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Aspects of Immigration: Cultural Adaptation with Reference to Indian Diaspora Writing

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Abstract

Immigration is not just a physical displacement but a cultural, psychological and emotional transformation that reshapes identity. Indian diaspora writing, by authors who have migrated out of the subcontinent or belong to communities formed through earlier waves of indenture and trade, provides a rich archive for understanding how migrants negotiate cultural adaptation. In this article, the major elements of immigration as presented in the writings of V. S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are discussed. Using theoretical lenses offered by Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah and John Berry, the study uncovers four interconnected aspects of adaptation: nostalgia and the weight of memory, identity negotiation and hybridity, generational conflict, and assimilation versus resistance. It contends that the cultural adaptation that Indian diaspora writing represents is not a linear shift from one culture to another but a layered, often unsettled process in which the migrant exists in multiple cultural worlds simultaneously.

Keywords: Indian diaspora, immigration, cultural adaptation, hybridity, identity, nostalgia, postcolonial literature.

1. Introduction

The Indian diaspora is a prime example of the complexity of migration, a defining phenomenon of the modern world. Beginning with the colonial-era indentured laborers sent to the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius and East Africa, and followed by the post-1965 wave of professionals, students and skilled workers who migrated to the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and the Gulf states, the Indian diaspora abroad is now amongst the largest and most dispersed in the world. This literature, produced by these immigrants and their descendants, and often referred to as Indian diaspora writing, has grown into a sizeable body of work that registers the actual experience of crossing borders. The question of cultural adaptation is central in the literature. How does a migrant adapt to the expectations

of a new society without losing his or her cultural heritage? How does one reconfigure one's identity when one is not at home in either place? This paper tries to address these issues through close reading of some representative Indian Diaspora writing and by situating them in well-established theoretical discussions on diaspora, hybridity and acculturation. The topic is divided into 5 sections. It is followed, in the second part, by the presentation of the theoretical framework. The third section traces the historical features of the Indian diaspora and its literary representation. The fourth and longest section examines four important aspects of cultural adaptation in selected texts. The final section provides some concluding thoughts on what diaspora writing can tell us about the unfinished project of belonging.

2. Theoretical Framework

The best way to understand the concept of cultural adaptation within the diaspora is to combine the insights of postcolonial theory and acculturation theory. In his influential 1990 essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall argues that diasporic identity is not a fixed essence but a matter of "becoming as well as of being." Hall maintained that identity is produced through the ongoing acts of representation, and the diasporic subject lives in the tension of roots and routes, that is, between an inherited cultural origin and an ever-changing present. Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) has developed the concept of hybridity to complicate any simple model of adaptation. In his theory of enunciation, Bhabha introduces the notion of a "third space" in which cultural significations are not fixed but negotiated. The migrant occupies a space between two cultures, neither fully integrated into the culture of the host nor fully belonging to the culture of the origin. Rather a new cultural form emerges at the intersection of these two cultures. This concept is essential for interpreting diaspora literature, which often features characters who occupy liminal places. Avtar Brah (1996) in his book *"Cartographies of Diaspora"* introduces the concept of "diaspora space" and emphasizes that diaspora is not just about the people who move but also about the contact between migrants and the populations that are considered to be native. Brah's paradigm, in the context of the settlement process, is concerned with issues of gender, social class and racialization. In 1997, John Berry developed an acculturation model that is rooted in social psychology and describes four different strategies that migrants might pursue. The strategies include assimilation, in which the heritage culture is abandoned in favor of the host culture; separation, in which the heritage culture is retained but the host culture is rejected; integration, in which both cultures are maintained; and marginalization, in which both cultures are rejected. While Berry's model is sometimes taken to task for its neat categories, it offers a helpful vocabulary for reading characters in diaspora literature, whose trajectories frequently swing between multiple places within a single narrative. Taken as a whole, these conceptual frameworks imply that cultural adaptation is neither a straightforward nor a total process. It is a process of negotiation, loss, invention, and resistance; it is a process represented with a special acuity in diaspora literature.

Bringing these two traditions together requires acknowledging both their complementarity and their friction. Berry's model and the postcolonial accounts of Hall and Bhabha proceed from opposed premises. Berry's social psychology presupposes two relatively bounded cultures—a heritage culture and a host culture—between which the migrant adopts a strategy of retention or relinquishment; its four quadrants depend on treating "culture" as a measurable entity one can keep or discard. Hall and Bhabha begin precisely by denying that cultures are bounded or anterior to the encounter: for Hall identity is a production that is never complete, and for Bhabha the migratory encounter generates meaning in a third space that belongs to neither prior culture. Read against each other, the frameworks expose a genuine tension—what Berry calls "integration," the maintenance of both cultures, Bhabha would refuse to describe as the simple sum of two intact inheritances. Yet the tension is productive rather than disabling. Berry supplies a vocabulary of agency and observable trajectory—a way of naming where a character stands and how that position shifts across a narrative—while Hall and

Bhabha supply an account of what the content of any such position actually is. The most analytically useful move, adopted in the readings that follow, is therefore to treat Berry's quadrants not as fixed bins but as provisional coordinates, and to read the lived texture of each strategy—especially "integration"—through the lens of hybridity and the third space. So construed, Berry maps the migrant's strategic positioning while Hall and Bhabha describe the unstable cultural ground on which that positioning is enacted; neither framework alone accounts for both the patterning and the indeterminacy that the literature records.

3. The Indian Diaspora and Its Literature

In most cases, academics make a distinction between "old" and "new" Indian diaspora organizations. "Old Diaspora" refers to the labour migrations that occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of the British indenture system. These migrations sent Indians to plantation economies in Trinidad, Guyana, Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, and other regions of Africa. On the other hand, the new diaspora emerged after India gained its independence and increased after Western countries began to relax their immigration regulations in the 1960s. These migrations resulted in the formation of communities of professionals, technicians, and students in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Gulf region.

These two histories have resulted in the development of distinct literary tastes. The writing that is associated with the ancient diaspora, such as V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) and *The Mimic Men* (1967), is haunted by displacement that is generations deep. In these works, India lives more as a representation of memory, ritual, and rumor than as a place one may return to. The writing of the new diaspora, which includes works such as *Jasmine* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai, and *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, amongst many others, engages a more recent migration in which the homeland is accessible by aero plane and phone call but is frequently just as emotionally distant.

Salman Rushdie holds a unique position in the literary world. His writings, published in 1991 under the title *Imaginary Homelands*, articulate one of the most enduring conceptions of the diasporic predicament. These articles state that writers who are in exile or migration deal not in actual cities and villages but rather in "imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind." The novels *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Satanic Verses* (1988), written by Salman Rushdie, are examples of works that successfully navigate the generative instability of imagined originals.

Although ancient and new diasporic writing are distinct from one another, they both demonstrate a persistent concern with the manner in which Indianness is produced, enacted, challenged, and modified in other countries. The following section will investigate this worry under four major categories.

A word is warranted on the principles governing the selection of texts, and on the significant authors who fall outside this study's frame. The corpus assembled here was chosen by a single, deliberately narrow criterion: each text takes the lived experience of migration and settlement abroad—the everyday, psychological and relational labor of cultural adaptation within a host society—as its central and sustained preoccupation, and each lends itself to reading through the combined acculturation-and-hybridity lens set out above. The aim is analytic coherence rather than canonical comprehensiveness. This criterion explains several notable absences. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), though a landmark of Indian writing in English, is set almost wholly within Kerala and is principally concerned with caste, communism, gender and forbidden love inside India rather than with the condition of living in the diaspora; its central concerns lie largely outside the adaptation framework this paper applies. Amitav Ghosh presents a different case: migration and dispersal are unmistakably central to his work, but his characteristic mode—the oceanic and historical reconstruction

of circulation, indenture and kinship across the Indian Ocean world in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and the *Ibis* trilogy—treats diaspora as a transnational and archival network rather than as the contemporary, interiorised drama of cultural negotiation that the present study foregrounds. Their exclusion reflects the boundaries of this paper's particular question, not a judgement about their stature; a study framed around the historiography of dispersal, or around the nation as it is written from within, would rightly place both authors at its centre. Marking these limits also indicates the natural directions in which the analysis offered here might be extended.

4. Aspects of Cultural Adaptation in Indian Diaspora Writing

4.1 Nostalgia and the Burden of Memory

Among the characteristics of the diasporic experience, nostalgia is likely the one that is most readily identifiable. The migrant retains memories of their homeland, including its aromas, its kitchens, its celebrations, and its languages. These memories take on a greater significance exactly due to the fact that they are no longer a part of their everyday lives. The works of fiction written by Jhumpa Lahiri are remarkable in this sense. Throughout the short story "Mrs. Sen's" from *Interpreter of Maladies*, the protagonist's routine of chopping vegetables on her bonti, her search for fresh fish, and her difficulty driving on American highways are all examples of how commonplace items and actions may become repositories of cultural yearning.

The syndrome has been described in a memorable manner by Rushdie. When he is writing about his own attempts to retrieve Bombay from the distance of London, he makes the observation that the diasporic writer is plagued by a sense of loss, which results in a unique epistemological position: There is a possibility that writers who are in my position, whether they are exiles, emigrants, or expatriates, are plagued by a sense of loss, an urge to reclaim, and a desire to look back, even if it means the possibility of being transformed into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. This realization elucidates the reasons why nostalgia in writing about diasporas is rarely straightforward. It is always the case that the country that is recalled is partially manufactured. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the Tulsi household upholds a waning Brahminical orthodoxy that is both comically and tragically out of sync with its Caribbean environment. Naipaul's characters, who were born in Trinidad and whose grandparents came to the country as indentured laborers, perform Hindu rituals whose original meanings have been worn away by time and distance. Therefore, memory plays a dual purpose in the literature of diaspora populations. It provides a continuity with the past, which serves to establish identity, but at the same time, it reveals the gap that exists between the homeland that is remembered and the one that actually exists. Recognizing that the past cannot be completely restored but can only be re-narrated is the first step in the process of cultural adaptation, as viewed from this perspective.

4.2 Identity Negotiation and Hybridity

Hybridity is a point that points both forth and ahead, while nostalgia points backward. A great number of diaspora narratives portray the identity of migrants as being fundamentally multiple, formed by the simultaneous demands of two or more cultural norms. The novel *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee serves as a striking illustration. In the course of her journey from Hasnapur in Punjab to Florida, New York, Iowa, and finally California, the main character goes through a series of name changes and transformations, becoming Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane in that order. An act of self-reinvention is represented by each single name. The story told by Mukherjee places a strong emphasis on the bloodshed and the feasibility of such a metamorphosis. Jasmine, the protagonist of the story, makes the statement that "there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself." The reason

we kill ourselves is so that we can rebirth ourselves in the visions that we see in our dreams. The hybridity presented in Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is expressed in a more subdued manner. Gogol Ganguli, who was born in the United States to parents of Bengali descent, has long struggled with the fact that his name does not entirely belong to either India or the United States. His attempts to reject and then recover the cultural lineage that his name encodes through the course of the novel are detailed. The fact that he eventually went back to using the name Nikhil and that he rekindled his interest in the history of his family leads one to believe that hybridity is not a goal but rather a constantly shifting orientation.

Bhabha's concept of the "third space" is applicable in this context. The diasporic person does not just select from two stable cultures; rather, the interaction between cultures results in the production of something new, which is neither totally Indian nor wholly American or British, but rather a novel configuration. The saree, which is worn with a sweater, the dish that is modified to local ingredients, and the wedding that blends Sanskrit chants with Western reception music are all examples of hybrid objects and behaviors that are frequently used to encode hybridity in diaspora writing. Cultural improvisations of this kind are not failures of adaptation; rather, they represent the very core of adaptation.

In her novel *"The Inheritance of Loss,"* Kiran Desai describes characters who's cultural in-betweenness results in alienation rather than empowerment. Biju, an undocumented Indian immigrant living in New York, is unable to settle into either the American dream or the Indian home he eventually returns to. The retired judge, who was anglicized in Cambridge, finds himself estranged from his own family. Biju spends his time working in the kitchens of lowly restaurants. The book written by Desai serves as a reminder that hybridity is not fairly distributed; for some people, it might be a privilege, while for others, it can be a wound.

4.3 Generational Conflict and the Second Generation

A significant structural element recurring in diaspora fiction is the antagonism between first-generation migrants and their children. Cultural practices are often conserved with special intensity in the first generation, partly as a security mechanism against loss and partly because the primary socialisation of the first generation occurred in the country of the first generation. The second generation, born or raised in the host country, negotiate a more fluid relationship with the culture of their parents, often feeling the expectations of their parents as boundaries. Lahiri makes many references to this material. In *The Namesake*, the central characters, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, live their lives by the rules of a Bengali household transplanted to Massachusetts. Their children, Gogol and Sonia, find these rituals embarrassing at first, then irrelevant, and finally, after the father's death, meaningful again. The story suggests that the second generation's adaptation is not a straightforward march toward Americanization, but a more complicated movement of partial recovery. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 1995 collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, explores intergenerational friction. The book highlights the characters of immigrant women whose daughters reject their mothers' expectations of marriage and gender roles. These stories complicate any simple celebration of tradition, showing how younger women may see the preservation of cultural traditions as a form of patriarchal control. Rohinton Mistry's literature, more often set in Bombay than in Canada, nonetheless deals with related problems of generational rupture among Parsis, themselves an old diasporic group. His works such as *'Such a Long Journey'* (1991) and *'A Fine Balance'* (1995) indicate the fact that minority communities within India already have a form of internal diasporic consciousness which is a precursor to the conditions that are present in overseas migration. Reading these works together, one can conclude that the generation conflict is one of the main factors that contribute to the development of diasporic cultures. Tradition is not simply handed down from generation to generation, but is argued over, amended, and (by the very fact of being argued over) kept alive.

4.4 Assimilation, Resistance, and the Question of Race

There are numerous literary embodiments of Berry's acculturation tactics, which include marginalization, integration, separation, and assimilation, throughout the canon of diaspora literature. On the other hand, the migrant is rarely the only one who picks from among these options. How open the host society is, how it handles racial politics, and how it organizes its economy all play a role in determining the kinds of adaptations that are feasible.

In both her essays and her novels, Mukherjee has emphasized the possibility and desirability of a transformational integration. She differentiated herself from Naipaul by embracing American identity as a self-reinvention that she decided to pursue. In the novels *Her Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), the protagonists are immigrants who do not only endure their new country but actively claim it as their own after arriving there. Nevertheless, even Mukherjee's narratives that joyously acknowledge the violence that is associated with such a shift.

The concept of resistance is brought to the forefront by other authors. Memoir written by Meena Alexander in 1993, titled "Fault Lines," is a reflection on the inability to put her multifaceted identities – Kerala, Sudan, England, and New York – into a single national framework. Despite the fact that Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) focuses mostly on the experiences of second-generation British Asians, it also dramatises the racial violence that occurred in Britain throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, which makes any straightforward assimilationist endeavour more difficult. Where South Asian bodies have been increasingly viewed through the lens of mistrust, the subject of race is particularly poignant in writing that has been produced by diasporas in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Despite the fact that it was written by a Pakistani author, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) has been often debated with Indian diaspora literature due to the way it portrays a successful immigrant whose carefully crafted existence in the United States unravels under the weight of post-9/11 racialization. These writings provide credence to the notion that integration is contingent, and that the host community has the ability to revoke the welcome it had previously appeared to extend.

In this way, writing from the Indian diaspora demonstrates that assimilation and resistance are not mutually contradictory choices but rather stances that migrants shift between, often within the same life. According to this interpretation, cultural adaptation is determined not only by the goals of the migrant but also by the reception that the host society demonstrates toward the migrant.

4.5 Gender and the Uneven Labor of Adaptation

The four aspects examined so far do not bear equally on all migrants, and one of the most consequential axes of difference is gender. Brah's insistence that diaspora be read through gender, class and racialization is instructive here: cultural adaptation is not a single process undergone identically by men and women but a differentiated one, in which women frequently carry a disproportionate share of the burden of cultural reproduction. Across diaspora fiction, women are repeatedly positioned as the bearers and guardians of tradition – the keepers of kitchen, ritual, language and propriety – so that their adaptation is more closely policed and their deviations more heavily freighted. Lahiri's *Mrs Sen* and Ashima Ganguli register this expectation in the very textures of domestic life; the labour of maintaining Bengali ritual in Massachusetts falls to Ashima, and her slow, partial accommodation to America is measured against a standard of cultural fidelity that her husband's professional assimilation is never required to meet. What looks, in Berry's terms, like a single household's "integration" thus conceals a gendered division of adaptive labor.

For women, consequently, self-reinvention is at once more constrained and more transgressive. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* remakes herself through a violent succession of names and selves precisely because the roles available to a Punjabi widow afford her no other route to agency; her mobility is

purchased at a cost her male counterparts do not pay. Divakaruni's protagonists sharpen the point: the daughters of Arranged Marriage experience the preservation of tradition not as comforting continuity but as patriarchal control, so that for them adaptation to the host culture can be a means of escaping gendered constraint rather than a loss to be mourned. The same in-betweenness that Desai's Biju endures as economic precarity is lived by these women as a contest over autonomy, marriage and the body. Read this way, gender does not simply add a further "aspect" to the four already discussed; it cuts across all of them, inflecting nostalgia, hybridity, generational conflict and the choice between assimilation and resistance differently for women than for men. A fuller account of diasporic adaptation must therefore treat gender not as an incidental variable but as a structuring condition of the process itself.

5. Conclusion

The writing of the Indian diaspora is a long meditation on what it is to cross cultural barriers and to live in their wake. In these four dimensions discussed in this article, a similar pattern emerges: nostalgia, hybridity, generational conflict, and negotiation between assimilation and resistance. Cultural adaptation is not a process that the migrant completes and then forgets. It is a condition that is strengthened daily, in many aspects like language, food, clothes, marriage, ritual and relational structures. Not all fall within one paradigm of adaptation: Naipaul's plantation Hindus, Rushdie's transnational fabulists, Mukherjee's American shape-shifters, Lahiri's Bengali Americans and Desai's globalized drifters. What they have in common is the knowledge that the migrant's country of origin and the country in which they are living now are not two fixed poles, from which they can simply choose. Both are in a state of constant change and the identity of the migrant is constituted by the dynamic relationship that exists between them. The consequences are not confined to the sphere of literary criticism. Diaspora literature teaches us that migrants are not *tabulae rase* to be inscribed by the culture of the host country, nor are they sealed vessels bearing an immutable cultural cargo. This is something that is increasingly important as the modern debate on immigration in many nations becomes more polarized. They are agents who, by the very act of inhabiting more than one culture, are responsible for its modification. If one pays attention to the writing of the Indian diaspora, one will realize that cultural adaptation, which is not at all a danger to identity, is one of the ways in which identity continues to exist, grows deeper and renews itself with the passage of time and distance.

In foregrounding that process, this article makes a specific claim upon the existing scholarship rather than merely restating it. Diaspora studies has tended to keep its psychological and its postcolonial vocabularies apart the acculturation models on one side, the anti-essentialist theory of hybridity on the other and to treat the recurrent themes of diaspora fiction as a settled inventory. The contribution offered here is twofold. First, by reading Berry's acculturation strategies and the third-space theory of Hall and Bhabha as complementary rather than rival, the paper shows that the migrant trajectories these texts record require both a language of strategy and a language of indeterminacy to be described adequately, and that "integration" in particular must be reconceived, through hybridity, as the production of something new rather than the storage of two intact cultures. Second, by demonstrating that the four aspects are not sequential stages but co-present and mutually inflecting dimensions – each, as the discussion of gender shows, distributed unevenly across migrants – the paper reframes adaptation as a simultaneous and uneven field rather than a linear passage from one culture to another. The value of the reading is thus not the discovery of new themes but a more exact account of how the familiar ones relate: not a checklist the migrant completes, but a layered condition continually renegotiated, and renegotiated differently depending on who is doing the adapting and how the host society chooses to receive them.

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