

Chapter Two

Theoretical and Historical Approaches to “Diaspora”

(I) Introduction

The phenomena of diaspora have been the subject of considerable interest in such journals as *Diaspora*, *Social Text*, *Public Culture*, and *boundary 2*, which are devoted to the history and current production of transnational cultures. The multiple uses and theorization of “diaspora” have made it a contested term. This chapter provides a wide-ranging review of critics’ theoretical approaches to “diaspora” from William Safran’s lists of criteria based on the definitive model of Jewish history to judge the varieties of diasporization in other communities to James Clifford’s comparative study of “diaspora.” I argue that though the term has its roots in notions around the Jewish experience, Jewish diaspora should not be regarded as the paradigm of the diasporic phenomenon but as a starting point for diaspora studies. With the emphasis on the necessity to transcend the paradigmatic type of the Jewish diaspora, I then turn to the history of Indian diaspora in the second half of this chapter. My detailed description of the specific historical moments of Indians’ initial break with their homeland is to avoid the homogenization of diasporic cultures and to acknowledge the heterogeneity and specificity underlying the term “diaspora.”

(II) The Necessity to Depart from the Paradigmatic Type of Jewish Diaspora

The term “diaspora” has its roots in notions around the Jewish experience. Khachig Tölölyan, the editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, makes a study of the origins and the historical development of the term and discusses how Jewish diaspora becomes the paradigm of the diasporic phenomenon. He says that the

word “diaspora” is etymologically derived from the Greek term *diasperien*, a word comprised of *dia* (over) and *speiro* (to sow). It is widely believed that the term first appeared in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland of Palestine: “Thou shalt be a diaspora in all kingdoms of the earth” (Deut. 28.25). In his *History of The Peloponnesian War* (2.27), recounting the struggle between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century BC, Thucydides applied the Greek term to the unnatural uprooting and scattering of the Aeginetans which resulted from the destruction of their city by the Athenians. Not until the populations of the Jews exiled from Judea in 586 BC by the Babylonians, and in AD 135 by the Romans, did the term “Diaspora” (capitalized) refer specifically to the Jewish diaspora and was the Jewish diaspora regarded as the paradigmatic case, the “ideal type” of diaspora. Since then, the concept of diaspora has become suffused with the Biblical connotations of the Jewish diaspora particularly throughout the Graeco-Roman world.

Some scholars of diaspora recognize that the Jewish tradition is at the heart of any definition of the term diaspora; among them are Simon Dubnow (1860-1941), an outstanding Jewish historian, and Safran. Tölölyan points out that Simon Dubnow, in the 1931 *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, “writes primarily on the Jewish diaspora as the paradigmatic case” (9) although Dubnow also adds that the Armenian and Greek dispersions can also be the two other noteworthy examples. Similarly, Safran writes, “In terms of that definition, we may legitimately speak of the Armenian, Maghrebi, Turkish, Palestinian, Cuban, Greek and perhaps Chinese diasporas at present and of the Polish diaspora of the past, although none of them fully conforms to the ‘ideal type’ of the Jewish diaspora” (84). Moreover, Safran lists criteria based on the definitive model of Jewish history to judge the varieties of diasporization in other

communities. He maintains that the concept of diaspora can be applied to those who share the six following features: (1) the dispersal of “expatriate minority communities” or their ancestors “from an original ‘centre’ to two or more foreign regions”; (2) retention of “a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland”; (3) partial or fully alienation from their host societies; (4) aspiration to return to “their ancestral home”; (5) commitment to “the maintenance or restoration of the original homeland”; (6) derivation of collective consciousness and solidarity from this continuing relationship with the homeland (83-4). Safran’s prescriptive characteristics of diaspora based on the Jewish tradition, which appears in the first issue of *Diaspora*, are seen as the forerunners of the critical discussion about diaspora. Both Dubnow and Safran consider the Jewish diaspora as a paradigmatic “ideal type.”

However, not all scholars take it for granted that the Jewish diaspora is a normative type. Robin Cohen argues, “In trying to draw generalized inferences from the Jewish tradition it is necessary both to draw critically from that tradition and to be sensitive to the inevitable dilutions, changes and expansions of the meaning of the term diaspora as it comes to be more widely applied” (*Global Diasporas* 22). Cohen provides two reasons why it is necessary to transcend the Jewish diasporic tradition. First, the forcible dispersal of the Jews cannot amount to the history of Jewish migration because “there is considerable evidence to suggest that the Jews are not a single people with a single origin and a single migration history” (*Global Diasporas* 21). Not all Jewish migrations result from forcible dispersal. Nor do all the Jewish diasporans, like the Zionists, are eager to physically return to their homeland. Though linked by the shared homeland, the Jewish diaspora should not be marked as a monolithic and homogeneous entity but be characterized with diversity. Second, to defend the orthodox definition of diaspora is debatable because “the word diaspora is

now being used, whether purists approve or not, in a variety of new, but interesting and suggestive contexts” (Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 21). The term “diaspora” that once described the Jewish dispersion now has been theorized from plenty of diasporic experience such as African, Chinese, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Caribbean diasporas and so on.

With his insistence on the necessity to depart from the paradigm of the Jewish diaspora, Cohen amends the list of diasporic characteristics made by Safran. Cohen suggests, “[T]wo features should be ‘tweaked,’ while features need to be added, mainly concerning the nature of the diasporic group in its countries of exile” (*Global Diasporas* 23). He rewrites the first feature by adding that “dispersal from an original center is often accompanied by *the memory of a single traumatic event* that provides the folk memory of the great historic injustice that binds the group together” (*Global Diasporas* 23; emphasis added). With the traumatic memory, diasporic people develop a strong sense of “imagined community” to which they are faithful. The penultimate feature is also adapted by Cohen to “allow the case of not only the ‘maintenance or restoration’ of a homeland, but also *its very creation,*” which will “cover the case of ‘imagined homeland’” (*Global Diasporas* 23; emphasis added). The relationship of the diasporic group to its homeland is not exclusively physical but, for most diasporas, metaphorical. The other four features Cohen adds are as follows. Firstly, he hopes that “groups that scatter for aggressive or *voluntarist* reasons” can be included in the “category diaspora” (*Global Diasporas* 24; emphasis added). Secondly, not all ethnic migrants can be counted as diasporans, given that “[a] strong tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future must exist in order to permit *a diasporic consciousness* to emerge or be retained” (*Global Diasporas* 24; emphasis added). Thirdly, Cohen believes that more “*positive* virtues of retaining a diasporic identity”

should be recognized (*Global Diasporas* 24; emphasis added). It seems that the invasion of Jerusalem and the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC constitutes the chief memory of the diasporic experience. In his “Rethinking ‘Babylon’: Iconoclastic Conceptions of the Diasporic Experience,” Cohen instead explains in detail that the general acceptance of the negative views such as exile, loneliness and enslavement is not immanent in the word “diaspora.” He attempts to verify his assertion that the far more diverse conceptions of diaspora “was ‘hijacked’ to describe a forcible dispersal of a people and their subsequent unhappiness (or assumed unhappiness) in their countries of exile” (“Rethinking” 16) by means of tracing the term back to its original Greek definition and re-reading the Babylonian period of the Jewish exile.

Etymologically, the term is more positive, suggesting fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds. Also, in spite of the displacement of the few ancient Greeks to Asian Minor due to poverty and war, Cohen argues, “in the pre-modern period, it is clear that common Jewish use of the term “diaspora” overlaid a much more benign meaning in the original Greek” (“Rethinking” 6). The word was used to depict the Greek colonization of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor around 800-600 BC, which led to Greeks’ expansion and displacement through free migration, trade and military conquest. From these two perspectives, “diaspora” had a beneficial connotation. Additionally, Cohen, who does not favor the mawkish narratives of diasporas, emphasizes that it is because of a degree of anxiety in diasporas that motivates the need for achievements. Compared with the Israeli Jews, the diasporic Jews, Cohen says, are more distinguished on the evidence of great numbers of Jewish Nobel Prize winners in arts, sciences and so on (*Global Diasporas* 24). Finally, due to bonds of religion, language, and a sense of a common fate, there is “a common identity with co-ethnic members in other countries” (Cohen, *Global Diasporas* 25).

The new list of features made by Cohen is a more comprehensive account of varieties of diasporic experiences than that by Safran.

While Cohen asserts that the term “diaspora” should be extended to encompass new and various patterns of diasporas, he does not suggest that it should be a catch-all term for all kinds of dispersions. Instead, the second point concerning “a diasporic consciousness” he adds to Safran’s list is the constitutive element of becoming diasporans. Tölölyan even argues that only by continuous practice of “diasporic consciousness” can one be qualified as a diasporan. Tölölyan is critical of Walter Connor’s comprehensive definition of diaspora as “that segment of a people living outside the homeland” (qtd. in Tölölyan, 15). He argues,

It [Connor’s definition of diaspora] does not, for example, seek to define just what a community—whether made up of refugees, exiles, immigrants or diasporans—or its individual members *need think, feel, experience, or do* in order to be considered a ‘segment’ of the transnational people that dwells in homeland and outside of it. (15; emphasis added)

In other words, one who claims to be a diasporan given that one lives away from home by birth “risks mere biologism” (Tölölyan 30); it is rather one’s continuous practice and doing and one’s development of “diasporic consciousness” (Tölölyan 17) that make one a diasporan. By means of one’s social, political and emotional interaction with one’s communities away from home, with one’s homeland and with one’s hostland, one thus “enhance[s] the articulations between the past and present, homeland and hostland segments of the transnation” (Tölölyan 30). Tölölyan concludes, “Without some such minimum stringency of definition, most of America—or Argentina, or New Zealand, or any modern immigrant-nation—would just as easily be a diaspora” (30). Tölölyan, though stressing the importance of the

phrase “diasporic consciousness,” does not elaborate on it. The relatively clear definition and explanation of the phrase can be found in James Clifford’s essay, entitled “Diasporas:”

Experience of loss, marginality, and exile (differentially cushioned by class) are often reinforced by systematic exploitation and blocked advancement. *This constitutive suffering* coexists with the skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal. *Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension.* (312; emphasis added)

It is diasporic attachment to its homeland that distinguishes diasporans from immigrants. Diasporans, when faced with assimilationist national policy in a hostland, are not easily assimilated partly because diasporans “whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be ‘cured’ by merging into a new national community” (Clifford 307) and partly because they “maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere” (Clifford 307). However, immigrants, though they may suffer nostalgia and loss, are “only en route to a whole new home in a new place” (Clifford 307). In short, to become a diasporan, one must be aware of one’s identity crisis and learn to compromise themselves in such harsh situations.

From critics’ emphasis on “diasporic consciousness,” I am aware that the issues of home and identity are of importance in the case of diaspora. Unlike ethnic communities that have more positive and constructive links with their host countries, diasporic communities are trapped in their identification with their homeland and host countries. Gabriel Sheffer’s main motive for writing *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* best reveals diasporas’ dilemmas. In the “Preface and Acknowledgments,”

Sheffer writes, “I hope that this book will contribute to better understanding and sympathy for all those many millions of people worldwide who maintain special connections with their old homelands while striving to feel at home abroad” (xiii). Sheffer’s humanistic attempt to unravel the complexities of the existence of diasporas, including their grappling with their homeland and hostland and suffering from their identity crisis, are the two other main topics I want to deal with in my thesis.

(III) The Term’s Complicity with the Idea of Western Modern Nation-State and Nationalism

With Safran’s and Cohen’s discussions of diasporic characteristics mentioned above, many critics assert that diasporic experiences can be used to deconstruct the normative notions of Western nationalism and nation-states. It seems that the term “diaspora” is the synonym for anti-nation. Diasporic feelings and experiences of being trapped in an impossible in-betweenness suggests, “Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’, are contested” (Brah 208-9). Many critics contend that the strong association of the concept of diaspora with dislocation and displacement offers new frames of analyses of the uncritical and unreflexive notions: it challenges the received notions of homeland and returning home, disrupts the geographical and political spaces of the home-nation as an authentic space of belonging, and problematizes the conceptual limits imposed by national and ethnic/racial boundaries. Stuart Hall, for example, questions the essence of origin the Afro-Caribbeans can return to. He argues, “[A]n *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt” (“Cultural Identity” 399). Returning home is nothing but a

perpetual detour. Besides, multiple belongings and dual loyalties undermine the demarcated parameters of nation-states and nationalism as discrete categories of identification and political constitution. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur assert, “[T]heories of diaspora and transnationalism since the 1990s have offered ways out of the trappings of this hierarchical construction of nation and diaspora” (8). Essentially speaking, the boundaries of a unified and coherent nation are established by the territories demarcated by expelling and excluding those who are constructed as outsiders and aliens. Among them are diasporans whose living within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries of in-betweenness make them an easy target for nations. They are strangers among nations. It appears that “diaspora stands in hierarchically subordinate relation to nation or homeland” (Braziel and Mannur 8). However, this naturalization of the hierarchical relationship between nation and diasporans and territorial forms of nation are instead challenged and interrogated by the very concept of diaspora. As Homi K. Bhabha asserts,

The marginal of ‘minority’ is not the space of a celebratory, or utopian, self-marginalization. It is a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity—progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past—that rationalize the authoritarian ‘normalizing’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative. (“Introduction” 4)

Bhabha points out that the concept of diaspora prompts us to rethink and to question the rubrics of nation, nationalism and the relations of citizens and nation-states.

From the discussion above, we perceive that diasporic theorists use the concept of diaspora to oppose the notion of the nation-states. Their assertion that the presence of diasporans puts any normative notions of nationalism and nation-states in question

risks indicating that the concept of diaspora becomes an emblem of anti-nation and synonym for anti-homeland. However, I think that the conclusion they jump into oversimplifies the whole story of diasporans. On the one hand, the theory of diaspora calls the traditional definition of home into question. On the other hand, it may serve as another possible model for the concept of nation-states rather than simply as a foe to it.

The formation of the state of Israel in 1948 is the prime example of diasporans' nationalist claim to a homeland. What brought about such a profound change from Jewish Messianic hopes of simply being brought back to their lost homeland to Zionists' political assertion of the establishment of a nation-state of their own? A survey of causes of the shift must take the forerunners of Zionism as the starting point. Not until the nineteenth century were the Jews, particularly the Jewish intellectuals such as Moses Hess (1812-75), Leo Pinsker (1821-91), and Theodo Herzl (1860-1904), awakened to an urgent need for a Jewish nation-state.

It is noted that three of them are not always Zionists. The traditional notion of the Messianic dream drifted further and further out of their mind as they grew up in the early decades of the nineteenth century when the *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment, took place in Europe that lasted from approximately the 1770s to the 1880s. The *Haskalah*, inspired by the European Enlightenment, was an intellectual movement, led by Moses Mendelssohn (1726-1789), a Prussia Jew, who advocated adopting Enlightenment values of rationality and humanism and encouraged the religion-oriented Jews to learn the European languages and to receive education in the secular subjects such as the arts, science, and agriculture. Mendelssohn's liberating reforms were harshly criticized by many orthodox rabbis as "a half-way house on the road to apostasy" (Laqueur 7). In response to the accusation against him, Modelssohn

emphasized, “[T]here is no contradiction between religious belief and critical reason” (Laqueur 7). He argued that the Jewish religious belief in Messianic redemption should bring about Jewish emancipation, which denoted “the abolition of discriminatory laws, applied specially to Jews, the recognition of Jews as equal to other citizens, and the formal granting of citizenship” (“Jewish Emancipation”) rather than intensified feelings of hostility towards Jews from other backgrounds. Social and cultural assimilation into European society became Modelsohn’s main concern, which “made rapid progress during the early decades of the nineteenth century” (Laqueur 8). For example, “[m]any Jews moved from the villages into larger towns, where they could find better living quarters; they sent their children to non-Jewish schools and modernised their religious service” (Laqueur 8). Besides, “[a]mong the intellectuals there is a growing conviction that the new Judaism, purged of medieval obscurantism, was an intermediate stage towards enlightened Christianity” (Laqueur 8). Those intellectuals “argued that the Jews were not a people; Jewish nationhood had ceased to exist two thousand years before, and now lived on only in memories” (Laqueur 8). The Jewish spokesmen in Germany “claimed full equality as German citizens; they were neither strangers nor recent arrivals; they had been born in the country and had no fatherland but Germany” (Laqueur 8). The *Haskalah*, taking place in Germany, spread to Russia, France and other European countries.

Exposed to the influences of Jewish emancipation movements, Hess, Pinsker, and Herzl sought deeper and closer assimilation and gradually ceased to be practicing Jews. Hess, though born into an Orthodox Jewish family of Bonn, “turned his back on religion” (Laqueur 48). Hess suggested that Jews should stop “identifying themselves with their dead institutions” and asserted that “Christianity was obviously better fitted for the present time” (Laqueur 48). Losing interest in religion, Hess immersed himself

in German literature and scholarship. He later became “prominent in the theoretical exchanges between the Young Hegelians during the 1830s and 1840s” and “collaborated for a while with Marx and Engels” (Laqueur 46). As a socialist, he advocated “love, humanity, justice, and sympathy for the poor” (Sachar 10). Pinsker is the son of a Jewish scholar of Odessa, where existed “a society for spreading enlightenment among the Jews” in the 1870s (Laqueur 70). He was one of the leading advocates of cultural assimilation, “publiciz[ing] his faith in both Russian toleration and Jewish enlightenment” in Russia (Sachar 14). Born in Budapest in 1860, Herzl had extraordinary knowledge of books and had long desired to be accepted as a German writer. While he studied in Austria, he, “who accounted himself a liberal and an Austrian patriot, plunged eagerly into the activities of a large student Cultural Association [student fraternity], attended its discussions and directed its literary evenings” (Bein 25). Three of them made efforts to be integrated into the countries they resided in. They did not have a traditional Messianic desire for returning home, let alone a political claim to a Jewish nation-state.

It was not until the growth of the anti-Semitism that they became aware of the Jewish question and realized that the so-called Jewish emancipation was only an illusion. In the face of the emergence of German anti-Semitism, Hess was impelled to return to his Jewish roots. Influenced by the works of the Italian nationalist Mazzini, Hess in his *Rome and Jerusalem* emphasized that Jews, like Italians, also needed a national life. It is his firm belief that the establishment of the Jewish nation can save Jews from being marked as “a historical anomaly, a social parasite in the lands of other peoples” (Sachar 11). Similarly, Pinsker was deeply unsettled by the anti-Jewish riots of 1871, erupting briefly in Odessa. He became bitterly disillusioned by the attacks of 1881: “[. . .], they [Jews] were, or would be, legally emancipated and

accorded civil right, but they would not be socially emancipated and accepted as equals. Emancipation was always the fruit of a rational cast of mind and enlightened self-interest, never the spontaneous expression of the feeling of people” (Laqueur 72). After realizing that his efforts to seek the disappearance of anti-Semitism through assimilation were in vain, Pinsker turned to be convinced that the only way out of the dilemma was “a concerted attempt by the Jews to utilize their waning moment of opportunity to restore a national home of their own” (Sachar 15). Herzl’s faith in emancipation remained unshaken until he witnessed the anti-Semitic movement in Austria and later perceived that the student fraternity he belonged to had embraced the anti-Semitic movement. Particularly the Dreyfus¹ affair he was assigned to report “made him a Zionist” (Bein 35). The affair was a political scandal, which, in Herzl’s opinion, embodied most non-Jews’ desire to condemn a Jew. Herzl was shocked at the outbreak of anti-Semitism in France, which should have been the center of liberalism and democracy after the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Aware that “anti-Semitism was deep-rooted in the heart of the people—so deep, indeed, that it was impossible to hope for its disappearance within a measurable period of time” (Bein 34), Herzl in his *The Jewish State* (1896) advocated the establishment of the Jewish state and later founded the World Zionist Organization. While Hess and Pinsker were considered the forerunners of Zionism, Herzl was seen as the Father of Zionism, who transformed the forerunners’ national consciousness into “a mass movement and a political force” (Laqueur 83).

The detailed description of Zionism above is to show how the Jews’ desire for returning home is transformed into a political movement. Hess’s, Pinsker’s and Herzl’s dislocation from their ancestral homeland does not make them Zionists. It was

¹ Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish Captain in the French army, was convicted of treason based on forged documents in 1894.

not until their failure to assimilate themselves to the places they lived that they were made Zionists. Zionism was aroused in response to the growing anti-Semitism in Europe. The case study of Zionists complicates the notion of diaspora. The term “diaspora” cannot be simply defined against nation-states but is constituted in the tension between nation-state and assimilation.

(IV) Clifford’s Study of “Diaspora”

The concept of diaspora needs to be extricated not only from the paradigmatic type of the Jewish diaspora but also from its loose and rash associations with the ideas of hybridity and transnationalism which are simply used to undermine nation-states and nationalism. James Clifford’s comparative study of the term “diaspora” avoids the foregoing risks. Like Cohen, Clifford questions Safran’s single quote surrounding “ideal type,” and emphasizes that it is “a sense of the danger in constructing a definition, here at the outset of an important comparative project, that identifies the diasporic phenomenon too closely with one group” (305). He argues that the so-called ideal type or the pure form is in itself ambivalent, let alone used as paradigm to identify other groups as “more or less diasporic” (306). Being critical of the paradigm of the Jewish diaspora does not mean the denial of their particular diasporic experiences. Clifford, instead, suggests, “We should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model,” (306). In other words, “Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be taken as nonnormative starting points for a discourse that is traveling or hybridizing in new global conditions” (Clifford 306). Jewish diaspora should not be regarded as the paradigm of the diasporic phenomenon but as a starting point for diaspora studies. Though, like Cohen, disagreeing with Safran’s assertion, Clifford

may not approve of Cohen's revision of Safran's list since Clifford considers locating essential features an oversimplified way to approach the concept of diaspora. The reasons are that "[w]hatever the working list of diasporic features, no society can be expected to qualify on all counts, throughout its history" and that "the discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and adopted" (Clifford 306). The emergence of Zionism mentioned previously serves as one of the best examples.

Instead of making any lists, Clifford rather "focus[es] on diaspora's borders, on what it defines itself against" (307). Clifford argues, "Diasporas are caught up with and defined against (1) the norms of nation-states and (2) indigenous, and especially autochthonous, claims by 'tribal' peoples" (307). To begin with the first point, the notion of diaspora is caught up with and defined against that of nation-states. On the one hand, people in diaspora are not willing to be assimilated by host countries because of their collective memories of displacement and their nostalgia for homeland. It seems that diaspora cultures are antinationalist. However, "[r]esistance to assimilation," on the other hand, "can take the form of reclaiming another nation that has been lost, elsewhere in space and time, but powerful as a political formation here and now" (Clifford 307). The foundation of Israel in 1948 is the prime example. Zionists with their desire to come home are the zealots for nation building. From this perspective, diasporans cannot be totally innocent of nationalist aims. The second one is diasporans' entanglement with tribal cultures. On the one hand, "[t]ribal cultures are not diasporas; their sense of *rootedness* in the land is precisely what diasporic peoples have lost" (Clifford 310; emphasis added). Tribal groups claim that they are the 'original' inhabitants of the homeland with which they are 'naturally' and 'primarily' linked. On the contrary, diasporas are homeless and rootless. However, tribal groups, on the other hand are diasporic to some extent. First of all, their polemical assertion

risks ahistoricism. Clifford argues, “Tribal groups have, of course, never been simply ‘local’: they have always been rooted and routed in particular landscapes, regional and interregional networks” (309-10). But in order to legitimize their claims, they “usually must override conflicting rights and the history of others in the land” (Clifford 308). Secondly, their claims to indigenous sovereignty are often denied by “colonial powers, transnational capital, and emerging nation-states” (310). Because of the political assault and economic invasion, some tribal groups end up living away from home temporarily or permanently, becoming “tribal diasporas” (Clifford 310). Thus, “the tribal-diasporic opposition is not absolute” (Clifford 310). Clifford concludes, “[I]t is not possible to define diaspora sharply, either by recourse to essential features or to privative oppositions” (310). The concepts of diaspora should be defined by means of relational contrast; diasporas are not absolutely opposed to nationalists and to tribal groups.

Clifford’s argument points out that the category “diaspora” does not correspond to any unified essence which is to be unearthed, nor does it tally with a list of features. The term “diaspora” is rather a signifier, the definition of which is constructed contingently and precariously in the multiplicity of social, cultural and political relations. That is, we no longer have a homogeneous entity “diaspora” against nationalists or tribal groups but a variety of relations in which the concepts of diaspora are always constructed in very diverse ways. Besides, we should also recognize that “*the relational positioning* at issue here is not a process of *absolute othering*, but rather of *entangled tension* (Clifford 307; emphasis added).” Clifford attempts to remind us that there is no such a necessary and definitive relation but a constant movement of displacement. The definitions of “diaspora” are subjected to constant modifications and continual shifts within a field of open and indeterminate

frontiers characterized by “entangled tension” (Clifford 307).

Clifford’s insightful ideas of “the relational position” and his phrase “entangled tension” involve Michel Foucault’s conception of power relations. As Foucault points out, “Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (94). Foucault argues that the mechanisms of power cannot be understood as “the system of Law-and-Sovereign” (97), within which power is possessed, given, or captured by some one or some institutions. This traditional notion of power, which has captivated politics for a long time, is replaced by the most effective form of power, which is particularly tied to the networks of power relations. Foucault emphasizes that power should be considered “a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but *never completely stable, effects of domination are produced*” (102; emphasis added). In other words, there is no such a type of complete, stable and hegemonic domination or subjugation but contingent domination or subjugation which only becomes possible when it is temporarily localized, made specific in the “relational character of power relationships” (Foucault 95). By the same token, diasporans are regarded as opponents to nationalists and tribal groups in one relation while they entangle themselves in these two in another. In my opinion, Foucault’s conception of power can be perceived in Clifford’s approach to “diaspora.” Similarly, Avtar Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* directly points out, “Rather, the concept of diaspora should be seen to refer to historically contingent ‘genealogies’, in the Foucauldian sense of the word” (196). That is to say that the term “is embedded within a multi-axial understanding of power” (Brah 189), which puts the fixation of minority against majority into question. Brah explains, “A multi-axial performative conception

of power highlights the ways in which a group constituted as ‘minority’ along one dimension of differentiation may be constructed as a ‘majority’ along another” (189). Clifford’s and Brah’s analyses of diaspora are very similar: the concept of diaspora can only be understood in the process of “the relational positioning” rather than “absolute othering” in the field of power networks (Clifford 307; emphasis added).

Clifford’s and Brah’s methodology not only avoids absolutely dichotomous oppositions and the failure to take full account of entangled tension of power relations but also opens up the possibility of the multiplicities of social, political, and cultural relations. Clifford’s and Brah’s theoretical and methodological approaches to diaspora help illustrate the way I will deal with the politics of home and identity in the next two chapters.

(V) The Historical Conditions that Produce Indian Diasporans, particularly Those in East Africa, and the Historical Setting of *BR*

Compared with Safran’s, Cohen’s, and Tölölyan’s notions of diaspora, Clifford’s appears to be much more theoretical. Such an attempt to theorize the term has been scholars’ increasing preoccupation. However, while diaspora is theoretically celebrated, it is criticized methodologically for risking losing its historical specificity. It seems inevitable that “[t]here is sometimes a slippage in the text between invocations of diapora theories, diasporic discourses, and distinct historical experiences of diaspora” (Clifford 302). How the inevitable inadequacy of theorizing diaspora is hotly debated by scholars and in what ways the rupture between theoretical studies of diapora and the social, historical texts of diaspora can be sutured particularly in the case of the Indian diaspora are to be discussed in the following passages.

In their *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur observe,

Some scholars, arguing that diaspora enters into a semantic field with other terms and terrains, such as those of exile, migrant, immigrant, and globalization, have asserted that diasporic communities are paragons of the transnationalist movement; other critics have resisted and critiqued such celebratory models for thinking diaspora, noting that such celebrations are often ahistorical and apolitical, failing to note the different contexts allowing or prohibiting movement globally (and even locally). (6)

Some scholars criticize those who favor the theory-inflected diasporist discourse. The reason is that they often lift the notion of diaspora from its history that produces diasporic subjectivities and generally equate the term “diaspora” with transnationalism, which results in the reduction of the complexity of the past and the present of diasporas’ social formation. Braziel and Mannur’s assertion is similar to that of Tölölyan I mentioned before. He suggests that in order to overcome the theoretical limitations, diasporic theorists focus on “the identity of the diasporic collective subject not simply as generated from literary and theoretical discourse but as both effect and cause of the social formation, as a figure that mobilizes dispersion into diaspora and is fleshed out in the course of that mobilization” (29). Tölölyan’s repetition of “social formation” evidences its importance, which has been neglected by theory-oriented scholars. In the following passages, I will focus on the Indian diaspora since different diasporas come to articulate different meanings and explore in what social and historical conditions and circumstances Naipaul and his *BR* are respectively set, which are imbedded in the history of the Indian diaspora.

Different from the diasporic experience of the Jews, the Indian diaspora “began

as part of British imperial movement of labour to the colonies” (Mishra, “Diasporic Imaginary,” 421). The abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century brought radical changes to the migration of Indians. According to Arthur W. Helweg, “Slavery was becoming uneconomical and, with its abolition, various colonies needed cheap labor for plantations, construction and middle-level bureaucratic positions in the colonial administration” (105). To meet a massive demand for labor in Britain’s colonies, the exploitative tradition did not stop but was carried on “under the guise of indenture” from 1830 to 1916 (Helweg 105), which Hugh Tinker characterized as “a new system of slavery” and wrote a book on it. Indians were recruited to work on sugar plantations, the railways, tea and rubber plantations in Britain’s colonies such as Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, East African, Sri Lanka and Malaya (Mishra, “Diasporic Imaginary,” 421). The mass movement of indentured laborers to Britain’s colonies not only turned the previously small-scale movement into mass migration but also predominated the nineteenth-century migration of Indians (Helweg 105; Sowell 310).

There are differences between the indentured-labor system and the horrific African slave trade though the former is often seen directly as a substitute for the latter. While agreeing with Tinker’s influential account that the exploitation of Indian labors was comparable to that of African slaves, Cohen argues that “the analogy with slavery can be taken too far” (*Global Diasporas* 61). He points out that unlike African slaves, who were regarded as the masters’ property, “the indentured workers and their offspring could not be bought or sold” (*Global Diasporas* 61). Besides, the recruited Indians worked abroad for the stated period, “usually for five or seven years” (Cohen, *Global Diasporas* 61) and were offered a free or sponsored return passage at the end of the contract; nevertheless, “[t]he majority either reindentured with the promise of

free land or saved their pennies to buy land at the end of their indentures” (Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 61). In spite of the unlimited working hours and poor accommodations the Indian indentured laborers were subjected to, they, to a certain extent, worked with a prospect of social mobility.

Naipaul’s grandfather migrated from Utaar Pradesh in eastern India to Trinidad around 1880 as an indentured laborer, who had been promised a better life by the British government. Ever since then, Naipaul’s family had settled down in Trinidad as a result of the imperial expansion. Born in 1932 to the family of East Indian descent, Naipaul apparently did not like Trinidad, having made his mind to leave it as soon as he could by the time when he was fourteen years old. In 1950, he had his dream realized; he left for Oxford on an island scholarship and had since made his home in England. Doubly displaced, Naipaul is “part of a generation that had to face the problems that resulted from the withdrawal of imperial order and the resulting cultural confusion” (King 1). As “an Indian by descent, a Trinidadian by birth, a Briton by citizenship” (Gussow, par. 2), Naipaul seeks to come to terms with his ambivalent attitude towards his homeland and with the problematic of his identities.

Naipaul’s *BR* is filled with historical details concerning the migration of Indians to East Africa. Like Naipaul, the two protagonists, Salim and Indar, are also Indians by descent. Salim reveals that Indar’s grandfather “had come from the Punjab in India to work on the railway as a contract labourer” (*BR* 17), which exemplifies the once massive immigration of indentured labourers, mostly Punjabi Muslims, brought from India into East Africa to build a railroad from the coast to Lake Victoria during the colonial era (Sowell 310-11; Delf 1; Mangat 74). According to Sowell, most began poor and uneducated but later became wealthy and prosperous and decided to settle down (313); Indar’s grandfather is one of them. Salim describes, “His [Indar’s] family,

though new on the coast, had outstripped us all; and even their low beginnings—the grandfather who was a railway labourer, then a market money-lender had become a little sacred, part of their wonderful story” (*BR* 109). Unlike Indar’s grandfather, Salim’s ancestors originate in the Punjab and immigrate to East Africa as Indian Muslim traders and businessmen, having lived and prospered on Africa's east coast for centuries. They belong to what Delf describes as “small numbers of Indian merchants” who “have lived in the coastal regions for centuries, arriving long before the days of European settlement” (1).

In addition to the history of the migration of Indians to East Africa, the setting and portrayal of an unstable society in *BR* is based on Naipaul’s observation of Zaire and East Africa. Bruce King in his *V. S. Naipaul* provides readers with the information that Naipaul had spent most of his time from 1965 to 1966 in East Africa and Zaire and later returned to East Africa in 1971 and Zaire in 1975 (116-7). “A New King for the Congo: Moubutu and the Nihilism of Africa” (1975) is his report on his trips to Africa, published in the collection of essays *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad*. King, together with other critics such as Peter Hughes (18) and Helen Hayward (172), tends to view these two as the non-fictional sources for *BR*. For example, the latter essay on Zaire is about Naipaul’s account and indictment of the Mobutu government in post-colonial Zaire, which is widely used in *BR*; the unnamed town Salim heads for is roughly modeled on Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville, in an unnamed country, obviously, Zaire, and the Big Man is closely patterned after Mobutu.

The shift of power from the British Empire to the modern African state and the African government’s policy of nationalization lead to several rebellions and political upheaval, which make the Indian diasporans in East Africa homeless and penniless,

and even put their lives in danger. Salim in the interior of Africa learns of “the butchery on the coast” from his family’s letter, saying, “There was no place for us on the coast; our life there was over. The family was scattering” (*BR* 29). Neither does Salim lead an easy life in the interior, which is supposed to be Zaire (currently the Democratic Republic of the Congo) during the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko in the late 1960s and early 1970s following the withdrawal of the Belgian colonial rule. His property is taken away by the President and given to the native citizen. The foregoing is historically recorded in Sowell’s “The Overseas Indians.” Sowell mentions, “[T]he power of the Europeans and the European colonial government was increasingly challenged by rising African nationalism” (326) in Kenya, one of the British East African territories. Besides, with the movement of African nationalization, “what the Indian had achieved economically became a prize to be sought politically by Africans” (Sowell 327). Uganda, without exception, was suffused with “open hostility to Indian traders spread among Africans, sometimes expressed in destruction and looting” (Sowell 320) in the years preceding Uganda’s independence in 1962. Nazruddin, a friend of Salim’s family, moves to Uganda in order to escape the turbulence in the interior. But shortly, “There was trouble in Uganda, where Nazruddin had a cotton-ginning business [. . .]. Now in Uganda itself a king was overthrown and forced to flee” (95). This is the most difficult time for Indians in Africa who have nowhere to go. Indians in diaspora like Salim and Indar are forced to leave Africa to somewhere else, subjected to the repetitive dislocation and relocation.

(VI) Conclusion

Making the connection between the novel’s historical backdrop and the historical events taking place in the late nineteenth to twentieth centuries is to locate the specific

historical moments when Indian diasporans are historicized and politicized in *BR* and to explore how the historical conditions produce diasporic subjectivities. Naipaul's *BR* serves as a reminder of the collective history of South Asians in East Africa:

indentured labour recruited from India by the British during the nineteenth century to build the railways and the formation of a newly independent central African state in the wake of the withdrawal of the colonial rule. The former causes indentured laborers to make an initial break, never a clean cut-off, with the ancestral connection, which foreshadows their descendants' continuous and ambivalent relationship with their ancestral homeland. The latter intensifies their complicated and confused relationships with their ancestral homeland in India and their present home in Africa. How Indian diasporans deal with their relations to their homeland and with their identities will be discussed in the following two chapters.