



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 tries to address the problems associated with identity crisis and cultural hybridity in the selected works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, three eminent Indian diasporic writers whose fiction is an exploration of the intricacies of migration, displacement and cultural negotiation. Informed by postcolonial theories of Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall, and diaspora studies, the study examines how their protagonists deal with the conflicts between embedded cultural traditions and the demands of life in multicultural communities. The paper explores the evolving ideas about the idea of self, belonging and hybrid identity as seen in The Namesake, Jasmine and The Mistress of Spices. Lahiri explores the emotional struggles of second generation immigrants, Mukherjee focuses on change and becoming a new person, and Divakaruni focuses on memory, gender, and the continuity of culture. The paper's argument is that identity in diasporic literature is not fixed but fluid, that is, created by a continuous negotiation between homeland and hostland. The authors' distinct narrative approach is compared to demonstrate how cultural hybridity is a site of insurgency and empowerment and how it has played a significant role in the continuing discourses in Indian English literature, postcolonial and diaspora studies.

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

Introduction

Indian English Literature is a fascinating study field, and the contributions of the writers of the diaspora to this field are significant. Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri are representatives of a group that examines the theme of immigration and identity in their work. The plots of these authors' books are built around the immigrant and bicultural experience. These works of fiction unveil the psychological, social and cultural conflicts that arise in the life of immigrants and their children. It is claimed that identity is not a given, binary and unique but a fluid, multifaceted and multilayered phenomenon produced in the process of negotiation of memory and hybridity. Current trends in globalization and rapid internationalization have led to significant changes in identity patterns in the field of contemporary literature. Migration often

brings about various challenges to individuals, such as language, ethnicity, nationality, gender and cultural barriers. The result of migration can be an identity crisis, such as conflicting cultural values and behavioral norms in the host and home countries. This phenomenon is reflected, in particular, in the works of Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni. The characters of these authors face dilemmas about their identity and homeland, and the theme of their stories is the conflict of cultures. In order to understand these experiences we need to apply the concept of cultural hybridity as a theory. But Homi K. Bhabha (1994) suggests that cultural identities are not only constructed, but are also produced in a "Third Space" where contact with different cultures creates third culture identities that are resistant to the dualistic oppositions between East and West, native and foreign. Bhabha sees hybridity as a place of negotiation, and transformation, rather than a loss of authenticity in the culture. In the same way, Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is constantly being 're-made', always subject to and shaped by historical experiences, representation and social change, and is therefore not a state but a process. The experiences in these writers' works are further highlighted by diaspora studies. Diaspora, as avtar Brah (1996) argues, goes beyond geographical dispersion and represents a space in which multiple identities converge in terms of memory, migration and cultural interaction. They provide theoretical explanations as to why diasporic characters often fragment and how new identities emerge from them, which are mixed with different cultures. *The Namesake* (2003), by Jhumpa Lahiri, examines the problem of identity for the second generation of immigrants, especially Gogol Ganguli, who is struggling to find his identity as he pursues a search within himself, mirroring his experience of being torn between Indian traditions and American cultural influences. In *Jasmina* (1989), Bharati Mukherjee depicts identity as a fluid identity; the process of immigrants' lives can change an individual's identity through adaptation and resilience. In *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the complex relationship between memory, gender and cultural tradition in a book that explores how diasporic identity is negotiated both through personal transformation and cultural continuity. The present study will be based on the comparative method in studying these three writers simultaneously to find out how they depict the concept of identity crisis and cultural hybridity in their chosen pieces. It is based on postcolonial and diaspora theory and explores the commonalities and distinctions in the ways they have been depicted in relation to migration and displacement, belonging and selfhood. The paper contends that while Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni have narrated their works in diverse ways, they collectively show that identity is a flexible, relational and an ever-changing one, created by cross-cultural encounters. Their fiction adds much to the repertoire of literature in Indian English, with its various takes on the changing realities of the diaspora in a globalised world.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by two theories—postcolonial theory and diaspora theory—which offer a well-rounded approach to the complexities of the formation of identity, migration and cultural

negotiation in the literature of the Indian diaspora. Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories focus on people who exist in-between cultures, as a core theme of their literature are the idea of diaspora, identity and cultural hybridity. Their fiction shows how their personal and cultural identities change as they grow along with the journey, and how they have opportunities and conflicts to change, to become other people.

Diaspora

The diasporic dimension of the term refers to the spreading out of people from their homeland, but now the term is being used to describe the cultural, psychological and political experiences of people who have been displaced. William Safran (1991) points to the following features, which he sees as common in diasporic communities: dispersal from homeland, memory of homeland, emotional ties to homeland, and ongoing sense of identity connected to homeland. At the same time, Robin Cohen (2008) continues this understanding by focusing on the fact that globalization has shifted the nature of diaspora from a static to a dynamic concept, in which mobility, multiculturalism and transnational networks are emphasized. Diasporic communities are not confined to a specific country, but are instead formed through the interaction of various cultures, leading to the development of a new cultural identity.

The notion of diaspora space by Avtar Brah (1996) is important for the study. Brah does not define diaspora as only a space of movement of migrants but as the space of interaction between migrants, indigenous population and other communities in a social and cultural sense. The space is a place where identities are formed through racial, ethnic, gender, class, historical, and national intersections. Diaspora space is thus negotiated space where people constantly redefines themselves.

These theoretical views are vividly brought to life through the selected novels. The characters in Lahiri's movies are immigrants who are negotiating between the Indian traditions and American life; in Mukherjee's movies, migration is a source of change for the characters; and in Divakaruni's movies, people keep both emotional and cultural ties to India while adjusting to a life in the country where they came from. Their stories make it clear that diaspora is a process, not a state of being, of negotiation.

Identity

In postcolonial and diasporic studies, the issue of identity is one of the most important things to consider. Today, theorists do not consider identity as fixed and predetermined, but see how it is socially and culturally constructed instead. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that cultural identity is a process of "becoming" and not "being. People are always creating their identities by drawing on history, memory, representation and culture. As a result, identity is fluid and may change as a result of social and historical shifts.

Hall's theory is better applied to diasporic literature, as characters of immigrants are found in several cultural worlds at once. They live between tradition handed down to them and the values of the society to which they belong, and produce hybrid identities that are hard to pin down. In

The Namesake Gogol Ganguli's attempt to find balance between Indian traditions and American cultural norms, is a reflection of the way Hall views identity as a continuously evolving construction. Likewise, in *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices*, the protagonists are transformed as they are redefined in new cultural spaces.

Cultural Hybridity

A key theoretical idea in diasporic identity is that of cultural hybridity, which was most influential in its development by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). According to Bhabha, the colonial and postcolonial encounters have produced a 'Third Space' - space where cultures encounter, negotiate, and create new forms of identity. This Third Space goes against binary oppositions like East and West, self and other, and colonizer and colonized. Instead, identity is produced through the translation, negotiation and cultural exchange process. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is not one of authenticity lost but instead one of the process of creation by which the construction of rigid cultural classification is challenged. Hybrid identities are hybrid because they involve a mix of identities but also create a new meaning. Generally, hybridity is depicted as empowering and challenging in the novels chosen. Lahiri sees hybridity as an intimate relationship between generations; Mukherjee as a process of change and self-construction; and Divakaruni as a memory, spiritual and gendered journey of migration. A concept of Bhabha's is particularly useful for the understanding of the protagonists' lives, because they have established the cultural positions, which cannot be described by the fixed understanding of national and ethnic status. Their identities are dynamic as they are influenced by the relation of homeland and hostland.

Relevance to the Present Study

The theoretical frameworks of Bhabha, Hall and Brah are comprehensive and can be used to examine identity crisis and cultural hybridity in the selected novels. Hall's concept of the fluid and changing nature of identity, Bhabha's idea of intercultural negotiation and hybridity, and Brah's position of the experiences within the context of diaspora space. All of these theories provide insights into the psychological, cultural, and social aspects of migration in Lahiri's, Mukherjee's, and Divakaruni's fiction. In this integrated framework, the following study focuses on the negotiation of belonging, memory, language, gender and cultural difference by the protagonists. It claims that identity in diasporic literature is not static and unique, but is being continually forged along the process of migration, displacement and cross-cultural contacts. Thus, cultural hybridity is not only a result of diaspora but also can be a force of resilience, adaptation, and a force of self-definition.

The present study uses this combined theoretical approach to analyze and compare the portrayal of identity crisis and cultural hybridity in the novels: 'The Namesake', 'Jasmine' and 'The Mistress of Spices'. It suggests that the experiences of the protagonists show how the diasporic identity is 'everyday' and how cultural negotiation plays a vital role in the writing of the contemporary Indian English.

Comparative Analysis

The novels, *The Namesake* (2003), *Jasmine* (1989), and *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) look at issues of identity formation in diasporic communities. While Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni each take a different approach to the characteristics of their narratives and the different themes each explores, all three writers look at the ways in which migration, displacement, and intercultural encounters change an individual's identity. Their main characters have identity crises as they try to reconcile with both their cultural heritage and the multicultural societies that they live in. The novels show how the construction of identity is flexible and ever-changing, in various narrative courses, through cultural negotiation.

Find yourself feeling out of place or as if you don't know who you are?

Identity crisis is the main theme in all three novels but is presented differently by each of the authors. *The Namesake* follows Lahiri's Gogol Ganguli, a second-generation Indian-American who struggles with his sense of alienation from his Indian heritage and his American surroundings. His odd name represents his divided identity and is a recurring reminder of the lack of a fixed sense of self for him. At first he denies his Indian heritage, trying to fit in with society, until he comes to understand his family history through time to treasure his cultural roots. According to Lahiri (2003), identity forms itself by the process of self-awareness not based on total assimilation or rejection of a single culture. In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee portrays identity as a dynamic process of change. Jasmine is constantly re-creating herself in order to fit into new situations, while Gogol seems to face a dilemma regarding his cultural identity. She also changes her name several times in the novel – from Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jazzy, to Jase and Jane – as she moves through different stages of her life. These shifting identities reflect her capacity to adjust her identity to new spaces and at the same time instill a sense of fragility and uncertainty of migrant identity. Mukherjee's notion of identity is not static, but a dynamic construction that is determined by migration, strength, and individual choice (Mukherjee, 1989). In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni tells a story of identity through the eyes of Tilo, a woman coming from an immigrant background who is tasked with keeping alive the old ways, yet who is also caught up by her emotional needs. Tilo is all at once a spiritual guide, an immigrant, a woman and someone who wants to find personal freedom. The inner turmoil of her is a reflection of the problem of cultural duty and personal desire. While in the process of transformation, Gogol and Jasmine's identities are shaped mainly through social interaction, Tilo's are intertwined with memories, spirit and cultural continuity (Divakaruni, 1997).

The characters in each story face a struggle to establish themselves in new and strange cultural settings, yet this is what they have in common. Their travels are evidence of an ever-changing and evolving identity that is never fixed.

Cultural Hybridity & Negotiation : In Bhabha's (1994) words, the idea of cultural hybridity is a useful approach to the protagonists' experiences. Bhabha asserts that people who inhabit the "Third Space" negotiate their identity, rather than belong to a particular culture.

Hybridity is manifested in the everyday family life of Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Both the first generation immigrants (Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli) carry on Bengali customs, language, and religious beliefs, and their children are greatly affected by the American culture. This is a hybrid space in which Gogol's identity emerges and a conflict between family expectations and individual aspirations is seen. His eventual embrace of both cultures proves that there is not a compromise but a viable synthesis of cultures.

Hybridity is a power-stoking phenomenon in Mukherjee's hands. Jasmine is not bound by the rules of nationalities or gender. She becomes each new identity, a survival and a self-creation. She has transformed into a hybrid identity, in line with Bhabha's theory that a hybrid identity is a means of resisting the fixed cultural barriers and creating new avenues for personal freedom. Migration thus is not just a state of loss but also a state of renewal.

Hybridity, on the other hand, is seen as traditional Indian spirituality and the contemporary American life existing together in Divakaruni's work. Tilo's spice shop is a symbolic cultural site which serves as a space of remembrance for immigrant groups, who hold on to memories from their place of origin while making room for the new ones of their new society. The novel implies that being hybrid is a process of continuity of culture without resistance to change. In so doing, Divakaruni deepens the notion of hybridity, by weaving mythology, folklore, and spiritual traditions into diasporic journeys.

The three novels illustrate as a group that cultural hybridity is not a state of cultural confusion or assimilation. Rather it is a continuous conversation amongst the many cultures so that people can build up complex and multifaceted identities.

Migration, Belonging, and Displacement

There are opportunities and challenges for the protagonists of migration. For the first generation, displacement is felt most strongly by Ashima: her sense of loneliness and her own emotional attachment to her origins shows the emotional costs of displacement. This displacement is inherited by Gogol in a different way, as he feels uncertain about culture instead of being exiled to a different place. Migration is the journey of transformation in Jasmine. On her way to India, where she is a widowed immigrant, Jasmine finds herself continually reinventing herself in America. Initially, this trauma and uncertainty of displacement is disruptive, but it also allows her to become a woman with a new future, without relying on social norms. Instead of displacement just being a geographical issue, Divakaruni portrays it as an emotional issue. The predicament of the immigrant characters who visit Tilo's spice shop is to deal with homesickness, racial discrimination, family conflict and cultural isolation. Tilo is a healer, embodying the need to hold on to culture and adapt to a new one. Such diverging depictions indicate that migration has less to do with a process of passage from one country to another than with a continuous process of negotiating multiple cultural belonging.

Gender and Identity : In the three novels, the representation of identity is different and is influenced by gender. Lahiri looks at the lives of immigrant women like Ashima, who carry with

them cultural practices and traditions and learn to navigate in a new social context. Her resilience is testament to the importance of women's role in sustaining diasporic cultural identity.

Mukherjee foregrounds the agency of the female, as Jasmin's resolve to refuse the restrictions on feminine roles. Instead of being a victim of patriarchy, Jasmine is creative and builds her own identities, asserting her control over her future. Her multiple identities are a representation of power in adaptation.

Divakaruni's book is also about women's experiences, but also involves the intersection of feminism, myth and spirituality. The desire or responsibility to do something and the cultural context of women's autonomy are issues that are discussed, and Tilo's situation is illustrative of such issues. For Divakaruni, the construction of identity is a process of resistance and cultural continuity for women. Together, the three writers demonstrate that gender shapes diasporic identity in distinctive ways, highlighting women's resilience, adaptability, and capacity for transformation.

Comparative Perspective

While there are variations in approach and focus across the novels, Lahiri, Mukherjee and Divakaruni all confront essentialist understandings of identity. Lahiri writes about second-generation immigrant identity in a subtle psychological way; Mukherjee is all about change and self-creation; and Divakaruni's realism is juxtaposed with myth and spirituality, and focuses on memory and belonging. The various strategies that have been adopted show that there is no singular diasporic experience.

The journeys of the protagonists in the light of theory of Hall (1990), Bhabha (1994) and Brah (1996) show that the construction of identity is a process of negotiation, interaction with cultures, and history. Cultural hybridity is not a form of cultural loss, but a process that can help the migrants to develop meaningful identities, transcending national and cultural boundaries. In so doing, the novels chosen are important to the Indian English literary landscape in that they introduce this idea of diaspora as a space of conflict and creative possibility.

Comparative Discussion

Comparative reading of *The Namesake*, *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices* shows how Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has constructed identity as a process that is dynamic and continually shifts as a result of migration, displacement and intercultural interaction. Despite the differences in the narrative approaches and emphases in the three works, each of them in its own ways challenges essentialist theories of identity and proves that diasporic identity is not fixed, but continually negotiated. Their characters traverse several cultural worlds, and the psychological, social, and emotional challenges of being part of several worlds are illustrated.

An important theme in all of the three novels is the theme of identity crisis as a result of migration. *The Namesake's* Gogol Ganguli, *The Namesake's* Jasmine, and *The Mistress of Spices'* Tilo are all at least somewhat culturally displaced and personally unsure. But these challenges impact the

characters in various ways. As Gogol comes to understand that he must redefine himself as an Indian both in his life and in the eyes of his American peers, Jasmine must embrace constant change as a means of survival, and Tilo must find a balance between cultural responsibility and personal freedom. Such contrasting interpretations give evidence that there is no one-to-one connection between diasporic identity and experience, gender, history, and culture all influence the formation of identity.

The three novels are also examples of the negotiations of identity that are proposed by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) in his notion of cultural hybridity and the Third Space. Lahiri depicts hybridity as an intergenerational process, and explores the conflicts between immigrant parents and American-born children. Mukherjee depicts hybridity as a process that enables people to remake themselves outside of the “normative” social and cultural system. The concept of hybridity is extended with the integration of mythology, spirituality and realities of immigrants, as if cultural continuity could co-exist with adaptation and change. Divakaruni extends the idea of hybridity, incorporating the mythological, the spiritual, and the immigrant realities with the possibility of cultural continuity alongside adaptation and change. Together these stories show that hybridity is a process of developing new, and new and meaningful forms of selfhood, that is not a loss of identity.

The chosen novels also reinforce Stuart Hall's (1990) idea that identity is only a state of "becoming" and not of "being. Neither the leading characters has a final or full identity. Rather, their identities are formed through memories, familial relations, language, culture, and experiences. The fluidity is indicative of diasporic life, which is lived in a variety of cultural and geographical locations and with multiple loyalties.

In considering the wider social context of these stories, it is also important to consider Avtar Brah's (1996) idea of diaspora space. The characters exist in areas where multiple cultures, histories and identities meet. Migration is not the only factor affecting their experiences but also their gender, ethnicity, and race as well as the nature of their communities. The novels thus offer a different way to think about diaspora as being more about cultural interaction than exile or displacement. The authors, however, have different literary stances even in the face of these common concerns. Lahiri uses realism and psychological dimension to explore the relationship between family members and the experiences of second generation immigrants. In contrast, Mukherjee takes a more active line of narration with a focus on change, agency, and self-fashioning as a consequence of migration. Divakaruni's approach is both realistic and mythological, incorporating folklore, as well as spirituality and a sense of diasporic identity. The stylistic differences add to the diversity of Indian English literature, by offering a range of views about the nature of migration and cultural negotiation. The overall comparison indicates that the theme of identity crisis and cultural hybridity are related to each other, and these themes constitute the experience of the diaspora in the selected novels. Lahiri, Mukherjee, and Divakaruni do not simply tell readers the story of migration as being about alienation, but they

show the ways in which migration can create new kinds of identities, views, and feelings of belonging. In their fiction they state that identity is fluid, relational and always being re-constructed in relation to cross-cultural interaction. These writers contribute to the current Indian English literature with a nuanced understanding of the complexities of migration, multiculturalism and selfhood in a more connected world by engaging with postcolonial and diasporic perspectives.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of *The Namesake*, *Jasmine* and *The Mistress of Spices* shows that one of the major themes of the Indian diasporic literature of today is the issues of identity crisis and cultural hybridity. Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakarini tell their stories in three unique ways, delving into the complex experiences of migration, displacement, and cultural negotiation and uncovering the fluid nature of identity as a process, rather than a fixed, predetermined entity. They are protagonists that have to deal with several cultural identifications and try to find a place to belong in multicultural societies, issues that are common to diasporic groups in a globalized world.

It has been argued in this study that the diasporic identity is a constantly evolving process in which the homeland and hostland interact, taking in the theories of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah. The idea of the Third Space is Bhabha's explanation of the way in which cultural hybridity is a process that allows for individuals to develop identities that transcend rigid cultural binaries. Hall's concept of identity as 'becoming' and not 'being' is a way of understanding the protagonists' changing identity, while Brah's concept of diaspora space is a way of understanding the intersections of migration, memory, gender and cultural belonging that characterize diasporic experience.

There is a number of differences between the authors' literary visions identified in the course of the comparative analysis. Lahiri's nuanced psychological realism is characterized by themes of family ties and second-generation immigrant experience. Migration is presented as a process of transformation to which the protagonists are exposed, but Mukherjee's narrative strongly focuses on adaptation and self-reinvention. Divakaruni's writing, in its turn, is based on the interplay between reality and mythological worldviews and explores themes of spirituality and cultural, gender, and memory diversity. Yet, despite the differences in the approaches, all the authors address the theme of cultural hybridity and problematize the notion of identity in the context of migration, proving that hybridity is not a manifestation of identity loss but a way of negotiating the process of becoming a part of a new culture.

The study has revealed that migration is not merely a physical transfer from one location to another but a complex psychological and cultural experience. The sense of self is transformed when one is exposed to a new environment, and such transformation is hardly pathological, as the protagonists' experiences demonstrate. The analysis has also identified that migration and adaptation to a new culture can be empowering processes for individuals and communities as

they develop resilience and enrich their cultural heritage. What is more, the novels under review show that, instead of being an experience of alienation, migration can be positively viewed from the perspective of diaspora's potential to foster adaptability and diversity. To conclude, Lahiri's, Mukherjee's, and Divakaruni's novels make a significant contribution to the Indian English literature by depicting the processes of cultural negotiation and hybridity in the context of migration. The authors problematize the notion of identity, presenting it as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that is negotiated in the interactions between individuals and cultures. It can be noted that the literary works under review are relevant and topical today as they contribute to the discourse on diaspora's potential to empower individuals and communities in the context of globalization.

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