UNDERSTANDING AND LIVING DIASPORA IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S RUNNING IN THE FAMILY AND AMITAV GHOSH’S THE SHADOW LINES

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Abstract

Contemporary times are placed under the rubric of postcoloniality and postmodernity and on many fronts it feels as if the world we are entering is anxious and dark. The uncertainties and newness we now confront prompt radical questions about ourselves: Where do we belong? How can we find a sense of self within this diversity and confusion? This article looks at two books, namely Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family and Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines. Though written in the 1980s, these texts still talk about our current realities and are profound studies of the condition of diaspora and how it affects individuals and communities. Both texts also seem to suggest alternative ways of belonging to the places and spaces of the world which are becoming increasingly complex with its overlaps of histories and cultures.

Keywords: Diaspora, Borders, Michael Ondaatje, Amitav Ghosh

Introduction

Though much has been said and written about diaspora, it is a subject which still continues to shape modern society. In much contemporary cultural and literary theory, diaspora is the “exemplary condition of late modernity” (Mishra 1995, p. 147). Sustained interest in the diasporic condition is generated by an awareness that “our contemporary world has seen migrations of people on a scale as never before in human history” (Katrak 1991, p. 649). This also means the coming together of diverse ethnic and cultural communities in a dramatic way. This mobility, as Katrak notes, is rooted within colonial and postcolonial histories as well as “continuing imperialist dominations” (p. 649). It could be said that the diasporic experience provides the new postcolonial subjects. However, because diasporas are complex sites or communities, they are not unproblematic, particularly in negotiating home, identity and belonging.

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