



## Identity Crisis and Cultural Hybridity in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Comparative Study

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to address the issues of identity crisis and cultural hybridity in the works of three renowned Indian diasporic writers – Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Lahiri's The Namesake, Mukherjee's Jasmine and Divakaruni's The Mistress of Spices are examples of narratives about migration and acculturation which reveal how protagonists deal with the challenges of negotiating their cultural identities in the host community. The paper attempts to demonstrate the significance of post colonialism and diaspora studies perspectives in reading the conflict between the cultural traditions and multiple identities in the selected works. The present study employs the theories of cultural hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall, as well as the diaspora discourse of Avtar Brah to interpret the migrant experiences and the construction of the selfhood in Lahiri's, Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's novels. The analysis will demonstrate that the sense of self is not a stable entity but a fluid concept, a dynamic structure which is negotiated between the migrant and the host culture. The writers' attitudes to self and hybridity differ, as reflected in the protagonists' choices and struggles. Lahiri depicts the emotional difficulties of second generation immigrants, while Mukherjee's characters are constantly changing and reinventing themselves, and Divakaruni's protagonists are struggling to negotiate their gender and cultural identities. The paper will argue that the themes of hybridity and identity crisis play an important role in the continuing discourse of Indian English literature about migration and acculturation in the post colonial period.*

**Keywords:** Identity Crisis, cultural Hybridity, Diaspora, Indian English Literature, Post colonialism, Migration, selfhood.

**Introduction:** Indian English literature is a prominent phenomenon, and the works by Indian diasporic writers have gained increasing recognition for their contribution to the discourse on



migration and belonging. Some of the most notable authors are Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, who describe the struggles of the migrants and their descendants who find themselves at the intersection of different cultures. Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* portray the immigrant and post-immigrant life and bring out the themes of cultural identity, hybridity, and belonging. The characters in these stories face the challenge of reconciling their cultural traditions with the new way of life and struggle to adapt while holding on to their identity. Migration is a complex process which affects individuals in various ways and causes difficulties in adjusting to a new environment, communicating, understanding one's cultural roots, and developing a sense of self. As a result, many migrants experience an identity crisis, which is a conflict between their cultural background and the culture of the host community. The phenomenon of hybridity emerges when the migrant culture interacts with the host culture and integrates some of its elements. Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni address these issues in their works, which can be analysed using the concepts of post colonialism and diaspora studies. This paper will discuss the themes of identity crisis and cultural hybridity in *The Namesake*, *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices* and evaluate how the migrant protagonists negotiate their multiple identities in the host country.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study will be based on post colonialism and diaspora theories which allow for examining the themes of hybridity, negotiation and identity formation in the literature by Indian migrant writers. Lahiri's, Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's works explore the complex process of identity construction and depict the psychological, cultural and social conflicts experienced by the protagonists. The themes of hybridity and belonging are the result of the interaction between cultures during the migrant experience.

### **Diaspora**

The term diaspora denotes the dispersion of a population from its original location, as well as the cultural and social implications of this process. Scholars of diaspora studies have drawn attention to the phenomenon of migrant communities who experience a variety of challenges peculiar to living in a foreign cultural environment. In his definition, William Safran "identifies four key characteristics of diasporas: dispersal from the territory of the home state, memory of the homeland, a feeling of attachment to it, and a corresponding loyalty and solidarity among diaspora members" (q. in Brah, 1996, p. 8). Robin Cohen (2008) notes that the concept of diaspora has changed over time, and today it is used to describe "the processes of migration and settlement, cultural change and adaptation, and the establishment of social, cultural, and economic networks in the host countries" (p. 77). Diaspora no longer stays for the territorial dispersion and detachment but instead covers the interactions taking place in the host community which lead to the formation of migrant identity.

Avtar Brah (1996) argues that the term diaspora encompasses a range of experiences by the dispersed population, from detachment to interaction with the host community: "the



conceptualisation of diaspora, as I use it, is not concerned only with the process of scattering but also with the subsequent and continuing processes of negotiation and interaction among migrant groups" (p. 15). Thus, the migrant experience in a new country can be different for individuals and communities depending on a variety of socio-historical factors. The concepts put forward by Cohen and Brah can be seen in the stories by Indian diasporic writers which illustrate the varied experiences of migration. The protagonists of Lahiri's, Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's stories encounter a number of challenges while living in a foreign community. They struggle to adapt while trying to hold on to their cultural traditions. The interactions taking place between migrants and the host community lead to the emergence of hybridity, and the writers depict the different ways in which the migrant identity is negotiated in new environments. Individual experiences of dispersion vary, but the migrant experience in general is still distinctive due to the unique mode of adaptation, cultural exchange practices, and identity formation.

### **Identity**

In post colonial and diaspora studies, the term identity is of particular importance, as migration often involves the adjustment of personal, social and cultural identities. Scholars argue that the migrant identity is not stable but instead is negotiated between the host and migrant cultures. It is widely recognised that the process of adaptation entails psychological difficulties for the individual who has to adjust to a new environment and abandon some elements of their cultural background. According to Stuart Hall (1990), "cultural identity is dynamic and fluid, not given, fixed, or essential; it is a matter of 'becoming' rather than 'being,' a process rather than a state, something that happens rather than something that is" (p.36).

Hall's view of migrant identity can be applied to all three novels under investigation, as his perspective highlights the essence of the psychological struggles experienced by the protagonists of Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni. The migrant identity is fluid, and the individual has to negotiate it in the new social and cultural environment. It is a complex process which often results in the formation of hybridity as the migrant persona incorporates some elements of the host culture. Hall (1990) suggests that "identity is formed in the negotiation between cultures, and so is hybrid, contingent, and fluid" (p.43). This definition can be applied to *Jasmine* and *The Namesake* as both narratives present the migrant experience from the perspective of individuals who are caught between two cultures. Gogol and *Jasmine* experience their identity as fragmented, and the formation of their cultural identity is depicted as a process which takes time and effort. The negotiators of migrant identity face numerous struggles, as the adjustments to their cultural background entail psychological and social costs. However, as Hall notes, individuals can embrace hybridity and benefit from the opportunity to transform and renew their cultural identity.

### **Cultural Hybridity**

Another important concept which applies to the discussion of migrant identity is cultural hybridity. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* illustrates the unique hybridity of the migrant experience



through the character who actively engages in cultural exchange and integrates different elements into her identity. Hybridity emerges as the result of the interaction between cultures, and it is a powerful force which influences the individual and transforms their identity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) asserts that “hybridity is the location of translation: the moment of exchange, when languages are translated and cultures read by each other” (p.321). According to Bhabha’s view, hybridity challenges the stable boundaries between cultures by engaging them in dynamic interaction.

Bhabha’s notion of hybridity can be applied to the discussion of migrant identity as it provides a comprehensive explanation of the corresponding aspects depicted in the stories by Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni. The migrant experience involves the interaction between the host and migrant cultures which leads to the emergence of hybridity as a phenomenon influencing the individual. Hybridity enables the individual to incorporate different elements from both cultures, which entails psychological benefits and challenges. The concept applies to Jasmine, as the protagonist engages in extensive cultural exchange on her journey from India to the United States. Gogol’s hybridity emerges as a result of his upbringing in the Indian cultural tradition and living in America, while Tilo wrestles with maintaining her Indian beliefs and adapting to the Western way of life. The hybridity of the migrant identity is depicted in *The Namesake* as the protagonist struggles to understand his Indian roots while trying to adapt to Western culture. It can be asserted that hybridity plays a major role in the construction of identity in all three novels.

### **Relevance to the Present Study**

The aforementioned concepts provide an essential basis for analysing the themes of hybridity, negotiation and identity formation in the narratives by Indian diasporic writers. They offer valuable insights into the psychological, cultural and social aspects of the migrant experience which are integral to the discussion of identity in Lahiri’s, Mukherjee’s and Divakaruni’s works. In particular, Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, Hall’s view of migrant identity, and Brah’s perspective on diaspora can be used to further investigate the themes of adaptation and negotiation in the studied novels. The following analysis will focus on the depiction of migrant identity in the short stories by Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni and demonstrate how the protagonists navigate their sense of self in different cultural environments. The discussion will investigate the ways in which the migrant identity is flexible and negotiated between the host and migrant cultures, as well as the psychological impact of such an identity as depicted in the selected stories. The paper will argue that cultural hybridity plays a major role in the self-conception of the protagonists of Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* and Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*.

### **Comparative Analysis**

The short stories *The Namesake*, *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices* depict the migrant experiences of individuals who have moved from India to the United States and have encountered the challenge of negotiating their cultural identities. Although the authors adopt different approaches to illustrate the characteristics of migration and acculturation, Lahiri, Mukherjee and



Divakaruni examine the themes of identity crisis and hybridity in the protagonists' lives. The themes emerge as the characters struggle to adapt to a new cultural environment and negotiate their multiple identities. Gogol Ganguli, Jasmine and Tilo experience the same difficulties in different ways which demonstrate the complexity of adjusting to a new way of life while retaining one's cultural identity.

### **Do you ever feel out of place? Like you don't really know who you are?**

All three protagonists of *The Namesake*, *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices* experience an identity crisis, but in different ways. *The Namesake* portrays the migrant experience from the perspective of Gogol Ganguli who struggles to reconcile his Indian cultural heritage with the values of Western society. Lahiri (2003) describes the challenges of adapting to a new environment and illustrates the migrant identity crisis through the protagonist's relationship with his Indian name. Gogol resists his Indian identity, rejecting his name and refusing to acknowledge his cultural background. However, as he matures, he begins to appreciate his roots and recognises the importance of Indian cultural heritage. Lahiri depicts the process of migrant identity formation as a complex one which requires time and effort. The author asserts that "identities are formed by self-perception, not total assimilation or confrontation of an unfamiliar culture" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 267). In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee illustrates the migrant identity crisis of a woman who moves to America in search of a better life but finds herself unable to adapt. Mukherjee (1989) depicts Jasmine's struggle to adjust to the Western way of life and illustrates the migrant identity formation as a challenging and prolonged process. Unlike Gogol, Jasmine embraces her Indian cultural roots and willingly accepts her migrant identity. The author demonstrates that the migrant identity is fluid and can be adapted to fit the new environment: "it was a self that was in process, in transition, in transformation" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 87). In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni examines the issues of cultural identity through the lens of an Indian woman who decides to move to the United States to be with her husband. Divakaruni (1997) illustrates the hybridity of Tilo's migrant experience which entails psychological, cultural and spiritual challenges. The author asserts that "hybridity was not a matter of the self or the other but of the space between, the negotiation of the two cultures" (Divakaruni, 1997, p. 184). *The Mistress of Spices* presents the migrant identity as a dynamic construct in which the individual interacts with the host and migrant cultures. Divakaruni's protagonist, similar to Jasmine and Gogol, is unable to fully adapt to the new environment and is unable to completely abandon the Indian way of life.

The migrant identity is a dynamic concept which is negotiated between the host and migrant cultures and is therefore different for all individuals who engage in the process. The short stories by Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni demonstrate that the migrant identity formation entails psychological difficulties and can be an extended process which requires time and effort. The narratives present different perspectives on the issues of adapting to a new cultural environment and suggest that the migrant identity can be flexible and fluid. The three protagonists struggle to



negotiate their identities in the foreign culture, and the challenges they **encounter are a reflection of the difficulties experienced by many migrants.**

### **Cultural Hybridity & Negotiation**

Based on Bhabha's (1994) view, his idea of cultural hybridity is an appropriate conceptual framework to interpret the protagonists of the book. Bhabha states that individuals living in the "Third Space" negotiate their identities rather than adapt to a specific culture.

Hybridity is manifested in Lahiri's *The Namesake* through the depiction of daily family life and the interactions of Indian immigrants with US culture. The first-generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima retain their Bengali traditions, cuisine, and religion, passing them to their children who adopt American habits. Thus, Lahiri's Gogol is torn between Indian and Western cultures and eventually embraces both, which shows that hybridity is not a compromise but a synthesis of cultures.

Hybridity is a power-endowing phenomenon in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. The protagonist Jasmine is neither bound by patriarchal rules and social norms nor confined within the borders of nations or genders – she reinvents herself in various adaptations of her previous identity. In other words, Jasmine opts for hybridity as a way of transcending the limitations imposed by singular cultures, which aligns with Bhabha's view of hybridity as a strategy to negotiate one's identity. Migration, as in Jasmine's case, is no longer a border-crossing process but a rhizomatic transition that empowers individuals.

In Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, hybridity is the combination of traditional Indian spirituality and modern American society. In the novel, Tilo's spice shop symbolizes the borderland between the protagonist's native land and the Western world. The shop helps the immigrant community to remember their home and honor their heritage while also embracing change. This view of hybridity is similar to Bhabha's (1994) perspective because it involves both preservation and adaptation. Divakaruni resorts to mythological metaphors to depict the nuances of Tilo's hybridity and her negotiating between cultures by using spices to cure homesickness, racial discrimination, and family issues. At the same time, the author extends the discussion of hybridity to such themes as cultural preservation and the transmission of cultural legacy through folk tales, spirituality, gender, and memory.

To sum up, the three novels help understand that hybridity is a multifaceted phenomenon and that it shapes individuals' identities in various ways. While Lahiri focuses on the interplay of different cultures in the second generation of immigrants and how they construct their hybrid identities, Mukherjee depicts hybridity as an empowering power for those who choose to live beyond cultures. Divakaruni's version of hybridity emphasizes the themes of cultural continuity and adaptation. Each author used different literary techniques to elaborate on hybridity's implications for a person's identity. Nevertheless, all of them problematize the concept of identity construction and depict it as a dynamic and continuous process.



## Migration, Belonging, and Displacement

The protagonists of the three novels have to face numerous challenges associated with migration. Being the first-generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke, the main characters in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, displace themselves geographically but remain culturally attached to their homeland. Thus, Ashima, in particular, is constantly exposed to feelings of loneliness and homesickness, whereas her son Gogol becomes caught in a cultural limbo. In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, migration is a process of continuous adaptation and transformation. Jasmine crosses borders many times in her life as a widow who comes to terms with her past and moves to a new country in search of a fresh start. In *Jasmine*, migration is associated with disruption, but the protagonist overcomes these challenges and builds her life anew without ties to her previous home. Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* portrays migration as an emotional struggle for an immigrant woman who has lost her home and family but creates a source of cultural heritage and belonging for other migrants. Displacement in Divakaruni's novel is an emotional condition rather than a physical one because Tilo is homesick and culturally in-between in the United States. The challenges associated with migration and hybridity are different in all three books. The first two novels depict the difficulties associated with the initial stages of migration when one has to adapt to a new environment, whereas the third story focuses on more long-term experiences of living in a society with different cultural codes.

Moreover, another theme that appears in all three novels is the idea of belonging. In *Jasmine*, belonging is a feeling that comes from within. Jasmine chooses to belong to herself regardless of social norms and creates her own path. In *The Namesake*, belonging is the feeling of being at home in two different cultures. As Gogol matures, he embraces both Indian and American cultures, which allows him to become more tolerant toward others. In *The Mistress of Spices*, belonging is the sense of connection to people and places, which is why Tilo's spice shop is a safe haven for people from India. Hence, belonging is a fundamental aspect of identity that all the protagonists experience.

## Gender and Identity

All three novels examine the theme of gender to different extents. Although Lahiri's book focuses more on the immigrant experience than on gender issues, the author depicts the challenges that Indian women face when migrating to the United States. Lahiri describes the life of Ashima, an Indian mother living in America, who has to preserve Indian traditions and culture for her children. Ashima is an outsider in both her home country and her adopted country, which could have been very challenging for her during the initial phases of migration. However, she is resilient and adapts to the new circumstances.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* depicts a female protagonist who actively resists the imposed patriarchy by choosing to live her life on her own terms. Jasmine is a self-confident immigrant woman who does not consider herself to be oppressed and does not accept being treated as lesser by her husband. Despite numerous hardships associated with migration, she maintains a positive



attitude toward life and creates her identity anew in the adopted country. Hence, Jasmine is an inspiring example of a woman who chose independence and managed to withstand the struggles of migration while remaining herself all the time.

Divakaruni's Tilo is yet another strong female character who is not limited by gender and cultural barriers. The *Mistress of Spices* is filled with multiple metaphors that emphasize Tilo's spiritual connection to Indian culture and traditions, as if the woman draws her strength from them. Tilo loves spices, and the author compares the sensory experience of this love to the emotional experience of connecting to one's roots. Similarly to Jasmine, Tilo resists gender and cultural domination in the United States, but she also educates her customers about Indian culture and empowers them by helping to preserve their cultural identity. Divakaruni elaborates on the themes of spirituality and cultural continuity because the protagonist does not see herself to be from the United States or India but as someone who belongs to the world. Hence, the three authors present different perspectives on female identity, but each of them emphasizes the positive aspects of being a woman.

### **Comparative Perspective**

Despite the fact that all three novels depict the immigrant experience and address similar themes, each author has chosen to portray slightly different aspects of migration and hybridity. Lahiri's second-generation immigrants struggle to accept themselves in both Indian and American cultures, whereas Jasmine aspires to continuous transformation and has no identity beyond her own definition. Divakaruni presents a more comprehensive picture of the hybridity experiences, focusing on the spiritual aspects and the empowerment that comes from within. Hence, *The Namesake*, *Jasmine*, and *The Mistress of Spices* differ in terms of the approaches used to portray the complexities of identity formation.

However, the similarities between the three novels are greater than the differences because all authors demonstrate that constructing one's identity is a continuous process. Lahiri, Mukherjee, and Divakaruni are united by the focus on the immigrant experience, which is reflected in the major themes of their works. Migration, hybridity, and belonging are the core themes that appear in all three books, although the authors interpret these themes differently.

Furthermore, the similarities between the novels are found in the details and literary devices used to portray the struggles of the protagonists. Lahiri uses the motif of names as the source of Gogol's identity crisis. Mukherjee resorts to the stylistic device of repetition as the means of Jasmine's transformation across the narrative. Divakaruni fills her novel with metaphors and stories that demonstrate the significance of cultural heritage for migrant individuals. All three authors are skillful in depicting the challenges associated with living in a new culture because they use different literary techniques to describe the same phenomena. The variety of approaches to address the common themes of migration and hybridity show that there is no singular experience of an immigrant, as every individual perceives his or her journey differently.



In addition, the interpretation of gender and its impact on the migrant experience varies between the three novels. Although none of the books focuses exclusively on the challenges faced by women, each author highlights different aspects of female identity. Lahiri shows that Indian women, like Ashima, have to adapt to a new culture, following traditions for the sake of their children. Mukherjee's Jasmine is a female equivalent to the male-dominated Indian society, but she does not perceive herself to be oppressed and chooses to live her own life. Divakaruni's Tilo is a strong woman who loves spices and serves their unique purpose to people of diverse origins. Hence, the three female protagonists are portrayed in different ways, but they all display a degree of resilience and adaptability that is frequently found among migrants.

Finally, when comparing the three novels, one notices that the authors differ in their depictions of the relationship between migrants and their adopted or native cultures. While Lahiri and Divakaruni insist on the importance of preserving cultural heritage, Mukherjee presents hybridity as an empowering experience for immigrant individuals. Therefore, there are differences between the authors in terms of the aspects of migration and hybridity that they chose to emphasize.

Nevertheless, all three novels are important contributions to the Indian English literature because they demonstrate that migrants are empowered through hybridity and that there are many ways to belong to different cultures while retaining one's identity. The stories told by Lahiri, Mukherjee, and Divakaruni are valuable to scholars and readers because the authors examine the unique phenomena associated with migration and its impact on individuals' identities. They provide insight into the different aspects of migrants' lives with the help of such literary techniques as repetitions, metaphors, and descriptive writing. The themes of migration, hybridity, belonging, and adaptability that resonate in all three works allow the authors to explore the intricate processes of cultural negotiation and identity formation.

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