

# Navigating Identity and Exile: Exploring Themes of Diaspora, Alienation, and Dislocation in Contemporary Indian Literature

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## **Abstract**

*The research paper delves into the intricate realm of diaspora, focusing on its portrayal and exploration within contemporary Indian literature. Drawing insights from a wide range of literary works, the study analyses the multifaceted themes of alienation, dislocation, and identity crisis faced by individuals navigating the intricate terrain of migration. The paper examines how Indian authors, including Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee, and others, articulate the experiences of those living in foreign lands, juxtaposing their original homeland with the adopted one. The term "diaspora" is investigated through a historical lens, tracing its origins and evolution from the dispersion of the Jews to the modern-day global movements.*

*The paper scrutinizes the divergent trajectories of diasporic experiences, highlighting the various motivations behind migration, such as economic prospects, religious propagation, and political upheaval. By scrutinizing representative works, the study dissects the intricate layers of identity crisis faced by protagonists who oscillate between multiple cultural influences, often leading to a struggle to define their sense of self. The texts reveal how diaspora literature captures the complex interplay between the yearning for a lost homeland and the challenges of integration into new societies.*

*Through a comprehensive examination of key literary works, the research unpacks the thematic threads that bind these narratives together, emphasizing the commonalities and contrasts in the portrayal of diasporic experiences. Furthermore, it underscores the pivotal role of literature in not only reflecting the multifarious realities of migration but also in advocating for social justice, equality, and cultural understanding. The exploration encompasses genres beyond the traditional novel and extends to poetry, drama, autobiography, memoirs, and travelogues, illustrating the depth and breadth of the diaspora discourse within Indian literature. Ultimately, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary Indian writers grapple with the complexities of identity, dislocation, and the ever-evolving notion of home in an interconnected world.*

**Key Words:** Identity, Exile, Indian Diaspora, rootlessness, Alienation, Dislocation, Indian Literature

The term 'diaspora' has been defined by Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary as, "the spreading of people from one original country to other countries" (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary Online) and The Oxford Dictionary defines it as, "Jews living outside Israel, the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland, or the people who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland" (The Oxford Dictionary Online). When we look at the origin of the term Diaspora, we come to know that it referred to the dispersion of the Jews from Israel back in the sixth-seventh century B.C. and later in the second century A.D. from Jerusalem. Then from 200 A.D. to 900 A.D., people migrated from one country to another for their better prospects which result in mass migration. A better prospect was not the only motive behind this mass migration but religion was also their motive. People migrated from one place to another to propagate their religion. From time to time, it has gone under certain changes as we know that the people migrated to quench their religious thirst, and then they got migrated in search of their better bread. Colonial period contributed migration due to war and slavery. People from colonized countries migrated to other colonies as laborers. People from the third world countries became the refugees in UK, the USA and the other European countries during the cold war era. The post-modern era witnessed the migration due to economic interests. People flew from their native lands to meet their economic needs in an alien land. It also caused forced exile or we can say political exile. The diaspora of different lands and their experiences also vary as their history varies. David Pendery by means of Safran's model relates the Chinese, the Jewish and the Black diasporas considering their ethnicity, history, race, culture and identity. —The Chinese can be termed as 'Sojourners', the Jewish as 'displaced people' and the Blacks as 'bondsmen'. Their homeland identities can be taken as nationalistic-mythic, autochthonous and mythic respectively. The initial new land identity of the Chinese is that of aliens, of the Jewish, as strangers and of the Blacks as subalterns (Pendery Asian Ethnicity).

The Indian diaspora is the largest diaspora in the world. It dates back to the Indian civilization. We can divide it into three phases- ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient diaspora refers to laborers, crafts men and traders who explored new lands for work, wealth and adventures. In medieval times, the British imperialism caused movement of the indentured laborers. In modern times, skilled educated and intelligent Indians moved to the USA and other European countries for economic and professional reasons. This 'new diaspora' is made of experts in different fields like IT, Medicine, Space Technology, Engineering, and Management and so on. There are eminent intellectuals, writers, orators, economists and

financial experts etc. The wave of willed exile came to the Indian soil in 70's which lifted many intellectuals from the land of the Himalaya and the Ganga to the unknown pastures. The pain, nostalgia, in betweenness, trauma, rootlessness are the prevailing themes which are mourning on the death bed of the Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora has been celebrated as well as mourned by many writers like A.K Ramanujan, V. S Naipaul, Anita Desai, Arvind Adiga, Vikram Seth, Amitav Gosh, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherji, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Aga Shahid Ali etc. C.G. Shyamala in his essay, "Perspectives on Diaspora in the Fiction of Anita Desai", maintains the interesting view about the diaspora writers, "The group maintains its separateness from the host country based on common ethnicity or nationality, yet maintains attachments, nostalgic or related to culture to the home country. Though the group is physically or geographically displaced, they retain their social and cultural position to the old memories of the culture which they have inherited". (Shyamala 1)

The post-colonial phase of the Indian Diaspora is the opposite of ancient period because in the ancient times Indians migrated to other countries as indentured laborers but the migration of post-colonial phase is from the middle-class families, much skilled. The bucks and the white color jobs bewitched them and they left their country. Such type of happening can be witnessed in a diasporic piece of writing, *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, by a well acclaimed diaspora writer Anita Desai. The said novel unlatches a story of two friends, Dev and Adit, in London. Adit was disappointed with his job in India which compelled him to leave his motherland for a comfortable foreign job. He says out of anger

All I could find was a ruddy clerking job in some Government of India tourist bureau. They were going to pay me two hundred and fifty rupees and after thirty years I could expect to have five hundred rupees. That is what depressed me-the thirty years I would have to spend in panting after that extra two hundred and fifty rupees. (Desai 18)

The novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* also deals with the theme of otherness. Adit lives in London with his English wife, Sarah who pays the high price of being the wife of an Indian. The people around him treated him as an alien only because of this. The question of identity continues to haunt her:

Who was she –Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari One burning, bronzed day in September, or Mrs. Sen the Head's secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency? Both these creatures were frauds; each had a large, shadowed element of charade about it. When she briskly dealt with letters ... she felt an impostor, but equally, she was playing a part when she tapped her fingers to the sitar music on Adit's records ... she had so little command over these two charades she played each day, one in the morning at school and one in the evening at home, that she could not even tell with how much sincerity she played one role or the other. They were roles and when she was playing them, she was nobody. Her face was only a mask, her body only a costume. Where was Sarah? Where was Sarah? ... she wondered if Sarah had any existence at all, and then she wondered, with great sadness, if she would ever be allowed to step offstage, leave the theatre and enter the real world – whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth. (Desai 34-35).

Anita Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) deals with the heart-aching, sue-generis story of Hugo Baumgartner, an old Jew who has escaped Nazi Germany and made Bombay his home. But unfortunately, his long stay of fifty years in India waved a bad hand to him. He failed to get close to the Indian people around him. He was considered a 'firanghi' neither Indian nor Western. He suffered a lot due to this in-betweenness. The novel really shows us the pathetic picture of being diasporic who tries hard to adopt an alien culture but cannot. The novel ends with a tragic end; the protagonist got killed by a fellow German for money.

Bharti Mukherji, multi exiled, as she changed many citizenships born in India shifted Canada, from Canada to Australia and from Australia to America, enjoying a soft corner in the Indian English literature. She came to the literary landscape with the dominant themes of diaspora. Her novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* is a clear picture of problems like alienation, dislocation and otherness. Bharti Mukherjee represents the transnational communities and transnational interpretation. Her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is "a materialization of the diasporic community and hence alienated" (Chetana Pokhriyal 3). Tara Banarjee, the main character of the novel is the real state of the dispersed community who strongly wants to enter into "nationalised community" (Chetana Pokhriyal 3) by the means of marriage with an American, David Catwright. In this regard Milton Gordon remarks, —inter-marriage leads to marital assimilation which is an intermixture of the two "gene pools which the two populations represent, regardless of how similar or divergent these two gene pools may be" (Gordon 11). Her dreams and cultural beliefs got injured when she came to know the union of the two hearts was actually a contract between the husband-wife. While giving the voice to her characters Bharti Mukherjee put the words of reality on the tongue of her characters. She says, "I need to feel like a part of the community I have adopted (as I tried to feel in Canada as well). I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation. (Two ways to Belong in America)

Bharti Mukherjee has created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad, by her contribution to Indian English writing. Her admirable literary works place her in the class of great diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bernard Malamud, Issac Babel, and Yashmine Gunratne. The traumas and the agonies that people of Indian Diaspora face, in fulfilling their dreams, constitute the prime concern of Mukherji's literary oeuvre. Her novel *Jasmine* traces the story of the eponymous heroine in her American exciting journey. Jasmine, the Hindu widow, who leaves India for the US after her husband's death in a terrorist attack, is found to undergo a cross- cultural change in her fractured life as an immigrant. The opening chapter of the novel starts with the words, "Lifetimes ago, under a banyan tree in the village

of Hasnapur, an astrologer cupped his ears – his satellite dish to the stars – and foretold my widowhood and exile. I was only seven then, fast and venturesome, scabrous-armed from leaves and thorns”. (Mukherjee, 3)

The critic Nagendra Kumar notes that Jasmine’s “decision to kill herself first, is a decision of a woman who lives for her deceased husband but the woman who kills Half- Face is prompted by her will to live to continue her life” (110). Jasmine’s journey from Punjab, through Florida, New York, and Iowa, to California depicts the various stages of her exilic condition. But these exilic locations are also representation of the spiritual states of her mind. Jasmine assumes different mythological avatars in her various exilic states, “I have been reborn several times”. (Mukherjee 126). She shuttles between identities, “Jyoti [was] the Sati-Goddess, Jasmine lives for the future” (Mukherjee 176). Jasmine emancipates herself from being an illegal immigrant into a self-assured American woman but her spiritual call comes from India, “I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness” (Mukherjee 40).

The need to establish one’s root becomes more acute in the case of diasporic writers. The diasporic writers locate and establish the cultural nuances with the diasporic space. While negotiating between the parent and immigrant culture diasporic writers occupy what Homi Bhabha calls “interstitial space” (144).

Jhumpa Lahiri, a diasporic writer, has written a collection of short stories and a novel both are exploring the clashes of culture in the U.S. Her novel, *The Namesake* is a fine story of emotional dislocation and cultural dislocation. In the wave of the early 60’s many Indian professionals went to U.S.A in search of their better future. Ashoke Ganguli, an Indian Bengali from Calcutta too leaves his motherland to America for pursuing higher education. After two years stay in the U.S.A he returns back and marries a nineteen-year-old Bengali girl from Calcutta, Ashima. She had never thought to be in an alien land but after getting married with Ashoke Ganguli there was no option to remain in India. She left from Dum Dum airport to the U.S with a bundle of traditional instructions from all the kiths and kins who come to see her off, “not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston” (Lahiri 37). Living in America is a totally different experience for her. Everything was totally opposite what has she read in the English novels. She feels homesick and alone in their three-room apartment which is too hot in summers and too cold in winters. She feels emotionally dislocated and yearns for her home which is a bowl of their dear ones. We see the heights of her dislocation when we see her all the time reading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazine she has brought with her. Mahesh Bharatkumar Bhatt says:

Ashima’s love of family influences her to create a close-knit web of immigrant friends. This group practices Indian custom, speaks the Bengali language, and, in many respects, becomes a substitute family for the vast collection of relatives back in India. But for Ashima, the close relations between the immigrants become an excuse to avoid the customs of American life. (44)

The novel *The Namesake* is a story of two generations of an Indian family who struggles to assimilate with an alien culture but fails. The novel really deals with the complicated diasporic issues. The first generation feels the nostalgic about their homeland and the second generation, Gogol their son, suffers from the identity crises and broken relationships. Gogol could not assimilate himself with the white relations of America. He loves Ruth, a white American but got deceived. His next love is Maxine but this relation comes to an end because of emotional complications of his father’s death. After he marries, Moushmi, but the marriage fails because she loves Dimitri, a German man. Gogol struggles to transform himself by escaping from the traditions of the community of Indian immigrants to which his family belongs.

The age of globalization has blessed us with nebulous relationships and so is hovering over the modern diaspora literature. The themes of alienation and exile are dancing on the hyphenated stage of Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora writings explore the complexities and the dilemma of the immigrants in exile so vividly that it has got the attention of world institutions. It has delineated the problems and plights of exile and the diasporic individuals caught in the crisis of a changing society.

Salman Rushdie is another diasporic giant. Salman Rushdie inaugurated the field of postcolonial diaspora with his debut novel *Grimus*, which is really an experiment to show the plight of detachment and alienation of exiled people. According to him migrants are new types of human beings.

who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves - because they are so defined by others - by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves’ strange fusions occur the migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier. (124-125.)

Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* harbours the idea of migration. Harveen Sachdeva Mann notes that while depicting the life of a character, Saleem Sinai, Rushdie narrates the many changes that dwells in the country’s migration into postcolonial nationhood; of class struggles, language battles, religious skirmishes, political machinations, and territorial wars with neighbouring countries. *Midnight’s Children* is actually a story of dislocation and displacement where Saleem Sinai wanders among three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but could not find a piece of peace. As Pramod K Nayar opines, “Diasporic writing captures the two invariable of their experience: exile and homeland. All diasporic literature is an attempt to negotiate between these two polarities. The writings of exiled/immigrant writers undertake two moves one temporal and one spatial. It is as Meena Alexander puts it, writing in search of a homeland. (Nayar 188). In *Midnight’s Children*, he pictures this trauma of fluid identity. In his first migrated country Saleem becomes a dog; a member of the Cutia Unit. Consequently, his body has gone fully numb, the only sense active being his sense of smell, “anaesthetized against feeling as well as memories” (Rushdie 353). Here Saleem Sinai is presented as the microcosm of all the diasporic generation; how they are treated in the newly inhabited territories; how the venom is

thrown upon them and the current example of this venom throwing is Australia. Saleem, being the mouthpiece of his creator, expresses the feelings that Rushdie feels while living in an adopted land.

*Shame*, the most political adventure of Rushdie, exhibits the trauma of migration that he has been facing throughout his life. Shame is a novel about migration. At several places, Salman Rushdie emerges as the narrator and narrates the deplorable conditions of migrants:

It's a novel about the changes that happen to individuals and communities under the pressure of migration... I wanted to talk about the immigrant community in London particularly the South Asian immigrant community, and at that time what I wanted to say about it is, — Here is this enormous community of people who are, it seems, invisible—their concerns their lives you know, their fears, and so on, somehow invisible to the white populationl. (Herwitz Varshney 19)

*The Ground Beneath Her Feet* is the novel where Rushdie expresses his diasporic views ostensibly. The novelist is entailed in sketching a textual diasporism in the novel.

Indian diaspora writings have received unprecedented attention and acclaim. Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* in 1981 drew the attention of the critics towards the growing and maturing South Asian writings in English often by the diaspora. South Asian writers like Michael Ondaatje received Booker Prize for *The English Patient* in 1992, Arundhati Roy Received Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997. Jhumpa Lahiri got Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000 and V. S. Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003. The settings of these narratives are quite varied. In Hari Kunzru's novel *The Impressionist*, the landscape stretches from Rajasthan desert, Agra, Fatehpur, Bombay, London, Oxford and finally to West Africa. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories are set in Urban American as well as Indian settings. V. S. Naipaul takes readers to slums in Mumbai, Trinidad, England and African countries. Salman Rushdie's settings are often Pakistan and India, and England.

In conclusion, the exploration of diaspora in contemporary Indian literature serves as a poignant and intricate reflection of the human experience in an age of globalization and cultural interchange. The diverse narratives woven by writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee, and others resonate with readers on a profound level, as they shed light on the universal themes of alienation, displacement, and the quest for belonging. Through their narratives, these authors dismantle the notion of a singular, fixed identity, portraying characters who grapple with the complexities of multiple cultural influences and the tension between their past and present.

The texts reveal that the diasporic journey is not merely a physical relocation but a transformative process that reshapes the individual's psyche and worldview. As the protagonists navigate new territories, they encounter a spectrum of experiences—ranging from feelings of estrangement and nostalgia to moments of self-discovery and acceptance. The narratives also underscore the enduring human desire to establish roots and connections, even in environments that are initially foreign and perplexing.

Furthermore, diaspora literature is a powerful medium through which writers advocate for social justice, challenge stereotypes, and foster cross-cultural understanding. By presenting the struggles and triumphs of diasporic individuals, authors contribute to a broader discourse on human rights, equality, and the intricacies of multicultural societies. These literary works not only document historical journeys but also illuminate contemporary issues surrounding immigration, assimilation, and the dynamics of identity.

In essence, contemporary Indian diaspora literature occupies a unique space where personal stories intersect with global themes, capturing the evolving dynamics of a world characterized by movement, connectivity, and diversity. The narratives serve as a reminder that the search for identity and belonging is an ongoing, collective endeavor that transcends geographical boundaries. As readers engage with these stories, they are invited to reflect on their own place in the world, the complexities of their own identities, and the bridges that connect individuals across continents and cultures.

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