

RECLAIMING DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN THE SELECT FICTIONS OF JHUMPA

LAHIRI AND MONICA ALI

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ABSTRACT

As diasporic literature has become a tool for exploring the complexities of identity, belonging and cultural negotiation in our predominantly globalized world, it is the time of its study to witness the evolution of this field. It is the time to witness the evolution of diasporic literature as it has become one of the powerful mediums to discuss the complexities of identity, belonging and cultural negotiation in an increasingly globalized world. This research paper discusses the concept of diasporic identity in the selected fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali. The study examines how diasporic subjects are coping with displacement, hybridity, and diasporic identity crises in the context of a close reading of The Namesake, Interpreter of Maladies, and Brick Lane. The paper draws on and builds on post-colonial theories of identity developed by Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall, which suggests that diasporic identity is a process rather than a set attribute. The results show that Lahiri emphasizes on psychological and generational conflicts, whilst Ali foregrounds gender, class and socio-cultural constraints, and sees identity as fluid, hybrid and evolving.

KEYWORDS: Fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali

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INTRODUCTION

The migration and dispersion of individuals around geographical boundaries is a phenomenon known as diaspora, and this phenomenon has had an impact on literature today. Diasporic writing may be a reflection of the emotional, cultural and psychological experiences of individuals who experience existence in-between cultures and face negotiation of identity in other cultures. Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali are among the important names in this sphere, whose stories vividly depict the lives of immigrants in struggle and transformation. The concept of diasporic identity is complex in nature. It is a continuous dialogue between the culture values of the native and the host nation. This negotiation can result in alienation, disconnection and disorientation. It also, however, provides self-discovery and the possibility of hybrid identities.

The present research paper aims to analyse the diasporic identities that are being restored in the selected literature of Lahiri and Ali. There is a key word in the phrase “reclaiming” which indicates that it is an active process in which persons reconstruct their sense of self by reconciling conflicting cultural influences. The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of diasporic identity through a textual analysis and show that it is a dynamic process that is born out of personal experiences, memories and cultural encounters.

Diasporic identity in literature is not a new phenomenon; it has an intimate relationship with the postcolonial theory. Perhaps one of the most significant ideas in this context is that of “hybridity” as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha. According to Bhabha, cultural identity is created in the “third space”, which is the space of the intersection and interaction of two or more cultures. It is a place where new, hybrid identities can be constructed that defy binary oppositions of colonizer and colonized, native and foreign, and so on. Another theoretical framework is offered by Stuart Hall, who believes that “identity” is not an inherent quality of a person but rather, it is an ongoing action. To Hall, cultural identity is continually created and recreated in history, culture, and power.” When identity becomes “becoming” in the context of diaspora, it is influenced by the lived experience in the past and the lived experience in the present.

It is worth also adding to this the concept of diasporic consciousness. It is about being conscious of living in-between cultures, and experiencing a sense of homesickness for the country of origin and the experience of adapting to the culture of the recipient. The dual consciousness can result in a sense of alienation, yet it can also make one resilient and adaptable. These theoretical approaches offer a basis to examine the complexities of diasporic identity and the process of reclaiming it as illustrated by Lahiri and Ali.

DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Cultural Displacement and Alienation

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri describes the life of Gogol Ganguli, who is the second generation Indian-American who was born in the United States. The experiences Gogol has are the problems that arise in a cultural world that is quite different than that of his parents. From a young age, Gogol feels alienated from his Indian identity. Ashoke and Ashima, his parents, try to keep themselves to their culture, but Gogol feels it is foreign and limiting. Meanwhile, he is not always a complete citizen in the United States and has a hard time adjusting to the American way of life. The feeling of exile is an integral part of a diasporic identity. This is what is referred to in Gogol's work as a 'in-betweenness' – a feeling that brings him to a tug of war between the two cultures and makes him look at himself twice.

The Significance of Names and Identity

A major theme in The Namesake is the importance of names. His name is neither Indian nor American, but rather, it is something that can only be considered a country of its own, which is itself an embarrassment and a confusion for Gogol. Nikhil's name change is an attempt to redefine his identity, and to fit in with mainstream American culture. This is superficially transformed, however. Adopted a new name and a new life, Gogol still struggles with issues of identity. It indicates that identity is not easily changed because it is particularly based on one's cultural background and personal experience.

The Process of Reconciling and Regaining One's Identity

Ultimately, Gogol's trip results in a process of reconciliation. After his father's passing, he starts to think more about his culture and the meaning of his name. This period of reflection is a watershed in his/her identity development. Implementing his dual heritage, Gogol recovers his diasporic identity. It does not imply that he is rejecting American culture or that he's returning to Indian culture. He is embracing both of them. Lahiri here represents identity as a dynamic and changing concept.

Interpretation of Maladies – Diasporic Experiences

Lahiri offers a variety of characters who suffer from various kinds of migration and distancing in *Interpreter of Maladies*. These stories deal with issues of marital conflict, cultural differences and emotional alienation. In Mrs. Sen's, for example, the main character is trying to adjust to life in America, missing her homeland. She cannot drive, it represents that she can't be independent and she will rely on cultural anchors. In these stories, Lahiri foregrounds multiplicity of diasporic experiences and the different means through which people seek to reassert their identities.

THE CONCEPT OF DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN THE FILMS OF MONICA ALI

Migration and Cultural Constraints

In *Brick Lane*, Bangladeshi author Monica Ali traces the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who moves to London after an arranged marriage. Whereas Gogol is born in the country, Nazneen embodies a first-generation immigrant experience. In the beginning, Nazneen lives a restricted life, following the traditional gender roles and is quite dependent upon her husband. The limited contact she has with the outside world feeds into her feeling of isolation and dependency.

Gender and Identity Formation

Gender has an important role in the formation of the diasporic identity in *Brick Lane*. It is through Nazneen's experiences that we see the interplay of expectations and constraints of culture and patriarchy. Her migration is not the only factor that shapes her identity, but also her identity as a woman in a conservative community. Nazneen slowly comes into realization of what is being restricted from her. Her interactions with others and involvement in work are helping her develop an awareness of becoming more independent.

Transformation and Empowerment

Nazneen's journey is marked by a gradual transformation. She becomes a confident and self-reliant woman, instead of a passive, submissive one. She, who had decided not to go back to Bangladesh, has embraced a new identity in London. This is her act of self-choice, and reclaiming her diasporic identity. Nazneen's change is influenced by outside social and economic factors, while Lahiri's characters' are primarily internal.

RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN DIASPORA: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Creating diasporic identity is not just about learning a new culture, or keeping one's old culture alive. It involves making an effort to balance culturally conflicting influences and to establish a sense of belonging in a transnational space. Lahiri and Ali both show that identity is not a something that needs to be as such but is an ongoing process that is being constantly negotiated. Their characters show that they are resilient and adaptable, and that they find ways to be themselves and to redefine themselves.

CONCLUSION

In the narratives of Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali, diasporic identity is found to be multiple, fluid, layered and constantly in flux as it is traversed by migration. Both authors convey well the emotional and cultural challenges of people who live simultaneously in two worlds, that of memory and modernity, tradition and transformation, belonging and alienation. Lahiri's focus in *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* is on the psychological aspects of diasporic life—especially among second generation immigrants. Her characters are often torn between the pressures of assimilation and inherited

cultural values, and are in a process of self-definition. But by reflecting, losing and maturing emotionally, they slowly come into a more cohesive identity. This reconciliation does not 'solve' or 'forget' the conflict but rather becomes a way of gaining insight into self and acceptance.

On the other hand, *Brick Lane* foregrounds the socio-cultural and gendered aspects of diasporic identity. The story of Nazneen is a reminder that cultural displacement is not the only factor in the construction of identity, but also power dynamics like patriarchy, class, and community expectations. Her eventual independence is a conscious assertion of agency, an act of choosing identity, rather than inheritance.

These writers illustrate that diasporic identity is not a restoration of an original and unaltered self, but is rather a process of negotiation and creation. It entails the acceptance of hybridity as theorized by Homi K. Bhabha and the notion of identity as becoming as described by Stuart Hall. The diasporic subject learns to live in the “in-between” space and to turn it from a space of confusion to a space of possibility and self-fashioning.

Ultimately, both Lahiri and Ali argue that diasporic identity is not just a matter of loss; it is also a matter of resilience, adaptation and reinvention. Theirs are works that subvert conceptions of pure culture and value the richness of cross-cultural encounters in the formation of hybrid identities. These representations are increasingly relevant and meaningful within a globalized world that is constantly in movement and interaction, and that allows for greater depth when exploring the nature of identity, belonging, and human experience.

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