representation, and when they do, they are invoked to validate the theory that frames their argument. Even a crucial text such as *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* includes only one essay – by Gayatri Gopinath – that draws attention to forms of cultural representation, and this essay is concerned specifically with non-heteronormative forms of sexuality in one novel and two films. In short, literary analyses of diaspora, diasporic theory, and empirical studies seem to be connected in tenuous ways.

Sudesh Mishra speaks of transnationalism, globalization, and modernity as the three pillars of diaspora studies. In doing so he builds on the work of earlier theorists, including Rajagopal Radhakrishnan, Arjun Appadurai and Stuart Hall who invoke the polarities of modernity and postmodernity to anchor both the trauma of being uprooted and the excitement of being a global soul. Mishra unpacks in great detail the assumptions that go with these categories in order to demonstrate that there is a dichotomy between the meanings implied in these categories and the actual ways in which these operate. The distinctions he makes and the kinds of ambiguities that he would like us to be aware of are all quite central to the field of diaspora studies. Categories imply certainties, and Mishra, having looked at each term in detail, is suspicious about unequivocal positions. He quite rightly says: "The overall point is that by treating the global economy as an established category rather than as an arena beset by controversies and contradictions, the implied links between the social, the aesthetic and the economic remain highly fraught and conjectural" (155). In the final analysis, Sudesh Mishra's reading of the diasporic experience is a Marxist one that lays bare the economic realities that are often overlooked in narratives of diasporas. Diaspora, at its most basic level, as a movement of groups from point A to point B, involves both economic and political contingencies, and these aspects lead inevitably to the dictates of modernity, globalization and transnationalism.

Perhaps the scholar who brings together diaspora theory and literary criticism quite specifically is Vijay Mishra, who remains one of the more significant voices in the field. In the process of unpacking the multiplicity of what he calls the hyphen, he uses a number of markers, including trauma, memory, mourning etc. all of which enable him to discuss at some length the complexities of the Indian diaspora. The distinctions he makes to distinguish the old diaspora from the new are quite profound, and he quite rightly maintains that to collapse the two would be irresponsible and counterproductive. Surely, crossing the *kala pani* for three months in an uncomfortable ship would be very different from the thirteen hours one spends now in flying across the Indian ocean. Invoking a

psychoanalytical frame, Mishra speaks about mourning and fantasy, about the mindset that creates fierce nationalisms in the diaspora. Mishra's work is clearly erudite, but I do believe that the terms "old" and "new" to establish a frame for literary representation can be problematic.

I invoke him as a point of departure, as a way of inserting my own argument about literary transformation, about artifice, about the ways in which literature, not only in English but also in other languages, enables us to grasp not only the mimetic but also the transformative quality of literature. As far as we foreground modernity or its aftermath as predominant markers in diasporic writing, the tendency is to look at literature as imitation, as narratives that validate historical and economic processes. In short, literature becomes a way of validating positions that have been established in other disciplines. I would like to move away from this perspective to one that relates literary representation to a heightened sense of homelessness.

To be homeless in a metaphysical sense is very different, in conceptual terms, from being displaced and being forced to migrate to another country. The two are not unrelated, but the disparities are of crucial importance. The sense of homelessness is not necessarily a diasporic condition. It is a human condition in a context where metaphysical certainties and empirical realities are no longer perceived to be adequate. Amitav Ghosh uses Rilke as a constant intertext for *The Hungry Tide* for precisely this reason. Particularly in the West which witnessed both the loss of metaphysical authority and the disillusionment with rationality and science, existential despair is not altogether surprising. For South Asian authors, certainly the local writers, the structures that create the illusion of being at home in one's environment are still largely intact. They may well prove illusory, but they are a comforting presence. R.K. Narayan sees the fissures of the present, but his gods have not abandoned Malgudi. At some level, essence determines and shapes experience in his writing. For the diasporic writer, those structures are not easily available, and consequently, there is a much greater consciousness of that sense of horror. "The intellect has failed us," (198) mourns that classic diasporic figure, Himmelfarb, in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*, referring to the loss of his gods and his learning. The diasporic South Asian writer might resort to fantasy or mourning, might be self-consciously nostalgic or defiantly hybrid, might write about establishing a sense of community or charting an individual quest, but the underlying note is one of despair. There are two aspects to this despair that I would like to touch on: the first has to do with language, and the second with the sense of erasure.

One of the central aspects of the language used by the non-diasporic author is the availability of a large range of significations that language has accumulated over a period of time. Language implies a set of markers that form the subtext or the "underside" of the narrative. This language is not free of cultural baggage, but its presence is quite central to the relation between author and reader. For the diasporic author, this vocabulary is either unavailable or ineffective, depending on how the author is placed. In both situations, the challenge is that to be able to reinvent a language that compensates for the absence of social and cultural markers.

The diasporic writer, for the most part, works without the root metaphors that the stay-at-home author assumes automatically. I use the term "root metaphor" in the way that anthropologists such as Dipankar Gupta have done in order to refer to a set of conventions or practices that are associated with a culture in its broadest sense. The particular contours

of root metaphors are probably less important here than the assumption that they do exist, and they shape literature in very significant ways. To be unable to use them easily, as in the case of first-generation diasporic authors, or be unaware of them, as in the case of second-generation authors, is to recognize that new forms of artifice must be invented to replace the loss of time-honored markers. Root metaphors are sources of comfort, and they provide the illusion of community. For the diasporic author, the sense of fragmentation is far more immediate.

The second has to do with erasure, with the fear that with each upheaval – political, religious, social or ethnic – the past will be lost, and the little hold that one has on a sense of wholeness will be lost. "The Matla will rise" prophecies the demented headmaster Nirmal in *The Hungry Tide*. It is hardly surprising that for a writer such as Rienzi Crusz, the river is so important. In the metaphor of the river, and all the animals and fish associated with it, there is that sense of being at home, regardless of changes, regardless of erasure. The Mahaveli river has no past or future, and its present is what gives it its wholeness. Beauty and terror are irrelevant to the elephant, simply because of its sense of harmony with its habitat. Those who have thought of Crusz as a hopeless romanticist fail to recognize that the images of nature and of animals are never exotic; they are central to his sense of what it means to be a diasporic writer.

It is, I think, not an accident that the diasporic writer, particularly the novelist, is often preoccupied with quest narratives. And it is important that diasporic poets return obsessively to the inadequacy of language and the possibility of aesthetic fullness in art. These are symptomatic of a much more intense dilemma of having to live with the fear that the storm that caused them to leave their homeland would wipe out the sense of history that they remember. Such erasure does not haunt the local writer whose rituals, beliefs, and conventions preserve the illusion of harmony. The diasporic writer recognizes more fully that at the heart of beauty, at the end of the quest, there is the void, the terrifying fear of homelessness.

The diasporic text struggles with this sense of having to live in an interpreted world, and if the pervasive sense of despair that characterizes this text has a redeeming feature, it is simply that the struggle, the refusal to capitulate, has led to some of the finest examples of contemporary literature, in English and in many other local languages. Existential despair and aesthetic beauty are not too far apart in relation to literary representation. To reinvent the world in art, through form and language, is a curious form of resistance. "The writer's struggle" says Ghose in *The Fiction of Reality*, "is not with his subject matter and not with form, but with style." (177) In a memorable line from "The Schooner *Flight*," Walcott echoes this in his wonderfully expressive way: "That's all them bastards have left us: words." (9) But in order to understand the quintessential aspect of diasporic South Asian writing, it is important to be aware that authors consistently grapple with the notion that diasporic space is a lonely one in which neither gods nor humans can offer much by way of comfort. Ghosh says: "Writers who look back in the wake of that loss can only build shrines to the past. And yet the mystery of the sorrow that is entombed in their work is that that their grief is not just for a time remembered: they grieve also for the loss of a map that made the future thinkable" (17). Ghosh is right, but if there is some comfort in the experience of diaspora, it might well be that the experience enables the creation of remarkable literary texts that are, in their own way, shrines to the present.

WORKS CITED

Badami, Anita Rau. *The Hero's Walk.* Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion.* 1957. New York: Harcourt, 1987.

Ghose, Zulfikar. *The Fiction of Reality.* London: Macmillan, 1983.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide.* New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004.

—. *No Greater Sorrow: Times of Joy Recalled in Wretchedness.* Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2001.

Gupta, Dipankar. Culture, *Space, and the Nation-State : From Sentiment to Structure* New Delhi: Sage, 2000.

Mishra, Sudesh. *Diaspora Criticism.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.

Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary.* London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

Muhanned Cader, Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, Chandragutha Thenuwara, Jagath Weerasinghe. *The One Year Drawing Project: May 2005 - October 2007.* London and Colombo: Raking Leaves, 2008.

Parameswaran, Uma. "Contextualizing Diasporic Locations in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Srinivas Krishna's *Masala.*" *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts.* Ed. Makarand Paranjape. New Delhi: Indialog, 2001.

Paranjape, Makarand. "One Foot in Canada and a Couple of Toes in India: Diasporas and Homelands in South Asian Canadian Experience." *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts.* Ed. Makarand Paranjape. New Delhi: Indialog, 2001.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus.* Trans. A. Poulin Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

Satchidanandan, K. "That Third Space: Interrogating the Diasporic Paradigm." In *Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts.* Ed. Makarand Paranjape. New Delhi: Indialog, 2001. 15-23.

Walcott, Derek. The *Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992.

—. *The Star-Apple Kingdom.* London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.

White, Patrick. *Riders in the Chariot.* 1961. New York: Penguin, 1979.

CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM