

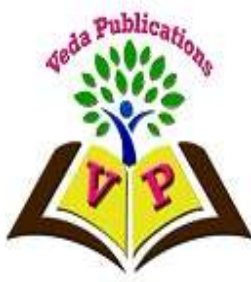


## REPRESENTING HYBRIDIZED IDENTITIES AND THIRD SPACES IN THE WORKS OF BHARATI MUKHARJEE AND JHUMPA LAHIRI

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### ABSTRACT



The present study is primarily concerned with analyzing some literary works written by Bharati Mukharjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, the prominent South Asian American migrant women writers. I attempt to examine how the writers articulate, question, and define their hybrid identities in the light of what Bhabha calls "the Third Space of enunciation". In effect, the act of writing 'Third Space' is an intricate task or rather "an ambivalent contact zone" into what Pratt remarkably depicts as "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (1992, p. 4). The present paper tries to work out the hypothesis that Mukharjee and Lahiri do not simply hold the reflection of nativity (a subsumed nostalgia and the trauma of non-belongingness) and thus no longer celebrate national boundaries, but rather the 'third space' which becomes their evocative space of renewal, going far beyond the hierarchy of center and periphery. By a similar token, the pervasive sense of dislocation, cross-cultural communication and empowerment launches new dialects of creativity and also resists the confines of minority status and assertion of a "positioning" - a new zone of structuring identities.

**Keywords:** *Hybrid Identities, Third Space, Diaspora.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Globalization has changed the face of the world. Transnational business transactions, cross-cultural interpenetrations, global socio-political and educational dependencies have made migration, exile, and other forms of displacement common experiences. Borderlands are “the normal locale of postmodern subjects” (Gupta and Ferguson, 18). Within this global condition of movements, Indian diaspora constitute a major migratory population. In these “new times”(Hall 1996), dramatic changes in the social, cultural, and economic spheres have led not only to the fragmentation and growing pluralism of societies (Bauman and Tester 2001), but also to the emergence of new identities. Identities are social constructs. They are about “questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves” (Hall 4). Always in motion, identities undergo constant transformations and are increasingly fragmented, fractured, and ‘multiply constructed across different, often antagonistic, discourses, practices, and positions’ (Hall 4).

Diasporic identities are defined by the recognition of necessary heterogeneity and diversity. They are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew along itineraries of migrating, but also re-creating the endless desire to return to ‘lost origins’ (Hall 17). These displaced and dispossessed, living on cultural borderlands or interstitial zones, cluster around remembered or imagined ‘homelands’ on one hand and experiencing cultural credulities on the other, quest for a “desired place”, an “identification” and a “positioning” (Brazier and Mannur 237). Diasporic dislocation is a much focused issue in present day literature. Since the very term ‘diaspora’ connotes displacement- a journey, it always invites a sense of loss with whom one way or another identity crisis is associated. So, it can be devised that diaspora is a misfortune. Writers who have experienced this agonizing experience emphasize on the configuration of identity as well as ideology of an individual in a foreign land. One the other hand for some the

diasporic dislocation appears to be a blessing in disguise. However, all the diasporas thrive for asserting a desired position. The two diasporian authors Bharati Mukharjee and Jhumpa Lahiri engage in socio-cultural transmission that is equitably exchanged in the manner of translating a map of reality for multiple readerships. Besides, they are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experiences.

## ORIGIN OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In recent years scholarly debates over diaspora and immigration structure round the concepts of “hybridity” and “in-betweenness” and “Third Space” of immigrants’ life and living that function as a critical zone to inquire the psycho-socio-cultural and economic state of being. In this globalized era, cultures do not exist in isolation but rather interact and overlap within a ‘hybrid space’ which Bhabha calls; “the Third Space of enunciation” (36-39). “Hybridity” is celebrated as a process not just a state; a zone of flux, spaces and in-betweens and it is in this structural undecidability hybridity and hybrids set balancing identities. Bhabha posits hybridity as a form of in-between space, which he terms the “Third Space”, a space inherently critical of essentialism and conceptualizations of original or originary culture. He writes, “For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “Third Space” which enables other positions to emerge” (1990, 211). It is in this third space the cultural identities merge together into “a connective tissue that constructs the difference” (1994, 4). But the complexity lies in the cultural specificities and the identity notion of “Selves and Others”. Bhabha says:

It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences - literature, art, music, ritual, life, death - and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation - migration, diaspora, displacement,



relocation - makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification (1994, 247).

The 'in-betweenness' is problematic – it is the space of belonging and exclusion and a depiction of the plurality and the diversity of the ways in which ethnically diverse people live, experience, narrate and make sense of their multicultural ways of life and living, and represents the outcome of processes of negotiations and change.

Soja's "thirthing-as-Othering" (5) focuses the structuration of identity among diasporas by putting attention on "politics of recognition" (7). In essence, hybridity has the potential to allow the subjugated collectivities to reclaim a part of the cultural space in which they move. Hybridity can be seen not as a means of division or sorting out the various histories and diverse narratives to individualize identities, but rather a means of reimagining interconnected collective. The term "positioning" rather than identity formation or construction is also revealed to be a more appropriate term in this discussion diaspora. Hall opined: "- - - identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 236) the social matrix. "Positioned by", in other words, implies that it depends on who is doing the "looking" at the diasporas and how the diasporas see themselves and are seen by others as constituting a legitimate cultural identity.

#### **IDENTITIES IN FLUX: STRUCTURING HYBRIDIZED IDENTITIES OF DIASPORAS**

Hybridity has the potential to allow once subjugated collectivities to reclaim a part of the cultural space in which they move. Hybridity can be seen not as a means of division or sorting out the various histories and diverse narratives to individualize identities, but rather a means of reimagining interconnected collective. In fact, exploring the literary production of Mukharjee and Lahari require an understanding of the paradoxical interrelation between the concept of identity and migrant writing in terms of how these women writers articulate the spaces 'in-betweenness' in their literary texts, along with race, ethnicity, and gender.

Individual's essentialist identity usually bears 'coherent' and 'unified' meanings that entirely differs

from identity formation associated with the space of minority writings (diasporic writing), Sommer (1998) explains, the minority space entails patterns of multiple subjectivity navigating more than one culture (301 -303) in the works of diasporas. Hall writes: "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think...of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Brazier & Mannur 234). Hall's argument leads us to reassess the relationship between culture and identity and how one informs the other.

Mukherjee also employs the metaphors of displacement, dislocation and dynamism and journeys to rescue her protagonists from gender (particularly women protagonists) and space constrictions. The constant movement and migratory of the characters interrogates the very credo of belonging and defies the "rooting" involved in structuring identities. In *Jasmine* the protagonist's escaping fixity, accepting rootlessness and constant movements is the strategic endeavour of the novelist to blow the trumpet for hybridized existence and projects the crossing of boundaries of gender and space and bridging the binaries of the "self" and the "other".

The question of identity, the dichotomy between self and the other, and the complexities of cultural identities are the pivot issues that are critically portrayed in *The Namesake*. The role of cultural factors in shaping the identity of a diaspora is one of the conflicting zones as it revolves round two aspects – the self and of culture. The "self" reflects upon an autonomous subject or the subjectivity of every human being. As Skulj states:

Understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside itself. It denied transcendence outside oneself and identified itself only with its immanent reality or with its own immanent validity. (2)



The characters are in search of their identities and that is, in the in-betweenness of cultures: one as the “self” and the other as the “other”, they are oscillating and creolizing their identities. However the characters are leading confused life tossing in-between which is which. Lahiri’s politics of “naming” is a strategy of personal and cultural naturalization and neutralization.

### CONCLUSION

Though Lahiri’s and Mukharjee’s works depict the pathos of uprooting of first-generation migrants but the pivot focus is on second-generation characters and the strategies they develop in order to negotiate their identity status and portray their daily lives in a plural location. There is a high degree of optimism in the way they approach hybridized relations in their works. The diasporas are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. Their identities and the spaces they inhabit are not fixed and homogenous but heterogeneous and malleable. The characters in their works develop manifold consciousness, resulting in a neither self that is neither amalgamated nor cross, but rather fragmented. As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the text, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is an erroneous belief and the reality of the diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity and the hybridized ‘in-betweenness’. This multiplicity at times becomes a noteworthy plight for the characters, for as their different consciousnesses contradict each other, the characters are left doubtful as to the nature of their identities, not knowing where they fit in the American society and where their proper “positioning” lies. Finally they become competent of living in a world where individuals exist not as an integrated one, but as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities. The underline messages that are moulded in the works of these writers reveal their efforts to break binaries of the self and the other and erase essentialist boundaries.

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