



Embracing Nostalgia: The Cathartic Yearning for Homeland in the Writings of Distinguished Indian English Novelists

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Abstract

Diasporic Literature, penned by authors living outside their homeland, delves into themes of alienation, nostalgia, loneliness, identity quests, and the perpetual displacement of self. This genre explores the emigrant experience, focusing on the internal and external conflicts faced by immigrants in unfamiliar environments. Contemporary Indian writings in English richly reflect the dislocation, fragmentation, racial discrimination, marginalization, identity crises, and cultural clashes inherent in migration and diaspora. By addressing cultural predicaments, the search for identity, multiculturalism, and universal aspects of human existence, Diasporic Literature holds a significant place in the literary world.

Diasporic writings, also known as 'expatriate' or 'immigrant writings,' articulate the traumatic experiences of authors grappling with cultural clashes and racial discrimination. Notable writers in the realm of Indian diasporic English literature include Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Kamala Markandeya, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, and Meena Alexander. In recent years, these Indian diaspora writers have gained significant global recognition for their impactful works.

This research paper explores the profound themes of displacement, longing for the homeland, and the alienation that comes with being uprooted in a few selected novels of those Indian English novelists who have personally experienced these emotions.

Keywords: Diaspora, migration, identity, multiculturalism, displacement

During the colonial period, individuals from Asia and Africa, the colonized territories, had opportunities to travel to Europe, the imperial centre. This migration continued for economic, political, cultural, and personal reasons even after the end of the colonial era, with many eventually settling in Europe. The phenomenon of people relocating to and establishing themselves in a foreign nation is known as diaspora. Settlers often find it challenging to integrate into their new communities because their old nation, along with its religion, language, and culture, occupies a significant place in their minds. From the outset, diasporans face significant challenges as they must transcend their previous identities and adapt to their new circumstances. This creates an internal conflict between their old and new lives, leading to predicament where they experience a juxtaposition of conflicting views about the two worlds. This results in a dual existence that is perpetually tormented. Often, they come to the disheartening realization that they belong nowhere and are residents of no man's land. Unable to forget their past or fully embrace their new environment, they struggle with a sense of mental dualism. To navigate this, they must undergo a significant reorganization of their thoughts and behaviours, which exacerbates their sense of alienation in their new life.

The diasporic experience is markedly different for those born and raised in a new country. These individuals are not afflicted by the same connection to the old nation that troubled the earlier settlers. Their understanding of their ancestral homeland is shaped by occasional visits, books, films, and stories shared by their parents. As they grow, their awareness of their heritage expands. However, when confronted with their history for acceptance or when their current identity is questioned in a foreign land, they face a dilemma. Their parents' preoccupation with their ethnicity can lead to a series of questions about the paths they should take, eventually causing them to experience a similar sense of duality as the initial settlers. However, because of their attachment to the country in which they were born and raised, it is reasonable to assume that their suffering is not as severe as that of the original settlers.

The term "diaspora" originates from the Greek word 'diaspora,' meaning dispersion or scattering. Historically, it referred to the dispersion of the Jews from Babylon in the 6th century BC and later encompassed all migrants who left their homeland for various reasons. Diaspora literature centres on the concept of a homeland from which displacement occurs, narrating the arduous journeys undertaken by characters due to their expulsion. Rooted in a sense of loss and alienation from migration and expatriation, this genre explores themes of alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, and the quest for identity. It also addresses the amalgamation or disintegration of cultures and reflects the immigrant experience arising from resettlement. Diasporic or expatriate writing holds significant importance in bridging countries and cultures.

Diaspora holds a pivotal role in literature, particularly in Indian Writing in English. Literature stemming from the Indian diaspora serves as a surrogate for the homeland on a global scale, transcending historical eras and geographical boundaries. It grapples with questions of representation and delves into the intricate experiences of dislocation, marginalization, and migration. Moreover, it scrutinizes issues such as gender, politics, racial, class, and cultural conflicts, as well as transnational encounters. Renowned diaspora writers in English include V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Meena Alexander, Salman Rushdie, alongside newer voices like Benyamin and Deepak Unnikrishnan. Literature stands as one of the foremost mediums through which migrant experiences are transmitted across generations.

Diasporic literature typically explores themes of alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, and the quest for identity. It addresses the synthesis or disintegration of cultures, as individuals find themselves torn between different places, cultures, and often languages. Emerging from these circumstances, diasporic literature unfolds the experiences of unsettlement and dislocation. Such texts can be examined through the lenses of location, dislocation, and relocation. Recurrent themes include the evolving concept of home, the anxiety of homelessness, and the impossibility of returning. Nostalgia, loss, betrayal, and duty form the foundation of new homes as diasporic protagonists adapt to new countries.

Indian diasporic writing has undergone a transformation, acquiring a new identity through a process of mutual self-fashioning and increased acceptance by the adopted country. The diaspora fosters an encounter between languages, cultures, and ideas, resulting in what Homi Bhabha termed a "hybridist" identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Lowland"

In "The Lowland," Subhash and Gauri represent diasporic identities. The novel ambitiously portrays the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States through its main characters, Subhash and his wife Gauri, who were born and raised in India. Despite their upbringing in India, they embark on a journey to the United States in their twenties, where they spend the remainder of their lives. Subhash, the protagonist, initially clings to his native culture but gradually adapts to the new culture in his new environment.

Similarly to Subhash, Gauri undergoes a similar experience upon arriving in America. She gradually assimilates into the new culture, quickly adapting to American ways. In a short span of time, she immerses herself in American culture, discarding Indian attire in favour of jeans and fully embracing her new environment. In "The Lowland," Subhash and Gauri, both born and raised in India, represent diasporic identities. Despite their upbringing in India, they choose to relocate to America in their twenties, where they establish their lives. While Subhash maintains a strong connection to his native culture, he also undergoes a gradual process of adaptation to the new culture in his new surroundings. Upon his return to India, Subhash finds himself behaving more like an American than an Indian. Having fully assimilated into American culture, he adopts American mannerisms and customs. In his efforts to assert his identity as an American, he even

indulges in activities like consuming beer at gatherings with his college mates or professors. Subhash's actions reflect his desire to be perceived as a citizen of America, as he gradually embraces his new location and surroundings.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Mistress of Spices"

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the theme of diasporic identity through the character of Tilo, who has migrated to Oakland, California. Tilo, who runs a spice bazaar, possesses magical powers that enable her to heal psychological and physical ailments. Despite being an Indian in a foreign land, Tilo carves out her own identity in Oakland while maintaining her Indian attire and respecting her culture and traditions. Through her healing abilities, she impresses many people by alleviating their disorders.

The novel is narrated in the first person from Tilo's perspective. Trained to extract the essence of spices, she uses them to alleviate pain, solve problems, and help people live better lives. The title, *The Mistress of Spices*, deliberately uses gendered language to subvert the traditional power dynamics associated with mastery of supernatural powers. Tilo has the ability to foresee disasters and understand the innermost thoughts of people. Her trainer, the 'Old One', noted that only in Tilo's hands did "the spices sing back," signifying that Tilo would never be the submissive, compliant mistress that was expected.

However, Tilo is not infallible. Sometimes, the problems faced by the diaspora are too complex for her to resolve. This highlights the challenges and limitations she encounters while navigating her dual identity and the intricate issues of the diasporic community.

Bharati Mukherji's "Jasmine"

"Jasmine" tells the story of an Indian woman, beginning with her birth and early life in a small village in India, and following her emigration to America where she embarks on a journey of self-discovery. As Jasmine transitions into life in America, she undergoes a profound transformation. Moving beyond the initial prediction of her fate, she evolves from a meek, submissive Indian wife into a strong, independent Indo-American woman. Embracing the present, she ceases to worry about the future and becomes indifferent to the past. After marrying Prakash, her husband renames her Jasmine, symbolizing her new identity and journey.

Upon arriving in the USA, Jasmine quickly sheds her introvert personality, adopting a new look with jazzy T-shirts, tight cords, and running shoes. This change in attire reflects a broader cultural transformation, leading to the gradual disappearance of her intrinsic qualities. As she adapts, she transitions from being a "visible minority" to becoming just another immigrant. The evolution of the protagonist's identity—from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jane to Jase—symbolizes the shedding of old personas and the emergence of new ones, ultimately highlighting the positive implications of her journey toward self-reinvention and empowerment.

Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss"

"The Inheritance of Loss" is a quintessential diasporic novel from the first decade of the twenty-first century, renowned for its seamless blend of history, myth, and contemporary life. The novel opens with a vivid depiction of Kalimpong's natural beauty, highlighted by the snow-covered peaks of Kanchenjunga. Kiran Desai introduces Sai, a teenage Indian orphan living with her Anglophile grandfather, a retired Cambridge-educated judge, and their cook at Cho Oyo in Kalimpong. Sai, originally from Dehra Dun, was born in Russia and spent her early years there until the age of six. After her parents' death, she moved to a convent in Delhi before settling in Kalimpong. Her maternal grandfather, Jemubhai Patel, is a Westernized intellectual who frequently reflects on his journeys from Pilhit to England and back to India.

Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" also delves into the life of Biju, the cook's son, who is an illegal immigrant working in America. Another key character is Gyan, a Nepali tutor who teaches Sai science and eventually falls in love with her. The novel features additional characters like Lola, Noni, Uncle Potty, and Father Booty, all of whom are settled in Kalimpong but originally come from different homelands. Their settlement in this alien land brings about a sense of dislocation, symbolizing a break from their old identities. They grapple with loneliness, non-acceptance by the native population, and ethnic discrimination, which underscore the broader themes of alienation and cultural displacement.

Conclusion:

The Indian Diaspora plays a crucial role in portraying the complexities of diasporic experiences in literature. This body of work examines displacement, nostalgia for the homeland, and the alienation caused by dislocation. It also delves into generational conflicts and cultural identity struggles. Diasporic writers often depict cultural dilemmas, generational differences, and the transformation of identities during displacement. The themes of exile and alienation inspire these writers to seek solace and rehabilitation in their writings, thereby cementing their place in English diasporic literature.

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