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# REIMAGINING HOME: NEGOTIATING ACCEPTANCE, ADAPTATION, AND BELONGING

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## Abstract

The present paper examines the complex idea of 'home' in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, with particular reference to the experiences of different generations of the Indian diaspora. It seeks to understand how diasporic individuals negotiate the idea of home while living between different cultures, memories, identities, and geographical spaces. The writings of Mukherjee and Lahiri capture the everyday experiences of diasporic life and reveal the emotional and cultural difficulties involved in migration, assimilation, and adaptation.

Although the experiences represented by the two writers are diverse, the paper argues that the struggle to define and experience 'home' continues across generations. Their characters may respond differently to migration and assimilation, but they often experience similar anxieties concerning belonging, identity, memory, and acceptance. Home, therefore, is no longer merely the geographical place one has left behind or the place in which one currently lives. It becomes an unstable and shifting idea shaped by memory, nostalgia, cultural attachment, and the need to adapt to a new environment.

Against this background, the paper briefly examines selected works of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri in order to understand the changing perceptions of home among the Indian diaspora. Through an interpretive reading of their works, it explores the ambiguity and volatility inherent in the concept of home. While the first generation may retain a stronger emotional attachment to the homeland, subsequent generations encounter the question of home differently. Yet the need to belong and the difficulty of locating oneself culturally and emotionally continue to remain significant.

The paper therefore addresses the following questions:

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- How do different generations of the Indian diaspora understand and negotiate the concept of 'home'?
- Does the longing for home continue across generations, and if so, how does its nature change?
- How do nostalgia and memories of the homeland shape diasporic identity?
- How does the younger generation experience nostalgia for a homeland that it may know largely through family, memory, narratives, and cultural inheritance?
- How do assimilation and adaptation reshape the meaning of home in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri?

**Keywords:** Immigration, Exile, Acculturation, Assimilation, Trauma, Alienation

## Introduction

Indian diasporic writing has emerged as a significant body of literature, enriched by the contributions of several generations of writers. These writings are closely connected to the histories and lived experiences of migration and displacement. However, diasporic experiences are neither uniform nor expressed in identical ways. Writers differ in terms of their historical contexts, cultural locations, personal experiences, and their responses to migration. Despite these differences, questions of displacement, belonging, identity, alienation, and adaptation recur prominently in diasporic literature. The significance of diasporic writing therefore lies in its engagement with fundamental questions concerning identity, acculturation, cultural memory, and the human need for belonging.

The present paper focuses particularly on the differences and continuities in the representation of diasporic experience across two generations of Indian diasporic writers. While these writers transform their experiences into creative expression, their works also draw attention to the personal and collective histories underlying such experiences. Diasporic literature thus encourages the reader not merely to appreciate these works as literary creations but also to understand the histories of migration, displacement, cultural negotiation, and adaptation that inform them. Consequently, diasporic writing has become an important area of academic enquiry, offering valuable insights into the relationship between literature, history, identity, and lived experience.

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The condition of being part of a diaspora brings with it several complexities. Migration may create a sense of distance from the homeland while simultaneously demanding adjustment to the social and cultural realities of the host country. Different generations experience these complexities differently. For the first generation, memories of the homeland and the difficulties of assimilation may remain particularly significant, while later generations may struggle with questions of inherited identity, cultural belonging, and their relationship with a homeland they may not have directly experienced. Indian diasporic writers have repeatedly attempted to articulate these varied experiences, including the anxieties, conflicts, negotiations, and transformations associated with diasporic existence.

Since diaspora studies have developed significantly within the broader intellectual framework of postcolonial studies, the present paper draws upon postcolonial theory as its primary conceptual framework while also engaging with important theories of diaspora. The selected writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri will be examined through concepts such as race, stereotyping, otherness, marginalisation, alienation, assimilation, and cultural hybridity. Particular attention will also be paid to nostalgia, memory, displacement, and belonging in order to understand how the idea of 'home' is constructed and reconstructed across generations. Such a framework enables the paper to examine home not simply as a geographical location but as a complex emotional, cultural, and imaginative space that is continually negotiated by diasporic subjects.

In this context, Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the diasporic idea of 'home'. Rushdie examines home not merely as a geographical location but as a space reconstructed through memory, imagination, and a sense of loss. Experiences such as migration and exile complicate an individual's relationship with the homeland, as physical distance gradually transforms the remembered home into an imagined one. For the migrant, therefore, home exists simultaneously as a real place that has been left behind and as a remembered space continually recreated in the mind.

Reflecting on his own position as a writer living away from India, Rushdie explains the complex relationship between exile, memory, and the desire to recover the lost homeland:

> It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of mutated 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

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> physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing which was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

Rushdie's idea of the 'imaginary homeland' is particularly relevant to the present study because it explains the ambiguity inherent in the diasporic experience of home. The homeland remembered by the migrant cannot be completely recovered because both the individual and the homeland undergo change over time. What remains is a home reconstructed through memories, stories, cultural practices, and imagination. This tension between the home that was left behind, the home that is remembered, and the home that must be created in a new country becomes central to understanding the diasporic experiences represented in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri.

**Negotiating diasporic subjectivity**

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the diasporic experience, particularly through the ideas of displacement, identity, and the 'unhomely'. Bhabha distinguishes being 'unhomed' from being literally homeless. The diasporic individual may possess a physical home and yet experience a deep sense of cultural and psychological displacement. As Bhabha explains:

> To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up to you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James' Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'. (13)

Bhabha's idea of the 'unhomely' is particularly relevant to diasporic writing because it suggests that home is not merely a physical location. One may live in a house and still experience a sense of not fully belonging to it. For the diaspora, therefore, the question of home becomes closely connected with the question of the self: *Where do I belong? Which culture defines me? What makes a place my home?* Such questions make diasporic identity unstable and continually negotiated.

Nick Mansfield's *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (2000) further helps us understand this problem through the concept of 'subjectivity'. Subjectivity

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refers not simply to an individual's identity but to the ways in which the individual understands and experiences the self in relation to the world. This becomes especially significant in diasporic literature, where individuals are often situated between different cultural worlds and are required to constantly reconsider their sense of belonging.

Michel Foucault's understanding of subjectivity adds another dimension to this discussion. From a Foucauldian perspective, the self is not completely independent or naturally given; rather, it is shaped through social relations, cultural practices, institutions, and various forms of discourse. Society provides individuals with particular ways of thinking about and defining themselves. For the diasporic subject, this process becomes more complex because the individual encounters different, and sometimes conflicting, cultural expectations.

Subjectivity, therefore, becomes an important framework for comparing diasporic writers belonging to different generations. Although their responses to migration, assimilation, nostalgia, and cultural adaptation may differ, their works repeatedly reveal the difficulty of constructing a stable sense of self and home. The 'trauma of subjectivity' may thus be understood as the continuing struggle to locate oneself culturally, emotionally, and socially when the meanings of both 'self' and 'home' remain unsettled.

**Between home and belonging**

The term 'exile' literally suggests a condition of physical displacement from one's homeland. However, a 'sense of exile' need not necessarily arise from complete geographical dislocation. Exile can also be understood as a psychological and emotional condition. Even when individuals are physically displaced, their experience of exile may largely depend upon their sense of belonging, cultural attachment, memory, and their relationship with the host society. Thus, geographical displacement does not always result in an equally intense psychological experience of alienation.

This distinction becomes particularly important when we consider different generations of the Indian diaspora. The second-generation experiences displacement differently from the first, especially in the context of an increasingly globalized and multicultural world. Writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri represent characters who gradually recognize that the society in which they live is also their own world. Their relationship with the host country is therefore different from that of many first-generation immigrants, who may have experienced a stronger sense of cultural separation and alienation. This does not mean that the second generation is free from questions of identity and belonging; rather, the nature of its alienation is different. As Anupama Kaushal observes:

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> Jhumpa Lahiri's writings are largely about the Bengali migrants who are settled in the USA. She belongs among such writers who have the awareness as to the multiple possibilities that cause alienation and issues of assimilation. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Interpreter of Maladies* is a magnum opus that deals with those diaspora who are in a state of trauma of integrating into a foreign society. (Kaushal, 2010: 92)

Another significant feature of the second generation is its growing awareness of living in an interconnected and multicultural world. The idea of the world as a 'global village' complicates conventional notions of home and foreignness. Multi-ethnic metropolitan spaces can create possibilities for individuals to belong to more than one cultural world at the same time. Consequently, the difference between the first and second generations may be located not simply in the fact of displacement, but in the ways in which they experience and respond to it. Exile may begin as a geographical condition, but its deeper consequences are often psychological. The trauma of displacement therefore depends upon how individuals negotiate memory, identity, belonging, and cultural difference.

The writings of Bharati Mukherjee, on the other hand, frequently engage with the immigrant's experience of cultural loss, transformation, and assimilation. Compared with the later generations, first-generation immigrants are often represented as being more consciously preoccupied with the loss of familiar cultural surroundings and the challenges of acculturation. Migration places them between two cultural worlds: the culture they have inherited and the culture into which they are expected to integrate.

The desire to become 'Americanized' consequently becomes an important aspect of the immigrant experience represented in such writing. Assimilation involves an attempt to participate fully in American social and cultural life while simultaneously negotiating one's attachment to the culture of origin. The immigrant is therefore caught between the desire to preserve elements of the past and the need to adapt to the present. American identity gradually becomes part of the immigrant's attempt to belong to the host society and to recognize it as a new home. In this process, however, assimilation may also demand the modification, negotiation, or even abandonment of certain inherited traditions and beliefs.

Thus, the crucial difference between the generations lies not necessarily in whether they experience displacement, but in how they negotiate it. For the first generation, home may remain closely associated with a geographical and cultural past that has been left behind; for

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the second generation, home increasingly becomes a fluid and negotiated space of multiple cultural affiliations. In both cases, however, 'home' remains an unstable concept, shaped by memory, belonging, assimilation, and the continuing negotiation of identity.

**Conclusion**

The experience of immigration often involves a complex negotiation between the loss of one's native culture and the attempt to adapt to the culture of the host country. This process can create psychological distress, particularly when immigrants encounter cultural differences, exclusion, or hostility. Such experiences often produce a strong sense of alienation and displacement. However, the nature and intensity of this alienation may differ between first- and second-generation immigrants, since their relationships with both the homeland and the host country are significantly different. Alienation, therefore, becomes an important aspect of diasporic sensibility. Jhumpa Lahiri sensitively explores these experiences in her fiction, portraying characters who struggle with belonging, identity, cultural memory, and displacement. An analysis of the selected stories will examine how experiences of alienation and displacement shape the diasporic sensibility of first- and second-generation Indian immigrants in the United States.

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