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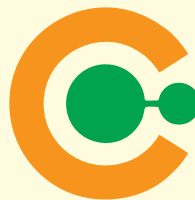
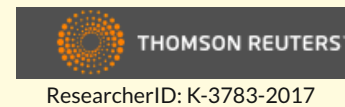
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Negotiating Hybridity: Cross-Cultural Identity Formation in Contemporary Indian Diasporic Fiction

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ABSTRACT

The fiction of the Indian diaspora goes beyond simply providing a story - it weaves together in a magnificent way the stories of family, identity and culture, as well as their complications in a transcultural world. It focuses on postcolonialism and globalization, investigating the life of Indian expatriates captivated in a paradox of belonging and estrangement. This study analyses the works of Lahiri, Rushdie, and Mukherjee, who capture identity politics of cross-border culture through displacement, nostalgia, and refiguration. Following from his model of hybridity, Bhabha Homi K. captured the integration of self-contested culture and sub-cultures. These fictional monologues reflect considerations for new identities that grow out of gaps left by the clash of different cultures. They are alive only to tell stories but they become useful in telling questions of - who do they belong to, of what value, and what do they fit within the demarcations? Lahiri and Mukherji's hybrid fictional works demonstrate how the intercultural reality of contemporary society provides unlimited opportunities for identity re-construction. Furthermore, Indian expatriate fiction illustrates personal hardships and conflicts of individuals amidst cultural globalization while stressing an intricate framework of global relations. In this paper, I will analyse hybrid identity construction of contemporary Indian diasporic fiction through three lenses: preservation of culture, negotiation of belonging to the new place, and technology.

Keywords: *hybrid; cross-cultural; identity; Indian diaspora; contemporary fiction*

FULL PAPER

The study of hybrid identity must be done in the context of contemporary Indian diasporic fiction literature. It also highlights how a person's bond with their home country shapes identity. This paper investigates the interplay of hybrid identity formation in contemporary Indian diasporic fiction within the frameworks of cultural retention, belonging, technology, and identity. Cultural preservation is an attempt by diasporic people to retain and pass on their culture to subsequent generations. It often involves some degree of change or reworking of customs to suit new contexts. Negotiation of belonging underlines the construction of identity vis-a-vis the dominant culture, struggling with acceptance and rejection simultaneously. Lastly, the role of technology particularly social media and other forms of digital communication is important to the formation of hybrid identities as they allow for links with the home country and provide places for cultures to interact. These platforms provide new opportunities for culture-building through identity construction and expression among diaspora individuals. Learning these concepts together, it is my intention to shed light on the complex and ever-changing nature of hybrid identity concerning the Indian diaspora (Gupta, A).

Understanding the Indian Diaspora

The Indian diaspora is the outcome of centuries of complex migration phenomena that blended together into a singular global community with diverse faces. To appreciate the literary dimensions of this diaspora, grappling with the interplay of history, socio-culture, and the economy is essential. This part offers a preliminary sketch by discussing the phases of Indian migrations, explaining some key concepts like diaspora, transnationalism, and outlining the problems and prospects of diasporic populations. The Indian diaspora is significant because it has emerged as a new actor – and sometimes a driver – of change in culture, economy, and politics at a global level. Such literature is useful to analyse the processes of constructing and reconstructing the so-called hybrid identities in the age of globalization. Such study, moreover, helps to respond to questions about multiculturalism, how we belong as a global community or as citizens, and the contemporary intersections of cultural interactions in the 21st century. The contribution to analysis about the formation of hybrid identity in this case derives from the scrutiny of how contemporary writers address the constantly changing essence of identity in the context of globalization, transnationalism, and even more so, digital interconnectedness (Haile, Y).

A Brief History of Indian Migration

Starting from the colonial period, Indians began migrating to different parts of the British Empire. This was the case during the Caribbean and Fijian indentured

labour schemes, as well as for indentured servitude in Mauritius (Leslie, D). Over time, waves of skilled professionals migrated to the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In more recent years, liberalization policies in India have increased the volume of skilled and unskilled workers migrating to Gulf countries along with Southeast Asia. The history and identity of the Indian diaspora has always been a collection of various experiences that are impacted by these factors.

The Concept of Diaspora and Transnationalism

According to Haile, the term “diaspora” describes a dispersed network of a particular people who live in different locations but maintain an actual or imagined tether to their homeland. On the contrary, “transnationalism” focuses on the processes that transcend national boundaries, including the movement of social relations, ideas, capital, and people. Understanding the dynamics within and across borders is instrumental to fathom how diasporic communities sustain their cultural identity, forge new forms of belonging, and negotiate their ties with the homeland and the country of settlement. As noted by Haile, Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have aided in bringing together people separated by distance, whether physically or sociologically through transnational family ties or diasporic and transnational families.

Challenges and Opportunities in Diasporic Spaces

From an Indian perspective, some of the challenges faced by diasporic communities include culture clash, ethnocentric discrimination, and the attempts to cultivate a hybrid identity. Sociocultural challenges are traditionally associated with culture maintenance and inter-generational linguistic transmission, while economic challenges encompass mobility and access to social markets. Most important, however, are the numerous opportunities provided through the connection, including access to education, economic opportunities, and the cultivating of pluralistic worldviews. The communities also actively participate in international and regional cultural exchanges, enhancing economic growth in their home countries, as well as having an impact on the social and political framework in the countries of settlement.

Theoretical Frameworks

Hybridity and Post-Colonial Theory

Homi Bhabha’s view of hybridity is particularly useful in understanding identity construction in the context of diaspora. In Bhabha’s framework, hybridity refers to the creation of entirely new cultural syntheses from interactions and amalgamation of different cultures. It is highly applicable to the Indian diaspora, where people oscillate between the culture of their origin and the culture of their adopted country, leading to an identity that is multifaceted and constantly evolving.

Diasporic individuals often embody hybrid identity that is a product of negotiation between “Indianness” and local culture of the host country.

There are, however, some critiques to Bhabha’s theory. Some scholars accuse him of ignoring the fact that cultural interaction can have exploitative aspects. They argue that the theory fails to account for the oppression and marginalization that diasporic people live in . Further, too much focus on hybridity makes it difficult to track distinct identities and the strategic essentialism which diaspora communities employ to try to retain their culture. It is important to understand and address these issues in order to apply hybridity critically towards the analysis of Indian diasporic fiction.

Belonging and Identity

Theories concerning the Indian diaspora describe belonging and identity formation in more detail. The understanding of belonging includes not only physical presence, but emotional attachment, social inclusion, and cultural recognition. Diasporic individuals struggle with partial belongingness, feeling neither fully “at home” nor completely belonging to the new society. This involves a perpetual negotiation of identity whereby individuals try to make sense of their multiple connections and construct a coherent self.

For diasporic communities, maintaining a heritage is a challenge. Assimilation may provide a path towards escaping one’s community; but it equally involves the disintegration of traditions and a severing of ties with one’s roots. Certain diasporic fiction attempts to document cultural heritage support such as family customs, ritualistic religion, or languages, and values that they intend to pass down. The relationship between individual and collective identity is also important because individuals gain strength and support from the diasporic community while still claiming their uniqueness.

Cultural Hybridity and Preservation

As portrayed in Indian diasporic fiction, cultural preservation is a complicated balancing act of honouring one’s roots while simultaneously negotiating life in a new setting. Over time, such tensions lead to hybrid identities, which are characterized by the fusion of one’s culture and the society they move to. Tension between preservation and assimilation is the main focus describing how diasporic communities try to maintain cultural practices while fusing them with the reality of life in a host country. It can be observed that this desire to remain distinct fosters self-identity. Still, it remains difficult, as the pressures to merge into culture of the host country, along with the ease and convenience of contemporary life, comes into play. Leslie goes on to state that this is one of the best forms in which new identities, or sub-identities of the dominant culture, can be developed. The idea of “mutuality of otherness” provides

the formulation whereby differences can be appreciated instead of erased for the sake of contact and closeness without thrusting into blending.

Tactics of Culture Preservation

Various strategies by Indian diasporic communities are employed when attempting to preserve their culture. One of the methods is the participation of their offspring in the festivals, rituals, and cuisines of their ancestors, which guarantees transmission of traditions. Many communities set up language schools and cultural centres to promote the use of the community's native tongue, which makes enhancing language preservation another primary initiative. Collective social activities together with religious or culturally-focused organizations enable the people to form close bonds that ensure cultural belonging and identity helped by a support system. This helps preserve, and assist with the knowledge from the older generations to be transferred to the younger generation (Botangen, K). Additionally, forming philosophies regarding cultural heritage assists in the sustaining and practicing of the heritage (Kirasur, N).

The Importance of Technology in Preserving Culture

Technology, particularly social media, has become essential in the protection and rejuvenation of indigenous culture for diasporic communities. Facebook, Instagram, as well as region-specific platforms such as Koo, assist in the maintenance of cultural ties, dissemination of information regarding cultural activities, and the formation of virtual communities regardless of physical location. Traditional music and dance, storytelling, as well as culinary practices can now be shared and taught amongst diasporic individuals, allowing them to be connected to their roots. The fear of losing indigenous knowledge transforms efforts made to preserve such knowledge, and causes the implementation of ICT-based strategies. (Botangen, K) While technology aids in the preservation of culture, it cannot be overemphasized that there are certain drawbacks, such as paraphrased appropriation of cultural practices or the simplification of culturally diverse customs (Kirasur, N).

Negotiating Belonging in the Diaspora

The Dynamics of Assimilation and Resistance

Indian migrants are subjected to acute pressure to assimilate in their receiving countries. They must balance retention of their ethnic heritage with adoption of customs and values of others. New languages, social practices, and professional norms may be adopted as a result of this pressure. Developing assimilative resistance is the primary response, where people and communities actively try to keep their culture intact. Some of these strategies include practicing a particular faith, participating and assisting in religious and cultural festivities, and teaching them the values and

traditions which are not often received by their peers. Such diasporic communities also develop and construct, both in reality and online, sites through which they can perform and reinforce their identity. (Botangen, K) The balance between assimilation and resistance is not static, rather it evolves over time depending upon the personal biography, community, and political environment.

Social Media and Construction of Vernacular Communities

Using social media enables users to create and engage with vernacular communities which foster a feeling or identity of social belonging and offers psychosocial support to diasporic users. Such communities go beyond physical boundaries and include users who have a certain cultural, linguistic, or experiential background. Through Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, diasporic users can interact with their families and friends, upload cultural content, and partake in conversations regarding pertinent community issues. Social media is also a place where marginalized diaspora groups during the post-colonial era century can narrate their tales, challenge socially constructed images about them, and campaign for their socioeconomic rights. In addition, these platforms help in the exchange of diverse cultures as other diasporic users get to meet people from other cultures and learn new things (Kirasur, N). But, while social media has made it easier to construct vernacular communities, such ease comes with problems like echo chambers, misinformation, and the rise of socially imprinted hierarchies.

Literary Analysis of Select Novels

This portion investigates the canvas of hybrid identity construction in contemporary Indian diasporic literature through the close reading of two works, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Considering these novels allows us to analyse the myriad approaches people take towards overcoming cultural identity and the mechanisms of 'being' within a culturally different society. These narratives capture the essence of the challenges and opportunities offered by living in a diaspora.

"The Namesake" by Jhumpa Lahiri

Lahiri's exploration of Gogol Ganguli's life in *The Namesake* indicates that he struggled with his identity as a first generation Indian American. His name—an odd one for a child—was meant to be a placeholder but turned permanent because of a “glitch” in the system. This is the epitome of egalitarian alienation and confusion (Khatri, H). Gogol's immigrants' parents, who worked tirelessly to hold on to their culture whilst traversing through a new land, added to his identity crisis. Some examples arise from the family's rigid adherence to Anglophobic values and Gogol's frustration to submerge in the American melting pot. This is evident in the Gogol's myriads of liaisons where he dates both Indian and American women

contemporaneously. This novel also demonstrates hybridity. For example, Gogol learns to embrace his heritage—not as a liability, but as an old companion whom he has been glad to have along the journey of life. He learns to navigate his dual belonging, striking a balance between his roots and upbringing. This negotiation is ever ongoing, steeped in the tensions of cultural conflict and the embracing of hybridity that goes beyond simplistic notions of ‘identity’.

“Jasmine” by Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* provides a strikingly different yet equally fascinating account on hybrid identities. With Jasmine, the titular character, we see one individual transforming over and over again as she tries to live life as an immigrant in America. Unlike Gogol, who struggles with a cultural pre-defined upbringing, Jasmine actively decides to cast away her past identities and adopt new ones in order to keep pace with her changing circumstances. Resilience is inherent in her journey, as is the willingness to adapt- even if it entails the need to reinvent oneself several times. Trauma, and the sense of belonging in a foreign land are some of the quintessential themes that this novel seeks to address. It is Jasmine's journey that proves how elastic identity can be in a world where cultures have been displaced (Khatri, H). Changing cultures is Gogol's story, whereas continuous transformation is Jasmine's. A price must be paid however, for this different approach wherein Jasmine struggles to let her past self-go and accept the morality of her decisions. Through the narrative, we see vulnerability and strength at the same time which comes from having to build or start afresh from scratch in a culturally different environment.

Challenges and Complexities

The Indian diaspora faces particular difficulties while attempting to develop hybrid identities in a digitized world. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) proscribe broad avenues for establishing contact, and self-representation, however, at the same time, ICTs open new possibilities for hatred and exploitation. Understanding these challenges is critical towards comprehending diasporic identity in the context of the 21st century (29). The ICTs fluid contours, migration, and inequalities pose theoretical challenges with regard to conceptualizing digital technology in the context of migration (Diarad).

Caste-Based Discrimination Online

Social media can enable connection across the diaspora but at the same time become the breeding grounds for caste discrimination. The fact that users operate under pseudonyms, and there is very little regulation can at times empower people to air their prejudiced views. This prejudice may nakedly foist exclusion and layered bigotry which reproduce offline hierarchies online. The soft boundary decisions motivated culturally and in unreflexively ways aggravate the moderation problems

(Pandiani, D). There is a need for automated systems to identify toxicity and justify their conclusions (Pandiani, D). While digital spaces were designed to enable the creation of new identities, they, paradoxically, strengthen identity-based inequalities and impede the seamless integration of diasporic individuals into a globalized social order.

The Tyranny of ICTs: Risks and Inequalities

Certain disparities arise as a consequence of information and communications technologies (ICTs) empowering boundless potential. This is especially true in the case of vulnerable migrants. Of paramount concern is privacy, as personal information disseminated over the internet is vulnerable to exploitation by corporations and governing bodies. In addition, lack of access to technology as well as a deficiency in digital skills exacerbate the problem of the digital divide, which, in turn, deepens the marginalization of certain groups within the diaspora. It can be claimed that business leaders need to be more aware of the lexicon used in today's multifaceted world. As pointed out by Gupta, there are also fundamental conflicts and compromises that need to be addressed which in this case are aimed at balancing and bridging. All of these problems underline the need for focused and critical engagement with technology accompanied by equitable provision of ICTs to the public. Moreover, efforts should be made to ensure that such technologies are not misused as devices of subjugation.

To sharpen the focus on potential harms and discrimination, it is critical to address the psychological effects of being perpetually connected. As much as diasporic might want to maintain connections with the homeland, it can foster being "in-between" in a geographically and socially fragmented world. Access to information and news broadcasting from both the home and host countries also tends to evoke anxiety and feelings of emptiness, a phenomenon commonly associated with more socially or politically important time periods. In addition, the need to project an idealized image of oneself online can have extraordinarily distinct consequences for diaspora individuals who feel the need to show that they have "successfully integrated" into the society at both the home and host communities. This phenomenon exacerbates the existing gap between their online and offline worlds, which makes them even more estranged from their identity.

Importance and Novelty

The exploration of hybrid identity construction in the members of the Indian diaspora communities in fiction is particularly relevant in light of the scope of global connectivity in contemporary world. As people move in and out of different sociocultural environments, the processes of identity construction and negotiation becomes intricate endeavours. This dissertation augments the scholarship of diaspora literature by offering a detailed account of the interplay of vegetable processes within

Indian diasporic literature. To appreciate deep these identities are shaped and articulated is to appreciate the multidirectional forces of culture in the 21st century. This understanding is important to guide contemporary efforts towards inclusivity and the cultural integration woes afflicting multi-ethnic societies and their civilizations.

Additionally, an emphasis on the technology's role in cultivating hybrid identities makes a fresh contribution to the scholarship on the Indian diaspora. Through the study of the social media and other digital communication tools, this paper looks at the cultural modes of preservation, negotiation of belonging, and even submission to forms of prejudice, or distasteful treatment, prevailing against people of many cultures – providing a critical commentary on the construction of identity for the diaspora in this digital epoch. This understanding is timely considering the use of the equipment and the internet for communicating, accessing information, and interacting socially is increasingly very common especially among the younger diasporic population.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the complex processes of hybrid identity development in Indian diasporic fiction of contemporary times. It has shown how the characters blend and make sense of their identities by integrating aspects of their Indian heritage with their lifestyles in a new culture. This form of literature is instrumental in understanding the complexity of diasporic life and the identity changes that persist in these societies. The analysis shows that hybridity is not merely the blending of cultures, but rather, an ongoing oscillation of adaptation, resistance, and re-creation (Ojha, A). With the continued evolution of diasporic peoples, the study of hybrid identity fiction sheds light on the multifaceted phenomenon of identity formation and association in the modern world. In the end, studying hybrid identities within diasporic fiction profoundly illustrates the intricate realities of life in a globalized society.

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