

## IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT IN DIASPORIC WRITING

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### Abstract

The paper explores how cultural displacement shapes identity formation in diasporic writing, focusing on Indian English women writers. Through examining short stories by authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and others, the study highlights the tension between belonging and alienation, the impact of bilingualism, intergenerational conflicts, and the struggle between tradition and modernity in shaping female identities. The paper engages with theoretical perspectives on diaspora, cultural hybridity, and identity, drawing insights from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and other scholars.

### Keywords:

Diaspora, cultural displacement, identity formation, hybridity, Indian English women writers, bilingualism, gender, patriarchy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background and Context

Diasporic writing has established itself as a significant genre within Indian English literature, offering nuanced perspectives on the experiences of those living between two or more cultures. It explores the complexities of migration, cultural conflict, and the quest for identity, making it a vital literary form for understanding the intersection of personal and collective experiences in the globalized world. Indian English literature has long been concerned with themes of identity, belonging, and the self's relation to place. However, with the rise of diasporic authors, these themes have taken on new meanings, as they are now shaped by the experiences of migration, displacement, and the need to navigate two or more cultures simultaneously.

A central theme in diasporic literature is *cultural displacement*, which refers to the feeling of being uprooted from one's cultural and geographical homeland and the subsequent struggle to forge a new identity in a foreign land. This displacement often leads to a crisis of identity, as individuals must reconcile their native culture with the norms and values of the host culture. For women, this experience is often more complex, as they must navigate both cultural and gender-based expectations, making their process of identity formation fraught with unique challenges.

The selected Indian English women writers—Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Meena Alexander—delve deeply into the lives of female characters who face cultural displacement. Their works highlight the emotional, psychological, and social impact of migration on women, particularly how these characters negotiate their identities in the face of cultural dislocation. By examining short stories from these writers, this paper will explore how cultural displacement plays a central role in identity formation for diasporic women.

### 1.2 Purpose and Scope of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how cultural displacement influences identity formation in the lives of women portrayed in the works of select Indian English women writers. Cultural displacement is not merely a geographical shift; it profoundly impacts individuals' sense of self, leading to a renegotiation of identity as they navigate different cultural norms, languages, and social expectations. This paper posits that cultural displacement is crucial to understanding identity, particularly in diasporic literature, where characters often inhabit an "in-between" space, caught between the traditions of their native culture and the realities of their new environment.

The scope of this study focuses on short stories from Indian English women writers who have portrayed the complexities of migration and cultural displacement. Stories by Jhumpa Lahiri, such as "Interpreter of Maladies," explore the subtle nuances of belonging and alienation, while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* collection focuses on the emotional challenges faced by Indian women adjusting to life in the U.S. Bharati Mukherjee's stories highlight the tensions between cultural heritage and personal freedom, while Meena Alexander's work delves into the psychological aspects of dislocation and identity. By analyzing these stories, this paper seeks to understand how cultural displacement serves as a lens through which female characters navigate their identities, balancing tradition, modernity, and personal agency.

This study is not limited to a single dimension of identity but will explore multiple facets, including language, gender roles, familial relationships, and cultural expectations. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discussion on identity, migration, and the experiences of diasporic women in Indian English literature.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Defining Cultural Displacement and Diaspora

Cultural displacement refers to the experience of being physically removed from one's cultural homeland and transplanted into a new environment, often with differing values, norms, and social systems. This form of displacement is more than geographical; it disrupts one's sense of belonging and self-identity. For individuals who experience migration, particularly for women in diasporic contexts, displacement brings with it a profound psychological struggle. It challenges their existing cultural values while forcing them to adapt to a new set of social expectations. The result is often a crisis of identity, as they try to negotiate between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, and their native and host cultures.

In the context of Indian English literature, cultural displacement is central to diasporic writing, particularly for characters who face the dual challenges of immigration and gender expectations. The psychological impact of displacement manifests in feelings of alienation, confusion, and fragmentation of self. Many characters experience a loss of cultural and linguistic rootedness, leading to a fractured sense of identity. This is especially true for female characters in the works of Indian English women writers, who are often tasked with preserving cultural heritage while simultaneously adapting to new social environments.

**Diaspora theory**, which emerged from postcolonial studies, offers a framework to understand these experiences of displacement. It examines how displaced individuals create new forms of identity while navigating their position in a host culture that may view them as outsiders. The term *diaspora* refers to the dispersion of people from their original homeland, and it often carries with it the connotation of longing for a return, even if that return is only symbolic. In literature, diaspora theory is concerned with themes of belonging, identity, and the negotiation of multiple cultural identities.

Diasporic literature often reflects the tension between assimilation into the host culture and the preservation of the migrant's native identity. This tension is especially heightened in the works of Indian English women writers, where cultural displacement is complicated by gendered expectations. Diasporic women are often depicted as living between two worlds—one rooted in the traditions of their homeland, and the other shaped by the opportunities and challenges of their new environment. This in-between space creates a fertile ground for exploring identity formation, as these women attempt to reconcile their past with their present.

### 2.2 Identity and Cultural Hybridity

In understanding the identity formation of diasporic individuals, particularly in the context of cultural displacement, the concept of *cultural hybridity* plays a crucial role. Cultural hybridity, as articulated by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, refers to the process through which individuals who exist in diasporic contexts develop a mixed or hybrid identity that blends elements from both their native and host cultures. Bhabha's theory challenges the notion of fixed or stable identities, suggesting instead that identities are fluid, constantly evolving in response to cultural interactions. For diasporic individuals, identity is formed not through a simple replication of the native culture but through the negotiation of multiple cultural influences, resulting in a "third space" of hybrid identity.

Bhabha's concept of *double consciousness* is also relevant here. It refers to the feeling of being caught between two cultures, where the individual is unable to fully belong to either. This experience of cultural hybridity is marked by ambivalence, as the individual simultaneously identifies with both their native and host cultures, yet feels alienated from both. For women in the diaspora, this ambivalence is often compounded by traditional gender roles from their homeland and the demands of modernity in the host culture. The result is an ongoing negotiation of self that involves balancing cultural expectations, personal aspirations, and social realities.

Stuart Hall, another prominent theorist on identity, offers a complementary perspective through his theory of *cultural identity* as a process of becoming rather than being. Hall emphasizes that identity is not something static or fixed but is instead constantly reshaped by historical, cultural, and social contexts. For diasporic individuals, identity is often constructed through the act of representation—how one is perceived by the dominant culture versus how one perceives oneself. This creates an identity that is fluid and contingent, always in the process of being renegotiated.

The concept of *the in-between space*, as discussed by both Bhabha and Hall, is critical to understanding the identity formation of diasporic women in Indian English literature. This space represents the cultural, emotional, and psychological terrain in which displaced individuals live. It is a space where identities are hybridized, and where individuals must continually negotiate between opposing cultural forces. For the women in the stories of Lahiri, Divakaruni, and Mukherjee, the in-between space is often the site of both conflict and opportunity—conflict in the sense of struggling with the expectations of two different cultures, and opportunity in the sense of creating new, hybrid identities that blend aspects of both worlds.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a robust framework for analyzing the ways in which cultural displacement and identity formation intersect in diasporic literature. They help to explain the complexity of identity for women who are navigating the challenges of living between cultures, and how their sense of self is shaped not just



by their cultural heritage but also by their ongoing interactions with their host society. Through the lenses of cultural hybridity, double consciousness, and the in-between space, we can better understand the nuanced processes of identity formation that Indian English women writers explore in their works.

### **3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN DIASPORIC WRITING**

#### **3.1 Language as a Marker of Cultural Identity**

In diasporic writing, language plays a fundamental role in shaping cultural identity. It acts as both a connection to one's heritage and a medium for navigating the new cultural environment. For many diasporic individuals, especially in the case of Indian English women writers, the choice of language can reflect their dual positioning between two worlds—their native culture and the host society. Language becomes a marker of both belonging and alienation, symbolizing the complexities of cultural identity formation.

For instance, in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories, characters often grapple with their relationship to their mother tongue and the English language. English, as the language of the host culture, represents assimilation and modernity, while the mother tongue—whether Bengali, Hindi, or another Indian language—signifies cultural heritage, belonging, and a connection to their roots. The use of the native language can create a sense of comfort and familiarity, reinforcing a character's ties to their homeland. However, it can also isolate them from their surroundings, making them feel like outsiders in the host culture. Conversely, English may offer access to the opportunities of the host society, but at the cost of a potential loss of cultural rootedness.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, language functions as both a tool for survival and a source of estrangement. Characters often find themselves caught between their ability to communicate in English and their emotional attachment to their native languages. This duality is representative of the broader diasporic experience, where language choice mirrors the tensions between integration and cultural retention. The alienation that many diasporic characters feel is heightened when they cannot fully express their emotions in either language, creating a sense of cultural dislocation.

#### **3.2 Bilingualism and Code-Switching**

Bilingualism is a defining feature of many diasporic communities, where individuals often speak one language at home and another in public spaces. For diasporic characters, especially women, bilingualism becomes a way to navigate their complex cultural identities. The ability to speak multiple languages allows them to shift between their native culture and the host society, but it also reinforces their dual identity. They often code-switch, or switch between languages, depending on the context in which they find themselves, reflecting their ability to adapt to both cultural environments.

Code-switching is not merely a linguistic tool; it is also a reflection of cultural hybridity. In the stories of Indian English women writers, code-switching often occurs when characters move between private and public spheres, between family and work life, or between cultural traditions and modernity. For instance, a character may speak English at work to integrate into the professional world but switch to their native language at home to maintain cultural traditions. This constant shifting between languages highlights the fluidity of their identities, as they are continually negotiating their place in both cultures.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake," bilingualism becomes a means for characters to mediate their cultural identity. The protagonist's parents insist on speaking Bengali at home, reinforcing their connection to their Indian roots, while the children, raised in America, prefer English, symbolizing their desire to integrate into American society. This linguistic divide represents the broader cultural conflict that the characters face, where language becomes a site of negotiation for identity. Bilingualism in this context is not just a practical skill; it is a tool for expressing the complexity of living in two worlds at once.

#### **3.3 Role of Silence and Voice in Diasporic Women's Writing**

In diasporic women's writing, silence and voice serve as powerful tools for identity construction. Silence often represents either resistance to oppressive cultural norms or the suppression of identity in the face of patriarchal structures. In many cases, female characters remain silent as a form of protest against the expectations placed on them, particularly in relation to their roles within the family and society. For instance, silence may signify a refusal to conform to traditional gender roles, even when the character is not yet able to articulate their resistance in words.

At the same time, silence can also reflect suppression, where female characters are unable to voice their true feelings or desires due to cultural or familial constraints. In many diasporic narratives, women are often expected to uphold cultural traditions, even when those traditions limit their personal freedom or agency. The struggle for voice, therefore, becomes a crucial aspect of their identity formation. The act of breaking silence—whether through speaking, writing, or other forms of self-expression—represents a reclaiming of identity and autonomy.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's stories, silence often marks the emotional struggles of her female characters. They may remain outwardly compliant with their cultural roles, but internally, they are grappling with feelings of displacement, alienation, and a desire for independence. When these characters find their voice, whether by speaking

out against their circumstances or making independent choices, it signifies a turning point in their identity formation. For these women, voice is not only a means of communication but also a symbol of empowerment and self-assertion. In Bharati Mukherjee's stories, voice often functions as a way for women to articulate their hybrid identities. Mukherjee's characters frequently struggle with the expectations of their native culture, which they feel disconnected from, and the pressures of the host culture, which demands conformity. Their ability to find a voice, both literally and metaphorically, allows them to navigate these conflicting cultural expectations. Voice, in this sense, becomes a tool for negotiating identity in a diasporic context.

In conclusion, language is a critical aspect of identity construction in diasporic writing, serving as a marker of cultural belonging, a tool for negotiating multiple cultural identities, and a means for asserting agency in the face of cultural displacement. For Indian English women writers, the use of language—whether through bilingualism, code-switching, or the struggle between silence and voice—reflects the complexities of identity formation in the diaspora. These narratives reveal the intricate ways in which language shapes, and is shaped by, the experiences of cultural displacement, offering profound insights into the lives of diasporic women.

#### **4. INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS IN DIASPORIC NARRATIVES**

##### **4.1 Parent-Child Relationships and Cultural Displacement**

One of the central tensions in diasporic narratives is the relationship between first-generation immigrant parents and their second-generation children. These relationships are often marked by differing views on cultural identity, where parents attempt to preserve their cultural heritage, while children, raised in the host society, lean toward assimilation. This generational conflict is particularly pronounced in Indian diasporic literature, where parents, having migrated from India, often feel a strong connection to their traditions, values, and language, while their children, growing up in a foreign land, struggle to reconcile these with the new culture around them.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, this tension is palpable in the relationship between Gogol, a second-generation immigrant, and his Bengali parents. Gogol resents the cultural pressures imposed on him by his parents, particularly their insistence on maintaining Bengali traditions, while he strives to fit into American society. For the parents, their cultural displacement drives a need to preserve their identity through their children, but for Gogol, these cultural markers feel like burdens rather than sources of pride. This generational clash underscores the difficulties of cultural displacement, where the second generation often experiences a cultural disconnection from their parents' values.

##### **4.2 Clashing Ideologies: Tradition vs Modernity**

A common theme in diasporic writing is the clash between the older generation's adherence to traditional values and the younger generation's gravitation toward modernity. For many first-generation immigrants, maintaining cultural traditions is a way to preserve their identity in the face of the overwhelming influence of the host culture. These traditions often include religious practices, gender roles, family structures, and language. For the younger generation, raised in a modern, multicultural environment, these traditions can feel outdated or irrelevant, leading to a struggle between tradition and modernity.

This ideological conflict is particularly evident in stories by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, where young characters often question the traditional values that their parents hold dear. In her short story "Clothes" from the collection *Arranged Marriage*, a young Indian woman finds herself torn between her traditional upbringing and the modern American society she now inhabits. As she navigates her new environment, she begins to question the cultural expectations placed upon her, particularly those surrounding marriage and gender roles. The tension between tradition and modernity highlights the challenges faced by diasporic individuals in constructing a cohesive identity.

##### **4.3 Impact on Female Identity and Agency**

Intergenerational conflicts have a profound impact on the identity formation and agency of diasporic women. The pressures from the older generation to uphold traditional gender roles often limit women's ability to assert their independence in the host society, where different social norms regarding gender may offer more freedom. These conflicts create a tension between familial duty and personal aspirations, with diasporic women often caught in the middle.

In Bharati Mukherjee's stories, the struggle for female identity and agency is a recurring theme. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist grapples with the expectations of her Indian family while trying to carve out a new identity in America. Her journey is one of transformation, as she adopts multiple identities over the course of the novel, each reflecting a different stage in her negotiation of cultural expectations and personal freedom. The intergenerational conflict between her traditional upbringing and her desire for independence shapes her identity, revealing the complexities of being a diasporic woman.

#### **5. GENDER AND IDENTITY IN NEW CULTURAL SPACES**

##### **5.1 Redefining Gender Roles in Diaspora**

Migration often brings with it a redefinition of gender roles, particularly for women. In many cases, traditional gender roles from the homeland are challenged by the new social and economic realities of the host country. Women, who



may have been confined to domestic roles in their native culture, often find new opportunities for independence and empowerment in the diaspora. However, this redefinition of gender roles is not always straightforward, as it often involves negotiating between the expectations of the native culture and the possibilities offered by the host society. In the works of Indian English women writers, the redefinition of gender roles is a central theme. In *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, for instance, Gauri, a widowed woman, experiences a radical shift in her role after migrating to America. In India, she was expected to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother, but in America, she begins to assert her independence, pursuing academic and professional ambitions that would have been impossible in her homeland. This redefinition of gender roles illustrates the transformative potential of the diasporic experience, where migration allows women to challenge and reshape their identities.

### **5.2 The Role of Patriarchy in Diasporic Identity**

Despite the opportunities for redefinition, patriarchal norms continue to play a significant role in shaping the identities of diasporic women. Even in a new cultural space, many women find themselves constrained by the expectations of their native culture, where patriarchal values still dictate their roles within the family and society. This ongoing influence of patriarchy often leads to a conflict between the desire for personal freedom and the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*, several stories explore the ways in which patriarchal values are reproduced in the diaspora, limiting women's agency even as they live in a more liberal society. For instance, in the story "The Word Love," the protagonist is torn between her desire for independence in America and her sense of duty to her traditional Indian family. The pressures of patriarchy, embodied in her mother's expectations, prevent her from fully embracing the freedoms offered by her new life. This tension between freedom and restriction highlights the challenges faced by diasporic women as they navigate patriarchal norms in a new cultural context.

### **5.3 Negotiating Freedom and Restrictions**

The tension between newfound freedoms and cultural restrictions is a recurring theme in diasporic literature, particularly in relation to women's experiences. While migration offers women new opportunities for self-expression and autonomy, it also brings with it the weight of cultural restrictions that can limit their ability to fully embrace these freedoms. Diasporic women often find themselves negotiating between the two, trying to balance the demands of their cultural heritage with the possibilities of their new environment.

In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the protagonist's journey is one of constant negotiation between freedom and restriction. As she moves from India to America, she encounters both opportunities for independence and the lingering influence of cultural expectations. Her ability to reinvent herself in the diaspora is tempered by the constraints of her past, as she grapples with the tension between her traditional upbringing and her desire for personal freedom. This negotiation between freedom and restriction is a central theme in diasporic women's writing, reflecting the complexities of identity formation in the diaspora.

## **6. DIASPORIC WRITERS AND THE REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY**

### **6.1 Jhumpa Lahiri and the Search for Belonging**

Jhumpa Lahiri's body of work, particularly her short story collections such as *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, offers a deep exploration of the search for belonging in the context of cultural displacement. Lahiri's characters often find themselves navigating between two worlds—the one they have left behind and the one they now inhabit. This liminal space is fraught with emotional tension, where characters struggle to reconcile their native heritage with their desire to fit into the host culture.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, several stories illustrate this struggle for belonging. For instance, in the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the young protagonist observes her parents and their friend, Mr. Pirzada, clinging to their memories of their homeland while trying to make sense of their present lives in the United States. The story reflects the longing for a home that no longer exists in the same way and the emotional turmoil that comes with cultural displacement. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri further complicates this theme by exploring how second-generation immigrants, who were born and raised in the host country, experience displacement differently from their parents. These children, caught between two cultures, often feel disconnected from both, leading to a continuous search for identity and belonging.

Lahiri's narratives are marked by a subtle yet profound exploration of loneliness, cultural dislocation, and the inner conflict that defines the immigrant experience. Her characters often find themselves yearning for a sense of rootedness, but their attempts to belong to either their native or host cultures often lead to feelings of alienation. Through her delicate portrayal of these characters' inner lives, Lahiri captures the essence of diasporic identity as one of constant negotiation between belonging and displacement.

### **6.2 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and the Struggle for Cultural Integration**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, particularly her collection *Arranged Marriage*, explore the struggles faced by Indian women in the diaspora as they navigate the pressures of cultural integration. Divakaruni's characters are often

caught in the middle of cultural clashes—on one side, the expectations of their native Indian culture, and on the other, the modern values of their new environment in the West. These characters experience crises of identity as they attempt to reconcile the two worlds.

In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni presents a series of stories in which female protagonists grapple with the tension between tradition and independence. In the story "The Bats," for example, a young girl witnesses her mother's suffering at the hands of an abusive husband but is unable to escape the cultural and social pressures that keep her mother tied to the marriage. This story, like many others in the collection, highlights the deep sense of entrapment that arises from trying to balance cultural expectations with personal desires.

Divakaruni's characters often face a complex emotional landscape where the prospect of cultural integration is both a promise of freedom and a source of deep conflict. The struggle for cultural integration is not just about adopting new customs or fitting into a new society; it is also about the inner battle to maintain one's sense of self amid conflicting cultural values. Divakaruni's writing reveals the emotional and psychological costs of this struggle, particularly for women who are expected to uphold traditional values while seeking independence in a new cultural space.

### 6.3 Other Notable Indian English Women Writers

In addition to Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, other Indian English women writers, such as Bharati Mukherjee and Meena Alexander, have also made significant contributions to the representation of diasporic identity in literature. Bharati Mukherjee's work, particularly in novels like *Jasmine* and stories such as "The Management of Grief," delves into the transformative journey of female immigrants who must constantly reinvent themselves in the diaspora. Mukherjee's protagonists often experience a radical break from their past as they adapt to life in the West, undergoing multiple identity shifts in the process. Her portrayal of the immigrant experience reflects the fluidity of identity and the challenges that come with cultural displacement.

Meena Alexander, known for her lyrical writing, focuses on the psychological and emotional aspects of displacement. Her work often explores themes of exile, memory, and the fragmented self, offering a more introspective take on the diasporic experience. In her memoir *Fault Lines*, Alexander reflects on her own experiences of migration, highlighting the ways in which identity is constantly reconstructed in response to displacement. Her writing blends personal and collective memory, illustrating the complex layers of identity that emerge in the diaspora.

Together, these writers offer a diverse yet interconnected exploration of identity formation in diasporic settings. Through their narratives, they examine the multifaceted nature of cultural displacement, the inner conflicts it generates, and the ways in which individuals—particularly women—navigate the liminal space between cultures.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the theme of cultural displacement plays a central role in shaping identity in diasporic literature, particularly in the works of Indian English women writers. Authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, and Meena Alexander provide profound insights into the emotional and psychological challenges of living between cultures. Their stories reveal the complexities of belonging, where characters struggle to reconcile their native heritage with the demands of the host culture, often leading to a fluid and evolving sense of self.

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