

## Diaspora and the Question of Belonging in Indian-American Literature

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the fluidness of the home, belonging and identity in Indian American literature, and how the stories of displacement negotiate the geographical and psychological boundaries. The paper makes use of important postcolonial theories such as "Third Space" by Homi Bhabha and "homing desire" by Avtar Brah, to examine how authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Mira Jacob, Anjali Enjeti, Nidhi Chanani and Iffat Nawaz attempt to break binary categories of "native" and "other". The paper contrasts sentiment of belonging as a transnational 'becoming' to that of the nostalgic sentiment of the first generation migrants/immigrants and the hybrid/hi perniciousness of second generation descendants. This study explores how the diasporic subject is constantly being made to mirror itself through these modes of critical reading of memory, via language, gastrocriticism, name alterations and systemic racial othering, in the process being hybridly remade. Finally, the modern Indian-American literature does not demonstrate a unidirectional assimilation but displays home that is continually in the process of border crossings.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Belonging, Indian-American Literature, Hybridity, Generational Memory, Transnationalism.

### 1. Introduction

South Asian diasporic voices have played an important part in altering the course of American literature in late-twentieth and early twenty-first century America. Previously, this migratory route was split by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that eliminated the limits on immigration and brought highly skilled people to the United States (Balaji and Thenmozhi 2172). Bharati Mukherjee showed the tears, the mind change of these exiles. Later writers, such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Mira Jacob, Anjali Enjeti, Nidhi Chanani, and Iffat Nawaz furthered these parameters and illustrated manner of trauma through being displaced, undocumented, and othered that affect everyday lives. This paper asserts that the contemporary Indian-American book contestants with stereotype notions of "home" and "belonging: A fixed place of beginning is not the idealized home; instead a process of dynamic translation and adaptation, this process occurs through "a transnational constellation (Ghatak 91). It is possible to demonstrate the interplay of first generation nostalgia and second generation hybridity to suggest that in Homi Bhabha's liminal "Third Space there is continuous negotiation of identifications.

### 2. Conceptualising Diaspora, Home and Belonging

It is important to trace the historical and contemporary evolution of the concept of 'diaspora' etymologically means to 'sow' or 'scatter seeds across' (Reddy and Selina 13) to grasp the nature of how they exist as representations of a displacement. Now it stretches over the limits of the earth, and globalized it concerns with the voluntary migrations as well as horizontal ethnic network (Ahmad 274). But the traditional models like the six-point model of William Safran focus on memories of the homeland that are retained, and intentions to return (Safran 83), which is now being questioned by contemporary theory. According to Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space', place of a collision of cultures results in 'in-between' space: a space where hybridity is negotiated (Asl and Abdullah 55; Alghaberi and Mukherjee 639). This is complemented by Stuart Hall who views cultural identity as a changing, historically and difference-infused "production" (Ahmad 4). Avtar Brah's discussion on the applicability of this to the concept of home, which she proposes is a 'homing desire', a desire to 'invent and rewrite' home in new localities, creating a home that is 'plurilocal and in a constant 'becoming' neither resolved nor resolved into' (Khorakiwala 261).

### 3. Memory, Nostalgia and the Imagined Homeland

Memory is an active and struggle to prevent forgetting (Yahya et al. 1296). Loitering among exiles produces "imaginary homelands" (Ahmad 4), invisible Indias of the mind, that can only be pieced together, whole, from shards of memory or a Hauser-like bewilderment of what might test the imagination. The Parted Earth (2021) by Anjali Enjeti conjures up the Partition of India in 1947, and its accompanying forced displacement of numerous people (Butt 794). The Partition trauma penetrates the space between generations and continents, and has deep impact on the survivors and descendants, as Enjeti shows. She portrays three generations, and illustrates the concept of "postmemory," "an

experience of inheriting the experience of trauma that one did not go through in the first person" (Butt 794). The two claimed carriers are Deepa Khanna, a stake-legging eighty-seven year old Partition survivor and her granddaughter Shanti, the secondary carrier who will now attempt to craft the incomplete tale of her family (Butt 801). They are then displaced subjects that realize reconciliation via the mobile/migratory medium of memory, which is both intracultural and transnational (Butt 801).

#### **4. Language, Cultural Practice and the Making of Belonging**

Diasporic is 'home making' via domestic ritual and food ways (Lal and Jayakumar 197). An investigation of the form of consumptive practice that become mnemonic devices to come nearer to the homeland that is left behind, is what can be termed 'gastrocriticism' (Biswas and Banerjee 138, 150). Food is an important cultural signifier in Jhumpa Lahiri's books *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Ashima Ganguli's creation of a "humble approximation" of a Calcutta sidewalk snack of Rice Krispies, peanuts, and red onions, illustrates this sensory displacement (Asl and Abdullah 60). The 'ambiguous power' of traditional Bengali femininity, and 'psychological distress' are demonstrated in the 'unaccustomed earth' of Ruma's kitchen incompetence – her 'vegetables sliced too thinly' and her 'begunis [that] broke apart' (Biswas and Banerjee 144). On the other hand, Sang in "Nobody's Business" turns from the field of traditional foods and towards American snack foods demonstrating the conscious denial of her hyphenated identity (Biswas and Banerjee 145). In Gogol's conflict with his peculiar name in *The Namesake*, lie the anxieties of hybridity as his change to "Nikhil" is a "strategic response" to demands of the host society (Asl and Abdullah 59; Singh 191).

#### **5. Race, Othering and the Limits of American Belonging**

Political borders impose a structuring constraint on diasporic citizenship because citizens' substantive citizenship is tied to how states make policies; thus elite professionals are more likely to be part of the diasporic citizenship than low-wage migrants. The "American Way" as 9/11 undermines is fractured in the US via the process of racial othering (Asl and Abdullah 60). Moussa Pourya Asl defines nationalism following 9/11 as a governmentality Foucault called apparatuses of government, which use "logic of surveillance" (Asl and Abdullah 54) to deal with minorities; and "consumer citizenship" (Asl and Abdullah 54) forces minorities to consume. This is a racialized nation-space, of which a writers' approach toward the problematic of the hostland, as pointed by Kar, is disagreeable. Marina Budhos's *Ask Me No Questions* (2007) and Kazim Ali's *The Disappearance of Seth* (2009) portray post-9/11 hate crimes and state surveillance (Kar 43). In Budhos's novel, experience of a family of undocumented Bangladesh immigrants, the Hossain family, is the traumatic experience when the father is arrested at the Canadian border (Kar 46). Budhos reveals that the policies of national security characterize immigrant bodies as "suspicious others" (Kar 45). In *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Kiran Desai deals with the class stratas of migration (Ahmad 2). Biju's experience of working in the underpaid positions in restaurants demonstrates the "American Dream" in the context of the subaltern classes as a myth. Similarly, Judge Jemubhai Patel is the voice of an internalized colonial consciousness, and thus suffers from a sense of isolation and a sense of empty mimicry throughout his life (Ahmad 2).

#### **6. Generational Change: From Assimilation to Hybrid Belonging**

Generational divisions lay bare the limitation of Elliott Barkan's "linear model of assimilation" where immigrants give up their heritage in order to be completely integrated (Alghaberi and Mukherjee 637). What South Asian fiction suggests, however, is that racial differences are still important barriers of exclusion despite being invisible (Alghaberi and Mukherjee 639). Thomas and Kamala, of Mira Jacob's *The Sleepwalker's Guide to Dancing* (2013), have their children adhere to certain customs (Alghaberi and Mukherjee 639). Trapped between the American culture and ideology in on which he is a minority, and yet domestic conservatism to which he is also a minority, Akhil experiences intense psychological dissonance, concerned as he is with trying to assimilate to the dominant culture without apparent success (Alghaberi and Mukherjee 637, 642). In Nidhi Chanani's graphic novel *Pashmina* (2017) there are no more restrictions on the freedom to be a woman by the Indian government anymore; hence away Nimisha, the single mother from the first generation, runs to California to celebrate the Indian female deities. Through the story of Priyanka, Nimisha's daughter, the reader can journey back to India and learn about the secret life of Nimisha, and an example of how second generation belonging can be a created synthesis of both worlds (Ghatak 97).

#### **7. Reimagining Home: Towards a Transnational Sense of Belonging"**

By employing the twin concepts of "expatriation" and "immigration," Bharati Mukherjee brings out the trauma of this self-transformation "that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids" (Mukherjee 3). Her *Darkness* (1985) and *Jasmine* (1989), both explore immigration as a "gain"-experiences of personal emancipation as well as immigration - and not "loss". This self-transformation is the main character's in the book *Jasmine*. Born in Punjab as

Jyoti, she suffers through so many bouts of violence and ends up in the US (Dash 39). She may play a few of these parts, for instance, Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, which required her to undergo several transformations in her psyche to survive (Das 42). In rendering her a "Phoenix" she shows that there is a sense of belonging that can be undertaken with the "open-endedness" of the adopted land (Dash 37). Iffat Nawaz's *Shurjo's Clan* (2022) is a transnational reconfiguration as it traces out three generations of women (Khan 54). While the older generation in "nostalgic limbo," *Shurjo's* "home" is rendered as the affectative space that is produced dynamically between the US and Bangladesh (Khan 62) in the process of creating a hybrid cosmopolitanism. Nawaz illustrates how this is (re)constructed based on conceptions of multiple 'habitats of meaning' and fluid emotional relations to the home.

## **8. Conclusion**

The new literary productions by Indian-Americans present a complex and nuanced approach to the possession of belonging, which challenges the usual dichotomy of "native" and "other." The "home" is no longer a fixed point of origin as is evident in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Mira Jacob and Nidhi Chanani. Rather, home is a construct of plurilocalism in transformation, through the prism of memory and language, via gastrocriticism and domestic rituals. These authors show that diasporic belonging is a "provisional condition of relationality" as they map out the "structural violences" of both illegal immigration and post-9/11 surveillance and the "generational conflicts" within immigrant homes and families. The Second Generation of postmemory, the younger exiles, assert with greater courage the liminal "Third Space" of cultural hybridity while the older generation of exiles tries to find a sanctuary of comfort in the nostalgic homeland of the "imagined". In sum, this body of literature will be a transnational identity in which the boundaries of "race" and "nation" are not foreclosed. Thus Indian-American fiction demonstrates that "home" is not where our "roots" lie, but where one puts one's feet—where one is, a space of infinite transformation, translation and resilient survival.

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