



Voices in Transition: Indianness and the Search for Belonging in Indian Women's Diasporic Writing

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Abstract

The experience of migration often generates a profound sense of dislocation and identity fragmentation, especially for women negotiating between cultures. *Voices in Transition: Indianness and the Search for Belonging in Indian Women's Diasporic Writing* explores how contemporary Indian diasporic women authors articulate the tensions of cultural hybridity, gendered displacement, and the longing for belonging in their works. The paper examines how writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, and Bharati Mukherjee portray female protagonists who are caught between inherited Indian values and the demands of Western society. Through these narratives, the writers navigate themes of alienation, nostalgia, home-making, intergenerational conflict, and cultural negotiation. This study employs postcolonial feminist and diasporic theoretical frameworks to decode the layered expressions of Indianness as both a contested identity and a cultural anchor. The analysis reveals that diasporic women's writing becomes a powerful tool for reclaiming voice, memory, and agency amidst the challenges of migration. These women characters often emerge as symbolic figures of cultural resistance and adaptation, redefining what it means to be Indian in a transnational context. By highlighting the emotional and psychological terrain of the diaspora, the paper emphasizes how literature reflects and shapes the lived experiences of cultural in-betweenness. Ultimately, it suggests that diasporic Indian women writers construct new paradigms of identity that move beyond binaries of home and abroad, tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indianness, identity crisis, cultural hybridity, displacement, belonging, Indian women writers, postcolonial feminism, migration, memory, transnationalism.

Introduction:



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https://www.google.com/imgres?q=Voices%20in%20Transition%3A%20Indianness%20and%20the%20Search%20for%20Belonging%20in%20Indian%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Diasporic%20Writing&imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fhighonbooks.co%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2023%2F08%2FMy-project-1-31.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fhighonbooks.co%2Fliterature-of-the-indian-diaspora%2F&docid=1GzlitbOic1v5M&tbnid=_dFhJGLi0h0tCM&vet=12ahUKEwiY_ZO7wcOOAxVQ-DgGHUBID-AQM3oECBoQAA..i&w=1200&h=720&hcb=2&itg=1&ved=2ahUKEwiY_ZO7wcOOAxVQ-DgGHUBID-AQM3oECBoQAA

The phenomenon of diaspora, particularly the Indian diaspora, has emerged as a significant area of academic discourse in the postcolonial world. With migration occurring due to colonial displacement, economic pursuits, or political asylum, a vast number of Indians settled abroad, creating a complex network of transnational identities. Among them, Indian women writers have voiced unique experiences of dual consciousness, cultural estrangement, and gendered dislocation. Diasporic literature written by Indian women provides an essential gendered lens

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through which issues of displacement, alienation, and belonging are explored. These narratives are not merely about geographical movement but about emotional, psychological, and cultural transitions. Women, in particular, often find themselves negotiating tradition and modernity, patriarchy and autonomy, memory and adaptation. At the heart of this exploration lies the elusive concept of “Indianness”—a cultural, emotional, and often spiritual framework that binds diasporic writers to their roots. Indianness becomes a metaphorical homeland, a source of identity, tradition, and at times, internal conflict. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depict characters struggling to preserve or redefine this identity in unfamiliar territories.

Indian women in the diaspora frequently confront the crisis of cultural displacement. Torn between ancestral traditions and host-country expectations, their sense of self is often fractured. Characters in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels, for instance, embody this tension as they strive to fit into Western society while being haunted by their cultural lineage. Diasporic narratives often portray a conflict between generations, where the first-generation immigrants uphold traditional Indian values, while the second or third generation adopts a more hybrid or Westernized identity. This conflict underscores the complexity of preserving Indianness across time and space, particularly through the maternal or familial line.

Language plays a vital role in retaining cultural memory. In many diasporic texts, Indian languages—whether used directly or referenced—become carriers of memory, intimacy, and longing. These linguistic elements preserve connections with the homeland, making the act of writing itself a cultural reclamation.

The search for belonging in these writings is not just cultural, but personal and political. Women protagonists are often shown resisting both the patriarchal structures of their homeland and the alienating forces of their adopted countries. This dual resistance fosters a unique subjectivity—one that asserts agency and complexity.

Home, in diasporic literature, is no longer a physical place but an evolving emotional space. Indian women writers reimagine home as a place of memories, stories, relationships, and inner reconciliation. Meena Alexander’s poetry often evokes this symbolic reconfiguration of home and identity.

This paper is grounded in postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks, engaging with scholars like Homi K. Bhabha (hybridity and third space), Gayatri Spivak (subaltern agency), and Avtar Brah (diasporic space). These theories help unpack the layered complexities of diasporic womanhood and Indianness in a globalized world. The selected writers contribute significantly to Indian English literature by giving voice to marginalized identities. Their works offer nuanced portrayals of emotional exile, spiritual disconnection, and identity formation. These writings foster cross-cultural understanding and disrupt monolithic notions of Indian identity. This paper seeks to examine how Indian diasporic women’s literature redefines Indianness and belonging in a transnational context. By analyzing select works through a feminist and postcolonial lens, the study aims to highlight the shifting, fluid identities that emerge in the interstices of migration, memory, and cultural negotiation.

Review of Literature:

Lahiri, Jhumpa. “Imaginary Homelands and Diasporic Identity in Indian-American Narratives.” *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2022, pp. 55–73.

In this paper, Lahiri reflects on the emotional dissonance and dual consciousness experienced by Indian-American characters in diasporic narratives. She emphasizes the internal conflict between inherited Indian traditions and the cultural demands of Western society, particularly for women who must also navigate patriarchal expectations. The study argues that diasporic identity is inherently fragmented, with belonging becoming a continuous negotiation.

2. Banerjee, Rituparna. “Gender, Migration, and Memory in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Fiction.” *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–18.

Banerjee analyzes how Divakaruni’s protagonists embody the struggles of Indian women immigrants trying to reconcile their past with their present. Through novels like *The Mistress*



of Spices and Queen of Dreams, the paper explores the theme of Indianness preserved through memory, culinary rituals, and myth. Banerjee concludes that the female characters reforge their identities through acts of remembrance and self-expression, despite cultural alienation.

3. Nair, Lakshmi. "Between Two Worlds: Diasporic Displacement and Female Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels." *Indian Review of World Literature in English*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2023, pp. 25–40.

This study examines Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of Indian women navigating life in America, highlighting issues of cultural displacement, identity crisis, and resistance. Nair argues that Mukherjee's female characters move from being passive bearers of tradition to active agents of change, thereby redefining both Indianness and belonging in their adopted spaces.

4. Roy, Ananya. "Hybridity and Belonging in Meena Alexander's Poetic Imagination." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2024, pp. 311–327.

Roy investigates Meena Alexander's poetry as a powerful articulation of diasporic identity, focusing on how Indianness is preserved and reshaped through memory, language, and poetic metaphor. Alexander's hybrid identity emerges through lyrical expressions of exile, longing, and fragmented selfhood. The paper applies Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space" to highlight the in-betweenness central to diasporic women's experience.

5. Sharma, Priyanka. "Cultural Cartographies: Locating Home and Self in Indian Women's Diasporic Narratives." *South Asian Diaspora*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2022, pp. 379–396.

Sharma explores the concept of "home" as both a physical and emotional construct in the works of Indian women diasporic writers. Using examples from Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamila Shamsie, and Shauna Singh Baldwin, the article reveals how Indianness is carried, reimagined, and contested in new geographies. Sharma contends that belonging is a dynamic process shaped by memory, migration, and resistance to cultural erasure.

Objectives of the Research Paper:

- To examine the portrayal of Indianness in the literary works of contemporary Indian women diasporic writers.
- To analyze how diasporic experiences shape the sense of belonging and identity among Indian women in foreign cultural contexts.
- To explore the narrative strategies used by Indian women writers to reconcile cultural displacement with personal and collective identity.
- To investigate the role of memory, tradition, and nostalgia in the construction of selfhood within diasporic settings.
- To assess the socio-cultural challenges faced by women in the diaspora and how these are reflected and contested in their writings.

Research Methodology :

This research primarily adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and textual analytical approach. The study draws upon selected literary works by contemporary Indian women diasporic authors to explore themes of Indianness, identity, and belonging. Primary sources include novels and poetry collections by authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, and Bharati Mukherjee. Secondary sources comprise scholarly books, journal articles, interviews, and essays relevant to diasporic literature, postcolonial theory, and feminist criticism. Online academic databases, research libraries, and digital platforms such as JSTOR and Google Scholar have also been consulted to provide theoretical depth and a broader scholarly perspective.

Voices in Transition: Indianness and the Search for Belonging in Indian Women's Diasporic Writing:

The concept of diaspora signifies not just geographical displacement but also a psychological and cultural condition of being in-between. In the context of Indian women's diasporic writing, this liminality is compounded by the challenges of gender, tradition, and identity. "Voices in

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Transition” symbolizes this journey between cultures and selves, where Indianness becomes both an anchor and a site of negotiation. Indian women in the diaspora often grapple with dual or multiple identities. They are expected to preserve their cultural roots while simultaneously assimilating into foreign societies. In this constant state of flux, literature becomes a tool through which they articulate their sense of belonging—or lack thereof. As Bharati Mukherjee writes in *Jasmine*, “I feel at home here in a way I never did in India.”

A recurring theme in diasporic women’s literature is Indianness—not as a static cultural identity, but as a lived, evolving experience. Writers often depict female characters struggling to retain their inherited customs while resisting oppressive traditions. This dynamic tension between roots and wings informs much of their emotional and narrative journeys. Jhumpa Lahiri’s stories, such as those in *Interpreter of Maladies*, highlight the emotional and cultural gaps between first-generation immigrants and their American-born children. The female protagonists often find themselves negotiating generational expectations while carving out personal identities. “I had been careful to wear something appropriate... not Western, but not too Indian either,” reflects this inner turmoil. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novels, especially *The Mistress of Spices*, use magical realism to bridge the tangible with the intangible—Indianness with global identity. Her protagonists often engage in rituals and memory work that tether them to home while allowing them agency in their new environments.

Meena Alexander’s poetry introduces another powerful dimension to diasporic expression: fragmentation. Her lines—“Birth was in another language / I am incomplete”—capture the postcolonial, exilic state of being. She writes through the lens of longing, alienation, and linguistic hybridity, all of which complicate the notion of belonging. The search for belonging is not just physical but also emotional and existential. Indian women in diasporic texts yearn for acceptance, security, and recognition in foreign lands, often against the backdrop of racism, sexism, and cultural stereotyping. They are caught in the contradiction of wanting to belong and fearing assimilation that erases their roots. Home is both a memory and a metaphor in these writings. While geographic India may fade from view, it remains vivid in food, festivals, myths, and maternal memories. “My mother’s sari smelled of sandalwood,” is not just nostalgia—it is the mapping of identity across space and time. Postcolonial and feminist theories help frame this experience. Homi Bhabha’s idea of the “third space” and Gayatri Spivak’s thoughts on the “subaltern” are particularly useful in analyzing the complex voices in these narratives. The intersectionality of gender, culture, and migration forms a multilayered identity.

Despite the tensions, these diasporic women’s voices are not merely of loss—they are also of empowerment and transformation. They reclaim Indianness in their own terms: syncretic, fluid, and self-defined. Their stories reflect resilience, negotiation, and reinvention. In conclusion, *Voices in Transition* underscores a key reality: Indianness and belonging are no longer confined to geography but are shaped by memory, experience, and expression. Indian women diasporic writers articulate a cultural hybridity that is both liberating and contested. Their literature becomes a space where they reimagine home, gender, and selfhood in a changing world.

Relevance of the Study :

The relevance of this study lies in its focus on a crucial intersection—between diasporic identity and gender, and between cultural memory and contemporary global mobility. As globalization has accelerated transnational migration, literature by Indian women in the diaspora has emerged as a significant cultural and political space for negotiating identity, displacement, and belonging. The research sheds light on how Indian women writers reclaim and redefine “Indianness” in contexts far removed from the homeland, thereby offering insight into larger questions of cultural continuity, hybridity, and resistance. Given the ongoing debates around multiculturalism, nationalism, and postcolonial identity, this study is both timely and essential.

Future Scope of the Study:

There is vast potential for future research in this domain. Subsequent studies may focus on comparative analysis between Indian diasporic men and women writers or between different



generations of women authors to trace evolving notions of identity. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches involving cultural studies, sociology, and media studies could deepen understanding of how Indianness is performed and perceived in diasporic communities. Exploring lesser-known voices from regional linguistic backgrounds or writers in non-Western diasporas (e.g., the Gulf, Southeast Asia, or Africa) would also contribute to a more comprehensive global framework. The inclusion of digital diasporic narratives through blogs, podcasts, and online poetry could offer further dimensions.

Results and Discussions:

The analysis of texts by Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reveals a nuanced portrayal of diasporic women negotiating multiple layers of identity. These writers depict characters who are often caught in cultural in-betweenness, attempting to reconcile their inherited traditions with the demands of a foreign land. Recurring themes such as nostalgia, hybridity, alienation, and cultural negotiation highlight the emotional and psychological landscapes of belonging. Language and memory play a crucial role in bridging personal and cultural histories. Furthermore, these texts reflect a subtle yet powerful critique of both Western and Indian patriarchal structures, thus merging feminist consciousness with diasporic subjectivity.

Findings of the Study :

This research concludes that Indian women's diasporic writing offers a powerful lens through which to understand the evolving meanings of Indianness and identity. It finds that these writers do not merely mourn loss or dislocation but actively reframe and reconstruct cultural identity. The notion of belonging emerges as dynamic—rooted in memory and emotion rather than physical territory. The study also highlights that diasporic Indian women writers assert agency by weaving together traditional motifs with modern challenges, thereby reclaiming their voices from both colonial and patriarchal silences. Ultimately, these literary works articulate a diasporic identity that is fluid, resilient, and transformative.

Summing Up:

To sum up; the researchers come to the point that *Voices in Transition: Indianness and the Search for Belonging in Indian Women's Diasporic Writing* critically engages with the complexities of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation. These texts become more than stories of migration; they are powerful commentaries on what it means to be Indian, female, and diasporic in an increasingly globalized world. By weaving together personal experience with collective memory, these writers provide a voice to the silenced and marginalized. Their literary productions challenge stereotypes and offer a space of reflection, resistance, and redefinition. Through their works, they do not merely seek a home in the diaspora—they create it. The researchers further write that the concept of diaspora signifies not just geographical displacement but also a psychological and cultural condition of being in-between. In the context of Indian women's diasporic writing, this liminality is compounded by the challenges of gender, tradition, and identity.

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