Diasporic Art: Writing/Visualising Back and Writing/Visualising into Being

Sukhmani Khorana

The University of Adelaide

Sukhmani.khorana@adelaide.edu.au

Sukhmani Khorana is a final-year Ph.D. candidate in the Discipline of Media at the University of Adelaide. As part of her critical-creative project on Indian diasporic cinema, she is both writing a thesis examining the production, distribution, and consumption of writer-director Deepa Mehta's elemental film trilogy, and using these theoretical observations to springboard her own diasporic filmmaking practice in the form of a poetic documentary. She has been involved with community media for several years, and was the on the preview panel of the Bigpond Adelaide Film Festival 2009. Sukhmani's work has been published in 'Bright Lights Film Journal', 'Journal of Media and Culture' and 'Outskirts' and her prize-winning short film, 'Refracting Adelaide' was screened on Channel Nine in January 2008.

Abstract

The recent critical and popular acclaim won by films like Danny Boyle's Slumdog Millionaire *and Deepa Mehta's* Water *is putting the creative works of diasporic artists in general, and South Asian diasporic artists in particular on the world map. This interest in creativity that is inspired by the homeland, but not necessarily produced in the culture of origin is of pressing significance in an era torn between globalisation and regionalism. Does the diasporic hyphen, through its cultural processes and products, bridge the gap between cosmopolitan and vernacular identities? This paper, which is an introduction to a larger project on diasporic creativity, attempts to understand the genesis of diasporic art by theorising diasporic identity using Gregory Ulmer's concept of 'heuretics', or the invention of a new poetics that is both theoretical and experiential. The creative and representative practices of diasporans then, are part of the postcolonial project of writing/visualising back to colonial discourse. These practices also perform the important task of writing/visualising into being a diasporic subjectivity that is rendered ambivalent in most academic and mainstream writing about diaspora. The paper will be preceded by a short excerpt from the author's twenty-minute documentary film about the diasporic experiences of a heterogeneous group of Indians settled in South Australia.*

Keywords

Diaspora, Heuretic, Diasporic Creativity, Diasporic Cinema, South Asia, Transnationality, Ethnicity, Cosmopolitanism, Globalisation

Diasporic Heuretics

In an essay titled 'Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora', diasporic Indian scholar R Radhakrishnan begins with a personal scenario where his eleven-year-old son asks him whether he is Indian or American (2003: 119). Terming the scenario "both filial and pedagogic", Radhakrishnan tells his son that he is both (2003: 122), and embarks on a polemical journey about diasporic identity and the shifting contours of its relationship with ethnicity and location. Such an autobiographical yet contextually relevant beginning begs the question – why use the personal narrative or anecdote as a springboard for reflections on the diasporic condition that otherwise adhere to traditional academic discourse?

It is likely that the answer to the above question lies in the very nature of contemporary diasporic formation(s) which, like Radhakrishnan's filial-pedagogic scenario, are both experiential and theoretical. It is for this reason that Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram recommend a process-oriented approach to acculturation research "where the focus is on understanding how immigrants living in hybrid cultures and diasporic locations are constantly negotiating their multiple, and often conflicting histories and subject positions" (2001: 3). Similarly, in the introduction to an edited volume titled *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur call for the need to move beyond the construction and consolidation of diasporic identities to asking how these identities are "practiced, lived, and experienced" (2003: 9). Therefore, in order to illustrate the subjective and experiential element of diasporic identity, I will begin with a personal anecdote of a recent journey back to my home country India, and then theorise it in the context of the wider 'heuretics' of diasporic identity and its cultural creation(s).

On reaching the middle-point of my three-year PhD and after spending more than five years (almost my entire adult life) pursuing tertiary studies in Australia, I decided to visit India during the non-holiday season – that is, the Indian monsoon and the Australian winter. What led to the specific spatial and temporal co-ordinates of this journey? A combination of not teaching during the semester in question, feeling overwhelmed by the multiple theoretical underpinnings of my project, seeking visual inspiration for the documentary I was about to begin filming, but most importantly for making sure that I was not growing apart from my family, my home, my childhood version of India (and them from me now). The last reason reminded me of Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje's temporary return-journey to his homeland to come to grips with his family and nation, poetically documented in his memoir, *Running in the Family* (1984). Given this context, I was slightly taken aback when my mother, habitually quick to comment on any changes in physical appearance, pointed out

that I appeared 'firang' (Hindi for foreign). She explained that it was obviously not my skin colour or clothes and jewellery, but something in my accent and general demeanour that wasn't quite her lived understanding of 'Indian'.

A visit to my youngest sister's boarding school (also my alma mater) and a brief conversation with her sixteen-year old friends led them to conclude that I looked like an Australian tourist. Again, I was surprised because I made a point to wear chic Indian fusion garb while in India – three-quarter black pants with a sleeveless ethnic tunic, silver necklace and earrings and kohl-lined eyes. Perhaps it was the digital video camera always slung across my right shoulder, giving the impression I was constantly documenting moments and sights that were ordinary to all those around me. Both my mother's and my sister's friends' observations made me wonder if my Indianness had already been hyphenated, if not usurped by the act of living, studying and working in Australia. I, like nearly twenty million people of Indian origin living in the diaspora, had not necessarily grown apart from India but acquired an additional layer of cultural identity. This newly-acquired layer led me to foreground my old (yet not fixed) layer in some scenarios, and delegate it to the background in others. I am, therefore, becoming different from my India-based family and friends even as I share my originary history and ongoing yet varying interest in Indian cultural and political events with them. Can this experience be theorised? Hybrid cultural theorist Ien Ang theorises her own identity with the following conclusion: "if I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*. When and how is a matter of politics" (2001: 51). Such a strategically essentialist approach to diasporic identity is the basis of the diasporic creative representations considered in this paper.

What distinguishes diasporic identity from the identity of those who are not geographically dislocated from their native lands? In the case of the diaspora (keeping in mind the class, religious, gendered, ethnic and generational heterogeneity of the term), the act of movement from one's place of birth/origin and the subsequent possibility of belonging and access to more than one language/culture is generally distinguishing, and sometimes enabling. Hence, it becomes crucial to theorise diasporic identity and its creative negotiations heuretically, that is, as an ongoing process of negotiation (positive or negative or both) rather than as a fixed entity. But what is heuretics and how can it be applied to diasporic identity as well as diasporic creation(s)? In his Wordpress blog, cultural theorist and digital media practitioner Gregory Ulmer defines heuretics as "the use of theory for the invention of new texts (poetics of any sort)" ('HEUretic*'). Diasporic identity then, because of and not despite of its difference from national, religious, gender, class or other reified conceptualisations of identity

is a 'new invention'. It is both an intersection of pre-existing theorisations on/of identity, yet new in that it combines and transcends the sum of its parts.

In their aforementioned edited volume of essays by diasporic scholars, Braziel and Mannur perform the crucial task of theorizing diaspora heuretically, while emphasizing the historical and cultural specificity of any new becomings:

> Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself – religious, ethnic, gendered, national; yet this diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical moments are embodied and – as diaspora itself suggests – are scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming (2003: 3).

Commenting on the representation of the black postcolonial subject in the 'Third Cinemas' of the Caribbean, Jamaican-British theorist Stuart Hall, whose writings on diasporic identity and its production(s) are now considered canonical in the field, performs a similar theorisation of diasporic identity and representation in his specific context. He suggests, "Perhaps instead of thinking about identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (1996: 110). Diasporic creations, therefore, like most representative-creative practices, are a reflection of this ongoing historic-cultural process of negotiating and inventing, as well as an intrinsic part of the invention. While the 'poetics' indicated by Ulmer implies a celebratory approach to any kind of heuretics, it is not the aim of this paper to view all manifestations of diasporic identity and all kinds of diasporic art as poetic or ideologically superior. The purpose of this critical-creative exercise, instead, is to understand why diasporic art is conceived. A short excerpt from the twenty-minute documentary that is the creative component of my doctoral project (shown at the beginning of the paper) is about a particular kind of located diasporic Indian experience, and aims to poetically illustrate the diasporic heuretics theorised in the critical section.

Diasporic Genealogies: Past and Present

Old diasporas (those created by colonialism, like the African-American diaspora, or the Indian-Fijiian diaspora) or originary diasporas/diasporas in exile (like the Jewish diaspora) have been theorised as being different from the new diasporas created by post World-War II forces of globalization and transnationalism. While the latter tend to have greater agency as

they have generally higher standards of education and have primarily migrated for economic reasons, the same is applicable to second and newer generation members of old and originary diasporas. The latter groups, through assimilation or integration, have greater socio-economic privilege than their predecessors. If this agency and privilege enable them to create and/or represent themselves anew, can it also lead to other extremes – like pandering to Western notions of the 'exotic' and capitalising on the same (this often angers the home nation), or reinforcing sectarian/tribal notions of ethnic identity that are essentialist and problematic for both the home and host societies? In the case of the Indian diaspora, diasporic theorist Sujata Moorti examines current critical scholarship and notes that there are those writing about the sectarian sections of the diaspora, as well as those who theorise the enabling aspects of diasporic creative expression:

> Scholars such as Biju Matthew and Vijay Prashad, Sandhya Shukla, and Arvind Rajagopal have examined the particular ways in which diasporic populations help shape and re-craft the contours of the nation-state. This school of thought has emphasised the forms of religious fundamentalism or Yankee Hindutva that are made possible by the economic support of the NRI population. Others such as Vijay Mishra, Ketu Kartak, and Gayatri Gopinath have examined how the diasporic imagination, or what Salman Rushdie calls access to a second language, has enriched creative expression (Moorti, 2005: 50).

Moorti's observation leads to the question - Are there only two dialectical ways of understanding diaspora and/or two kinds of fundamentally opposed diasporic creative discourse? In his keynote address at a seminar on the Indian diaspora and its creative (especially literary) discourse, Indian academic Kapil Kapoor named the three kinds of diasporic literary discourse, that is, enunciatory, renunciatory and denunciatory. According to him, those who overstate the case of their own country enunciate, those who imagine the home romantically yet flinch on seeing the slums renounce, while those who paint a negative picture of the homeland denounce (2004: 39-40). While most members of the diaspora (creatively-inclined or otherwise) do not belong to a singular category of discourse for the entire duration of their migratory experience, it is the 'renunciatory' discourse that comes closest to describing the ambivalence (sometimes positive) experienced and expressed by later generation and contemporary diasporas.

In addition to the sectarian and creative models, there is a wide range of critical or scholarly approaches to the contemporary notion of diaspora, but they can be broadly categorised into a) the notion of diasporic movement as a kind of dislocation (similar to Deleuzean

deterritorialization), and b) the idea of diaspora as a spatial and cultural dispersal (this is part of, but not the same as the transnational dispersal of capital, goods etc). While the former approach tends to privilege an understanding of diaspora based on the nation/culture of origin, the latter seems to consider the point(s), nature(s) and process(es) of dispersal to explain the construction and experience of diasporic identity, as well as the creation and consumption of cultural products by diasporans. According to Regina Lee, newer diaspora makers, in this case writers are more likely to exhibit the latter understanding of diaspora as their narrative form is transitional and transformational (2004: 68). She adds that ethnicity may still be commodified in the creative works of the new diaspora, but their agency enables them to represent themselves anew (2004: 69). In a similar vein, Ritu Birla, a diasporic scholar in her late twenties reflects on the changing representations of Indian identity in western mass media during her lifetime and observes that although there is a 'modern' difference, some colonial moulds persist:

> Our first introduction to being represented was Merchant/Ivory. There is a dynamic of people going through phases of being represented in different ways. First you are Dr Aziz in *A Passage to India*. That's the person that you associate with. And then maybe you become a more modern person, you read *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and then comes *Mississippi Masala*. Now you have a new kind of cultural production which, I think, is responding to the kind of space which Indians inhabit in the Merchant/Ivory world, and that is a kind of neo-colonial world" (1999: 212).

Hence, it appears that the heuretical subjective and collective negotiations of contemporary diasporas need not be celebrated in an uncritical manner, but their positive difference from erstwhile diasporas needs to be recognised.

What is this positive difference? Can it resist assimilation into the essentialised national identities of both the home and host societies? In her examination of South Asian cultural performance in the diaspora, Carla Petievich argues that the cultural landscape of the Anglo-West is expanding as a consequence of diasporic performances such as Bhangra is Britain, cultural shows at New York University, Eid functions in northern New Jersey or Montreal; Tyagaraja festivals, Nusrat or Jagjit at Alice Tully Hall being part of it (1999: 167). She adds that these creative and evocative assertions "reflect a generation of youth fiercely resisting the efforts of various groups to inscribe them into any particular definition of 'Indian-ness' or 'Pakistani-ness' while at the same time holding onto some aspect of that essential also recognised by their parents in order to sustain some acceptable notion of cultural continuity" (1999: 167). While recognizing the cultural continuity, or what he terms 'conjunctures' in the

real and imaginary spaces inhabited by contemporary diasporas, renowned diasporic theorist Arjun Appadurai writes that the new diaspora is also distinguished by its 'disjunctures' (1996:199). Is the notion of disjunctures akin to an older deterritorialisation model of diaspora? Appadurai's disjunctural-conjunctural synthesis builds on the conceptualisation of diaspora as dispersal by highlighting the construction of new localities and social formations by transient populations (1996:199). Perhaps these new spaces become the sites of diasporic creativity and resistance.

Diasporic Creativity and Scholarship: Why and why now?

Why create? Why resist? Why theorise about diasporic creative resistance? Why do all of this now, that is, in a present which is torn between the conjunctures of globalisation and cosmopolitanism, as well as the disjunctures of regionalism and ethnic/religious fundamentalism? It is likely that the pressing need to create in the diaspora and theorise about these new spaces arises from the desire to understand and bridge the fissure between the often oppositional forces of a cosmopolitan versus a vernacular identity. The diasporic project of which this paper is a part bases its argument on the contentions that a) contemporary diaspora is a s/pace, in that the diaspora is both a real-imaginary spatial location as well as a heuertical temporality that goes through collective-subjective phases, and b) creativity and scholarship in the diasporic s/pace is ideally positioned to attempt to hyphenate the global and the local in a manner that does not pit one against the other.

With the question of 'why now' answered, we are prompted to ask why contemporary diasporic members create, and why diasporic and non-diasporic scholars theorise these creative works as well as diasporic heuretics. Is this phenomenon a continuation of postcolonial literary, cinematic and scholarly resistance? While Diaspora Studies continues to employ postcolonial terms/conditions such as 'subalternity' and 'hybridity', there is a case to be made about diasporans' occupying a different s/pace that postcolonial natives, and hence the need to use postcolonial terminology with qualification. The purpose of this paper is to understand the conception of diasporic creativity, and to propose that under the influence of the cultural products and processes of both the home and host societies, new diasporans create with the desire to 'write/visualise back', and to 'write/visualise themselves into being'.

The writing/visualising back is an attempt at undoing historically orientalist representative discourse, as outlined in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), that continues to underline western representations of 'ethnics' at home and abroad. This is reminiscent of the postcolonial theoretical and literary endeavour to 'write back' to the former colonial power

(Ashcroft et al, 2002). However, in the case of the diasporans, the act of being geographically positioned in an/the erstwhile seat of empire brings them into everyday ongoing contact with western representative practices. As aforementioned, there can be a range of responses to this contact, including pandering to the west or engaging in xenophobic nostalgia for the homeland. This paper, however, only aims to consider those intellectually and creatively-inclined diasporans (and their works) who, regardless of how their art is received in the home and host nations, at least explicitly express a desire to 'write/visualise back' and/or 'write/visualise into being'. One such diasporic artist is Indian-Candian filmmaker Deepa Mehta, whose cinematic texts (especially the elemental trilogy comprising *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*), as well as the contexts of their conception, production and reception are being used throughout my doctoral project as springboards for observations about diasporic creativity. During my interview with Mehta on the Toronto-based production set of her latest film *Heaven on Earth*, she spoke about the genesis of her creative process, commenting that it often began with questions that sprung from contemporary media and socio-cultural phenomena:

> When I wrote *Water***,** the environment was rampant with questions about the place of religion. When I wrote *Heaven on Earth***,** I was reading the papers every day in Toronto about spousal abuse in the Punjabi community (cited in Khorana, 'Maps and Movies').

Mehta's attempt to make feature films that 'talk back' to representations in the mainstream media of both the home country (India), and the host nation (Canada), therefore exemplify the creative diasporan's impuse to 'write/visualise back'.

What about diasporic creative works that are not about diasporic experiences and identity, but base themselves on home soil and often critique its history and/or politics? Is such a text then, still to be considered diasporic? Makarand Paranjape, an Indian academic, is critical of the 'doubly privileged' status of Indian diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nair, implying in his critique that their experience is not representative of the vast majority of their country cousins at home or abroad (2004: 55). He further questions the 'perspective' of films like Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (based in India, but with several diasporic characters) and suggests that a diasporic text should have "a structure of location followed by dislocation and relocation" (2004: 59). He adds, "Without such a movement or journey, I would not consider a text diasporic" (2004: 59). While such a definition of a 'diasporic text' seems broad enough to encompass texts created by diasporans but not about the diasporic experience, it seems to be a definition that could be applied to any kind of narrative journey. In light of Paranjape's

critique of 'doubly privileged' diasporic makers, however, it would be fair to say that he expects a diasporic text to be one that represents some notion of an ideologically 'authentic' cultural/class struggle in the narrative form of a journey. This is where agency becomes significant because often it is economic and educational privilege that enables diasporans to write/visualise back. Citing the case of British novelist of Indian-Pakistani origin, Salman Rushdie, Trivedi notes that he was roused to 'write back' to the metropolis after being discontent with the misrepresentation of India in western visual media like British TV series *The Far Pavilions* and *The Jewel in the Crown* and Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (2008: 208).

Give the aforementioned examples of relatively privileged diasporic artists like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Salman Rushdie in this paper so far, it is clear that this project aims to assess diasporic cultural products and the contexts in which they are produced/received regardless of the class affiliations of the makers. The focus here is on those diasporic makers who may be privileged, but have a clear socio-political imperative to create. When representing the homeland, this imperative often takes the form of 'writing/visualising back' to western/colonial discourse. At the same time, the impact of the new society on their transforming individual and collective consciousness is often expressed through the imperative of 'writing/visualising themselves into being'.

The phenomenon of writing/visualising themselves into being by diasporic artists is a distinct performance of diasporic heuretics as well as a response to the ambivalence accorded to diasporic identity in mainstream and academic discourse. Diasporic scholar Magdalene Ang-Lygate, a Malaysian Chinese woman who migrated to Britain, talks about the need for articulating the diasporic location or (un)location and its experiences despite the lack of suitable vocabulary: "I have had to use permutations…words such as 'black',…diasporic, immigrant, visible minority, ethnic, non-white, women of colour, 'Third World' women,…native (female) Other – all of which are individually wanting and inaccurate" (cited in Brooks, 2004: 27). At the same time, Lee comments on Ang viewing diasporic ambivalence as a positive state enabling the ongoing heuretical creation of diasporic identity itself:

> Like Bhabha, Ien Ang attributes to this space subversive and destabilizing potential, while reading into it unlimited creative possibilities, in terms of the trajectories along which diasporicity may unfold. Ang points out that 'diasporic imagination is steeped in continuous ambivalence', and this is an ambivalence that 'highlights the

> fundamental *precariousness* of diasporic identity construction, its positive
> *indeterminacy*' (2004: 70).

It appears, therefore, that the very indeterminacy and apparent lack of locatedness of contemporary diasporas can be a s/pace for writing/visualising themselves into being.

While western representative practices urge diasporans to 'write/visualise back' contemporary diasporas are also exposed to the media of the home nation. This media, although dislocated from their new geographical location, is often as pervasive a part of their daily mediascape as the media of the host society. However, the home media (including diasporic media in the new home) performs a different function for the diasporans than the host media in that it enables them to imagine an ongoing cultural/spiritual link with the land of origin. Reflecting on the significance of what he terms 'a mass-mediated imaginary' for all kinds of migrants, Appadurai comments:

> Those who wish to move, those who have moved, those who wish to return, and those
> who wish to stay rarely formulate their plans outside the sphere of radio and
> television, cassettes and videos, newsprint and telephone. For migrants, both the
> politics of adaptation to new environments and the stimulus to move or return are
> deeply affected by a mass-mediated imaginary that frequently transcends national
> space (2002: 176).

Referring to the growing Indian diaspora in the west, Jigna Desai notes that cultural products, like "diasporic and Bollywood films, and also videos and DVDs, satellite television, and live performances, greatly contribute to the production of transnational ties as well as ethnic, gender, and class identities" (2006: 117). She adds that these cultural productions from the homeland and its diaspora are not only imbricated in the heuretical formation/negotiation of identity, but also impact the content and form of the transnational creative works of diasporans:

> Additionally, the impact of Bollywood extends beyond the content of films,
> appearing often in the filmic conventions that are reflected in the aesthetic forms and
> narrative structures in a variety of films. *Masala* and *Bhaji on the Beach* employ
> musical sequences, while *Mississippi Masala* and *Fire* feature Bollywood music both
> as background music as well as part of the narrative structure. *Bollywood/Hollywood*
> literally and figuratively merges the two cinemas with its psychosocial dialogue

accompanying romantic comedy, family drama, and musical numbers" (Desai, 2006: 117-118).

The use of multiple national cinematic conventions in the works of Indian diasporic filmmakers will be explored in detail in other sections of the project. However, it is clear that the diasporic creative s/pace is one where diasporans can amalgamate and transcend their numerous cultural influences to write/visualise themselves into being, or to become.

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