

Belonging Beyond Borders: Migration and Cultural Hybridity in South Asian Women's Fiction

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Abstract:

This study examines the themes of migration and cultural hybridity in South Asian Women's Fiction writings. The objective of the study is to identify the mechanism of reconstructing women, their own cultural identity and belongingness. The study portrays female protagonists to show how women fight for their freedom and identity under socially constructed practices in male dominated society. The aim of this paper is to analyze the differences in cultural practices and the challenges that women face in the way of coping up between the old traditions and their contemporary practices. This paper explores the themes of migration and cultural hybridity through the framework of Homi Bhabha's Cultural Hybridity and Third Space, focusing mainly on the authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Monica Ali who wrote about South Asian Women's Fiction through the application of a descriptive and qualitative approaches. Cultural hybridity refers to mixing of two different cultures and forming a new culture. South Asian Women migrate from one country to another to establish their identity and financial independence, and this research paper shows how the protagonists struggle to break the gender stereotypes and create an empowered citizenship.

Key Words: Migration, Hybridity, Cultural Hybridity, Gender Stereotypes, Post- Colonial, Culture

Introduction

This study aimed to focus on migration and cultural hybridity in South Asian Women's Fiction writings. In south Asia, women fight for their freedom under patriarchal practices. The term 'patriarchy' is a social structure where the men control the society in the aspects of financial independence, decision making, higher education and high ambition. South Asian English fiction occupies a distinctive position within postcolonial literary studies because it is written form, and about, a condition of cultural doubleness (Kour 2025).

This paper is to identify the mechanism of reshaping women, their identity and belongingness. In South Asia, women migrate from one country to another to establish their own identity or called ‘women empowerment’. The term ‘hybridity’ refers to the mixing of two or more different cultures, languages, traditions which form a unique culture.

In this paper, the most famous postcolonial theorist named Homi K. Bhabha explained the term ‘Cultural Hybridity’ in the text *‘The Location of Culture (1994)’*. Cultural hybridity is also known as in-between sight. Over the later part of the 20th century and the early 21st century, there has been a notable rise in the number of works of diasporic literature that explore the complexities of immigrant experiences, cultural displacement, and hybrid identities (Ishfaq Nisar 2025). Within the framework of this literary universe, books by female immigrants offer especially complex perspectives on the process of overcoming cultural boundaries and reconstructing identity in foreign settings (Ishfaq Nisar 2025). Overall, the paper highlights breaking the gender stereotypes and creating an empowered citizenship.

Literature Review

According to this study, it spotlights on migration and cultural hybridity in contemporary diasporic South Asian women’s fiction. The authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Homi K. Bhabha, Monica Ali, who talked about South Asian women’s fiction.

“Third Space” by Homi K. Bhabha:- The concept of ‘third space’ is a postcolonial context and it is explaining an in-between sight, cultural hybridity. Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes the third space of enunciation in coloniality and postcoloniality in a political discourse of in-betweenness and hybridity. He scrutinizes a formation of hybrid cultural identity of colonized people in their cultural encounter in colonial domination and inequality. The negotiation of cultural differences of the colonizer and colonized produces a new form of cultural identity. Bhabha (1994) stresses that the new form of cultural identity simultaneously combines and goes beyond the past and the present in an innovative act of cultural conversion (Bhandari, Prithvi Academic Journal 2022).

The term ‘cultural hybridity’ refers to the mixing of two or more different cultures and making a new form of culture and identity. Cultural hybridity is not a passive state, rather it is an active state. The interlocking nature of international migration and globalizing processes has led to increasing cross-cultural encounters (Marotta 2021)

.The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri: The Namesake is the earliest novel authored by. Jhumpa Lahiri who is one of the most powerful novelists in postcolonial literature and Indian diaspora literature. In this story, the protagonist Ashima struggles to reconcile her sense of belonging and alienation with her aging body, which is becoming increasingly unfamiliar to her. Lahiri’s writing brilliantly emphasizes a strong essence of dwelling in-between and of unsettlement that connects the discord of Ashima’s ageing body and the space she inhabits. Ashima’s familiarity changes to estrangement and alienation when she moves to Massachusetts after marriage. This sense of alienation continues throughout her life as she

ages in a different country and culture, especially after Ashoke's sudden demise when situations force her to live alone (Guha 2025). Ashima's choices also break the stereotypes and singularities that exist and that typically define South Asian immigrant women, offering a refreshing counterpoint to these reductive ideations. Though shaped by a patriarchal upbringing, she evolves in ways that set her apart, revealing layers of strength, adaptability, and individuality absent in other members of the Ganguli family (Guha 2025). The evolution of Ashima from a traditionally submissive south Asian woman to an independent individual capable of making critical life decision autonomously while negotiating in diaspora both differs from and resonates with findings from prior research. Contrary to scholars like Nirmal King, Prema Kurien, and Paramjit Judge, who argue that migration reinforces gender discrimination and various forms of exploitation for women, Ashima experiences a liberal cultural, social, and economic environment that allows her to exercise her agency freely. Her transformation aligns with the perspectives of Gina Buijs, Peggy Levitt, and Jaworsky Browning Nadya, who view migration as a liberating journey for women to assume stronger roles in new cultural settings. In Ashima's case, she overcomes cultural barriers by embracing Western culture practices in the diaspora, which afford women greater decision-making roles than her traditional South Asian upbringing, where parental authority often dictates a daughter's life choices. Additionally, her employment provides her with economic empowerment, reducing her financial reliance on her husband (Bhandari 2024).

Brick Lane by Monica Ali:- Brick Lane, which is the focus of the study of the paper, is an influential work in the domain of contemporary South Asian Diaspora Literature. The novel was published in 2003 and is considered to be Ali's magnum opus. The novel is set between 1985 and 2002 in East London, with intermittent shifts to Bangladesh through the protagonist's memories. There has been an increased emphasis on examining the gendered aspect of diaspora and the subsequent transformations women experience after migrating to new countries (Jan 2024). The novel is also different because its protagonist is a typical, uneducated Bangladeshi bride, wife, and mother. She tries to keep bonding with her memory of Bangladesh and her current reality and never forgets patriarchal culture, even though she lives in a privileged developed society. London has always been the hub of multicultural and immigrant people. Brick Lane is an area in London that is the heart of Bangladeshi people that is why it is also known as 'Banglatown'. Monica Ali is a British author and Bangladeshi origin born in 1967, in Dhaka of East Pakistan (now in Bangladesh). She got the attention of the readers and critics immediately after her first published fiction named after the famous Bangla Town in London (Brick Lane). The family's journey from Bangladesh to Brick Lane is full of a re-location, negotiation of identity, and adjustment for livelihood with their sensation and memory of being Bangladeshi. Their re-location leads to a dislocation in search of a home and identity. The nostalgia of food, childhood memories, distance from friends and family constitute loss of self-consciousness and insecurity of destabilization due to dual or hyphenated identity. From the diasporic sense, Ali brings out the picture of Nazneen's romanticizing dream of her childhood, of her homeland, about her Bengali food, and transformation from a girl to a woman from Bangladesh to Britain (Shafinur Nahar 2021).

Theoretical Background of Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women

Cultural Hybridity and the “Third Space”:- The most famous postcolonial theorist Homi K.Bhabha explained the term Cultural Hybridity in the text “*The Location of Culture* (1994)” in the contemporary diasporic south Asian culture. The term ‘cultural hybridity refers the mixing of two or more different cultures and make a new form of culture, identity. The another term of cultural hybridity is in-between sight. The author explained that the cultural hybridity is not a passive state. The author conceptualizes the third space of decolonizing language and postcoloniality.

Feminist Approach:- The feminist approach to the cultural hybridity interprets how gender intersects with cultural displacement, and belonging . It is the mechanism of reshaping women, their own identity and belongingness. In South Asia, women migrate from one country to another for establishing their better identity and financial independence.

Research Objective

The objective of this study is to identify the mechanism of reshaping women, their identity and belongingness. The cultural expectation inadvertently subjects South Asian female immigrants to patriarchal norms. The debate over whether diasporic experiences strengthen or challenge patriarchal power dynamics is a contentious issue in diasporic studies. Within their households, female immigrants often adhere more closely to the cultural practices in their country of origin than those living in their native country. Scholarship on female immigrants within the diaspora primarily centers on their relationship with the cultural norms of their home country. Some argue that South Asian female immigrants, originating from patriarchal cultures, are often exploited to preserve ethnic identity and cultural links (Bhandari 2024).

Methodology

This research paper uses a qualitative and descriptive approach to analyze how women are different in the cultural practices and how women are fighting for their freedom. Women are frequently struggle to navigate the conflict between old traditions and contemporary practices. This paper aims to explore the themes of migration, cultural hybridity and gender identity in contemporary South Asian Women’s fiction. The main motive of this paper is to break the gender stereotypes and create an empowered citizenship.

Research Design

Qualitative Approach:- The research paper heightens the hermeneutic examination of literary texts, themes, persona creation, narrative techniques engaged by authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Monica Ali and Homi K.Bhabha.

Descriptive Approach:- The research delineates how female protagonists navigate the conflict between old traditions and contemporary practices drawing focus to their hardship, highlighting their challenges.

Selection of Primary Literature

The primary dataset include handpicked narratives and short stories such as “*The Namesake*” by Jhumpa Lahiri, “*Brick Lane*” by Monica Ali. These texts are analyzed through different themes like migration, cultural hybridity and gender identity.

The Namesake:-

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* presents migration not merely as a geographical relocation but as a profound form of cultural displacement that affects every aspect of the immigrant experience. Through the Ganguli Family's journey from Calcutta to Cambridge and Massachusetts, Lahiri explores how migration creates a complex web of losses, adaptations, and transformations that extend far beyond physical movement from one place to another. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* provides a nuanced examination of how gender roles and cultural expectations intersect with migration, cultural identity, and generational change. The novel explores how traditional Bengali gender expectations are challenged, modified, and maintained within the American context, revealing the particular challenges faced by immigrant women who must negotiate between traditional cultural roles and new social responsibilities. Through the contrasting experiences of Ashima and her daughter Sonia, as well as the male perspectives provided by Ashoke and Gogol, Lahiri demonstrates how gender intersects with other aspects of identity formation in complex ways that affect both individual development and family relationships. The novel demonstrates how cultural hybridity- the blending and mixing of different cultural elements – becomes both a source of creative possibility and psychological tension for characters attempting to construct coherent identities within multicultural contexts. Through the experiences of Gogol and Sonia Ganguli, Lahiri examines how hybrid identities develop through complex processes of negotiation, rejection, acceptance, and integration that extend throughout their lives (Pradhani 2025).

Brick Lane :-

One of the central themes in *Brick Lane* is migration and the cultural displacement it brings. Nazneen's move from a rural village in Bangladesh to the urban environment of London symbolizes the vast transformation many immigrant women undergo in the face of globalized mobility. Transnational feminism critiques the way migration is often viewed solely as a personal choice or an economic necessity, failing to consider the complex, intersectional factors that shape the migrant experience, particularly for women. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's experience of migration is framed by her isolation and cultural dislocation. She feels estranged not only from her homeland but also from her new home, as she struggles to adjust to the British society around her. Transnational feminism critiques how global capitalist systems exploit women in the informal labor market, often forcing them into low-paying, precarious jobs. In Nazneen's case, her work as a seamstress, though exploitative, represents a form of resistance and independence that she did not have previously in her marriage. A significant transnational feminist theme in *Brick Lane* is the negotiation of cultural identity, particularly how immigrant women like Nazneen balance their traditional cultural values with the realities of living in a foreign land. Nazneen struggles to reconcile the conservative values of her upbringing in rural Bangladesh with the freedoms and cultural differences she observes in London. In contrast, Nazneen gradually embraces aspects of British culture, signaling the creation of a hybrid identity (Louis 2025).

Nazneen's role as a mother reinforces traditional gender norms, as she is expected to nurture and care for her children while remaining submissive to her husband. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen's maternal role enables her to break free from patriarchal constraints and assert her agency (Louis 2025)

Data Analysis

This part scrutinizes the primary texts, "*The Namesake*" by Jhumpa Lahiri and "*Brick Lane*" by Monica Ali, through the framework of cultural hybridity and the 'Third Space' as stated by Homi K.Bhabha. The research investigates, how female protagonists negotiate migration, cultural hybridity and displacement and how female reshape their identities and belongingness.

Migration as a spark for cultural hybridity:- Both the authors portray that the migration is not solely as geographical movement but it is a tangled process of cultural transformation. In the novel "*The Namesake*" the author demonstrates how cultural hybridity- the blending and mixing of different cultural elements- becomes both a source of creative possibility and psychological tension for characters attempting to construct coherent identities within multicultural contexts. The author provides a nuanced examination of how gender roles and cultural expectations intersect with migration, cultural identity, and generational change.

On the other hand, in the novel "*Brick Lane*", Nazneen's migration from rural Bangladesh to the urban environment of London epitomizes a keen cultural dislocation. Her story exposes severe cultural alienation inherent to female migration, caught between ancestral conservative traditions and host-country liberalism. Ali's illustrates that Nazneen's cultural dislocation from rural Bangladesh to urban environment of London pushes her into a "third space".

"Third Space And Cultural Hybridity:- The concept of "Third Space" was coined by Homi K.Bhabha which evinces flashily through the character's views. In the novel '*The Namesake*', the author stated how cultural hybridity, the blending and mixing of different cultural elements, became both a source of creative possibility and psychological tension for characters attempting to construct coherent identities within multicultural contexts. In "*Brick Lane*" Nazneen creates a unique and merges two distinct cultures into one. Fundamentally grounded in orthodox Bengali culture, she begins to adopt new practices such as seamstress and taking the reins of household decisions. Nazneen's maternal role enables her to break the patriarchal practices and live a life in her own rule and legacy. In both the novels "*The Namesake*" and "*Brick Lane*" demonstrate how migration accelerates the reshaping of gender identities and creates an empowered citizenship.

The Challenges Of Cultural Hybridity And Displacement:- South Asian women's migration spotlights the several challenges of cultural hybridity and displacement. Women often experience the sense of alienation and identity crisis while they negotiate between their traditional cultural roots and the modern cultural practices. In "*The Namesake*", the author experiences intense homesickness, isolation and identity crisis after migrating from West Bengal to the United States. In another context, "Cultural hybridity", while creating a new culture and new imagination, also faces conflicts and tensions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that migration in contemporary South Asian women's fiction is not merely a physical relocation but a transformative process of identity formation and cultural negotiation. Through *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane*, Jhumpa Lahiri and Monica Ali portray women who move beyond patriarchal constraints to reconstruct their identities in diasporic spaces. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of Cultural Hybridity and the Third Space effectively explain how these protagonists negotiate between inherited traditions and new cultural realities. Their experiences reveal that hybridity is both empowering and challenging, as it involves continuous negotiation, displacement, and adaptation. Despite alienation and cultural conflicts, the female protagonists develop agency, economic independence, and a stronger sense of belonging. The study concludes that migration becomes a catalyst for women's empowerment rather than merely a source of loss. Ultimately, contemporary South Asian women's fiction redefines home, identity, and citizenship by presenting women as active creators of hybrid cultural identities capable of challenging gender stereotypes and reshaping their social realities.

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