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The Role of Culture in Global Humanities with Special Reference to Indian Diaspora Writers

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of culture in shaping the global humanities through a critical reading of Indian diaspora literature, with particular reference to Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Kiran Desai. Drawing on postcolonial and transnational theory, the study argues that diasporic narratives function as micro-histories that complicate dominant accounts of globalisation by foregrounding lived experiences of migration, displacement, and cultural negotiation. The analysis situates these writers within debates on hybridity, affiliation, and identity formation, demonstrating how culture operates not as a fixed inheritance but as a dynamic and contested process. While Lahiri emphasises emotional continuity and intergenerational tension, Mukherjee foregrounds radical transformation and self-fashioning, and Desai exposes the structural inequalities embedded in global capitalism. Together, these texts reveal how diaspora literature contributes to a more inclusive and ethically grounded global humanities by articulating the psychological, social, and political dimensions of transnational life. The paper concludes that Indian diaspora writing remains central to rethinking humanistic inquiry beyond Eurocentric and nation-bound frameworks.

Keywords: Culture; Global Humanities; Indian Diaspora; intergenerational tension

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Introduction

The contemporary evolution of the global humanities is increasingly defined by efforts to move beyond traditional, Eurocentric frameworks toward a more inclusive understanding of the human experience. Central to this evolution is the role of culture, particularly as it is articulated through the narratives of displaced populations. Indian diaspora writers have emerged as pivotal figures in this discourse, offering nuanced perspectives on migration, identity, and the fluid boundaries of heritage. These writers do not merely document the experience of relocation; they investigate the psychic and social mechanisms through which culture is preserved, transformed, and sometimes discarded in a globalised world. Through an analysis of the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Kiran Desai, it becomes evident that the literary humanities serve as a critical site for exploring the "global human," providing a micro-historical counterpoint to the macro-narratives of economic and political globalisation.

The Theoretical Framework: Postcolonialism and the Transnational Turn

The study of the Indian diaspora requires robust engagement with postcolonial and transnational theories that challenge the primacy of the nation-state as the unit of cultural analysis. Homi K. Bhabha's seminal work on "hybridity" and the "Third Space" of enunciation provides a foundational lens for viewing the diasporic condition. Bhabha argues that cultural production is most productive in the "in-between" spaces where different cultures meet and collide (Bhabha 1). This space allows for the emergence of hybrid identities that are neither wholly of the country of origin nor wholly of the host land (Bhabha 2). For many characters in the Indian diaspora, identity is not a fixed point but a fluid, unstable form of identification shaped by the continuous play of history and power (Transnational Identities).

Vijay Mishra's distinction between the "old" and "new" Indian diaspora further refines this theoretical framework. The "old" diaspora, characterised by the 19th-century movements of indentured labourers to Fiji, the Caribbean, and South Africa, was defined by a sense of permanence and, often, by forced severance from the homeland (Beyond Borders). In contrast, the "new" diaspora of the late 20th century, primarily fueled by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act in the United States, consists of voluntary, often high-skilled migrants who maintain "almost a permanent connectivity" to the home and host lands through technology and ease of travel (Mishra 45). Mishra's concept of the "diasporic imaginary" describes the condition of these ethnic enclaves that define themselves through displacement, precariously lodged between real and imagined homes (Diasporic Consciousness). Complementing these ideas is Edward Said's framework of "filiation" and "affiliation." Filiation refers to the natural, "filial" order of authority and ancestral culture, which often feels "partial" or ruptured in the diaspora (Said 10). Affiliation encompasses the compensatory relationships or new systems of belonging—institutions, beliefs, or alternative cultures—that provide a sense of relationship when the natural filial order fails (Said 10). This tension between inherited culture and chosen identity is central to the literary investigations of Lahiri, Mukherjee, and Desai.

The Global Humanities: From Crisis to Inclusivity

The "global turn" in the humanities represents a conscious effort to purge the disciplines of their historically nationalistic and Eurocentric biases (Damrosch 18). For decades, the humanities were conceptualised within a Western model that positioned European history, philosophy, and literature as the universal standard. However, the current shift toward a "comparative global humanities" necessitates a framework capable of studying all cultural expressions of humankind with equal rigour and depth (Introduction 32). This move is not merely about expanding the curriculum to include non-Western texts; it involves a fundamental questioning of what it means to be human in an increasingly intricate and challenging global

context (Rationale). Literature plays a unique role in this reimagining by serving as a "historical laboratory" for human experience (East Asian Studies). While sociology and political science might track the movement of bodies across borders, the literary humanities explore the "perceptions, emotions, hopes, dreams, and fears" of those on the move (Reimagining 45). This focus on the "inner world" is essential for understanding the "crisis of individual and collective identity" that characterises the 21st century (Migration 89). In this context, culture is not a static relic of the past but a dynamic force that shapes how individuals navigate the "disorienting digital age" and the complexities of transnational existence (Rationale).

The evolution of the humanities is often described in terms of a "dualism of survival and crisis" (Beyond Survival 54). As traditional disciplines like English and History face shifting institutional priorities, many scholars argue that the future of the humanities lies in their ability to become "truly global" and "publicly engaged" (Reimagining 45). By focusing on the "things humans make"—art, writings, thoughts, and religions—the humanities provide the tools for leading a more meaningful life and for critically evaluating the technological and social developments that are transforming the world (Reimagining 45). Indian diaspora literature, with its focus on the "liminality of diasporic life," offers a profound contribution to this project, illustrating the "psychic toll of navigating contradictory cultural expectations" (Diasporic Criticism).

Jhumpa Lahiri: The Intimate Cartographies of Dislocation

Jhumpa Lahiri's work, particularly her novel *The Namesake* (2003), is widely recognised for its "quiet and reflective" exploration of the aftermath of displacement (Diasporic Consciousness). Lahiri focuses on the "psychology of relationships, ageing, and maturity," portraying the "loneliness of dislocation" through a balanced treatment of external details and internal psyche (Diaspora Literature 56). Her narrative traces the journey of the Ganguli family from Calcutta to Massachusetts, highlighting the differences between the "first-generation immigrants' sense of loss" and the "second generation's struggle for identity" (Displacement 23).

Naming and the Pathology of Inheritance in *The Namesake*

In *The Namesake*, the significance of naming serves as a powerful metaphor for the construction of identity. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, is caught in a "predicament of nomenclature" that reflects his broader cultural struggle (Munos 107). In Bengali tradition, children are often given two names: a "pet name" (*daknam*) for family and a "good name" (*bhalonam*) for the outside world (Navigating Hybrid Identity). However, when the Gangulis' letter from a grandmother in India, containing a chosen name, is lost in the mail, they are compelled by American hospital regulations to provide a name for the birth certificate (Navigating Hybrid Identity). This results in the haphazard naming of the baby after his father's favourite Russian author, Nikolai Gogol (Bookroo).

Lahiri uses Ashima to illustrate the specific weight of this cultural loss. For the first generation, the loss of these naming rituals signifies a more profound disconnection from the ancestral "filiation" that provided structure to their lives in India. Ashima realises that "being a foreigner... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (Lahiri 49). This metaphor encapsulates the anxious liminality of immigrant life, in which the past cannot be fully reclaimed, and the present cannot be fully embraced (Identity and Belonging). As Gogol grows older, his name becomes a "burden," a symbol of his being "bound to a backward Bengali heritage" that he desperately wants to escape (Navigating Hybrid Identity). His eventual decision to legally change his name to Nikhil is a willful act of "self-fashioning," an attempt to create a more American identity that is free from the weight of his father's past (Munos 110). However, this rejection of his namesake also creates a "sense of guilt," as the name was a symbol of his father's "gratitude" for surviving a

train wreck (Bookroo). Lahiri suggests that identity cannot be easily shed or remade; rather, it is "an evolving synthesis of influences, memories, and choices" (Cultural Struggle).

Domesticity and the "Liminal" Home

Lahiri frequently uses the domestic space—the home—as a site for cultural negotiation. For Ashoke and Ashima, their home in Cambridge becomes a "miniature version of Calcutta," where rituals, language, and food are meticulously preserved (Cultural Struggle). Ashima turns to other homesick wives for recipes and advice, attempting to recreate Indian life through "shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans" and "carp sold in Chinatown" (Namesake Quotes). For her, "family is a constant force... that which naturally defines one's identity" (Journal of Language 45). For Gogol and Sonia, the home is a source of "tension" and "embarrassment" (Postcolonial Identities). They "roll their eyes" at their parents' parties where everyone speaks Bengali and eats Indian food, longing instead for the "American names" and "hot dogs" of their peers (Cultural Struggle). The domestic rituals that provide their parents with a "cultural anchorage" are viewed by the children as "clichés" and "seemingly nonsensical traditions" (Postcolonial Identities). Lahiri notes that "it is equally important, and requires a different kind of courage, to attach oneself to a world created in collaboration with another person" (Lahiri 279). This reflects the second generation's move toward "affiliation"—building new worlds through romantic love and chosen communities, rather than solely through descent.

Bharati Mukherjee: The Maximalist Aesthetic of Transformation

In contrast to Lahiri's "quiet" style, Bharati Mukherjee is known for a "more radical, transformatory vision" of the diaspora (Diasporic Consciousness). Mukherjee rejects the "hyphenated label" of Indian-American, preferring to call herself an "American by choice" (Bharati Mukherjee and the American Immigrant). Her protagonists are often "in transit," escaping repressive pasts and actively "reinventing" themselves in the American landscape (Diasporic Consciousness). This "maximalist" approach views immigration not as a state of exile or loss, but as an opportunity for "exuberance" and "complete assimilation" (Maximalist Transformation).

Migration as Violent Rebirth in *Jasmine*

Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) tells the story of a protagonist whose identity undergoes a series of radical transformations as she moves from a small village in Punjab to various locations in the United States (Cross-Culturalism). The novel's central theme is expressed in the powerful assertion: "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Mukherjee 29). Jasmine's journey is one of "creative destruction," where she must discard her previous selves to survive and thrive in new environments (Immigration and Identity).

As Jasmine transitions from "Jyoti" (her name in Punjab) to "Jasmine" (named by her first husband Prakash), "Jazzy" (an illegal immigrant in Florida), "Jase" (an au pair in Manhattan), and finally "Jane" (in Iowa), her identity becomes "fluid and performative" (Diasporic Consciousness). Each renaming is a "proactive assertion of her agency," as she "shuttles between identities" to fit the needs of the moment (Identity and Transformation). Mukherjee portrays this process as "violent and traumatic," involving the "conscious annihilation of one's selfhood" to refashion a new identity (Displaced Protagonists). Jasmine's struggle highlights the "unyielding bond with the place of origin" even as she strives for a "new identity in an adopted Anglo-American cultural landscape" (Diasporic Criticism). Jasmine observes the rapid pace of this change: "We are all quick studies, I should have said. Once we start letting go—let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead—the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole" (Mukherjee 29). This "letting go" is not a passive surrender but a strategic move. Mukherjee recognizes that women undergo a more "psychological transformation" during migration, whereas men often focus on the material aim of making money to return home (Maximalist Transformation).

The Ethics of Assimilation and the American Mythos

Mukherjee's work challenges the "canonical literature" by situating the "transnational individual" at the centre of the "American mythos" (Bharati Mukherjee and the American Immigrant). Her characters "challenge and expose American mythology," proving that the immigrant is foundational to American culture (Bharati Mukherjee and the American Immigrant). Jasmine, in her various incarnations, experiences both the "humiliation" and the "promise" of America. She remarks, "This country has so many ways of humiliating, of disappointing" (Mukherjee 29). However, she also sees the "American need to make intuition so tangible, to possess a vision so privately" (Mukherjee 125).

This stance has made Mukherjee's work a subject of debate. Critics have sometimes "faulted" *Jasmine* for its "embedded messages of assimilation" and its seemingly "contemptuous" view of traditional Indian culture as "backward" and "repressive" (Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine). However, from a global humanities perspective, her work highlights the "transformative potential of immigrant life" (Intersections of Feminism). She argues that the "future depends on the breaking down of paradigms... the straddling of two or more cultures" (Maximalist Transformation). For Jasmine, the "zigzag route is the straightest," as she navigates a "shadow world" of aircraft and waiting rooms to arrive at her own empowered self (Jasmine by Bharati Mukherjee).

Kiran Desai: Neocolonial Legacies and the Globalization of Loss

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) offers a more "caustic" and "bitter" view of the globalised world than Lahiri or Mukherjee (Postcolonial Condition). The novel juxtaposes two primary worlds: the crumbling home of an anglicised judge in the Indian Himalayas (Kalimpong) and the "basement kitchens" of New York City (Postcolonial Condition). Desai explores how "colonial legacies" and "global capitalism" continue to shape the lives of postcolonial subjects, creating a "fragmentation of values" and a "crisis of individual and collective identity" (Migration, Globalisation).

The Shadow Class and the Economics of Displacement

One of the novel's most significant contributions is its portrayal of the "shadow class"—the undocumented, "disposable" workers who sustain the global economy but are denied its benefits (Migration, Globalisation). This is embodied in the character of Biju, the son of the judge's cook, who works illegally in a series of New York restaurants (Postcolonial Condition). Biju's experience is one of "harsh labour exploitation" and "racial exclusion," where he is "trapped" in the "vicious cycle" of being unable to get a green card without a job, and unable to get a good job without a green card (Migration, Globalisation).

Desai uses an "upstairs-downstairs" metaphor to highlight these socio-economic inequalities. In an upmarket New York restaurant, an "authentic French flag" might fly in the customer-receiving area, while in the kitchen, the workers are "Indian, Honduran, anything but French" (Migration, Globalisation). This "manufactured, globalised" form of authenticity mocks the "sham multiculturalism" of the Western world (Migration, Globalisation). Biju's return to India at the end of the novel—"materially and physically broken"—serves as a "caustic debunking" of the idea that globalisation offers prosperity to all (Migration, Globalisation). He realises the "arbitrariness of who can and cannot apply for a green card" is an extension of the "unfairness and racism of colonialism" (Chapter 14).

Insurgency, Identity, and the Fragmented Nation

The novel's Indian narrative centres on the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) movement in the 1980s, which demanded a separate state for the Indian-Nepalese community (Postcolonial Condition). This insurgency provides a "backdrop of socio-political upheaval" that mirrors the "internal conflicts" of the characters (Narratives of Belonging). For characters like Gyan, the mathematician tutor, the movement offers a sense of "resistance" to the "neocolonial hegemony" that continues to marginalise poor Indians (Postcolonial Condition).

Desai notes that the "drawing of borders" in the Himalayas was often "ridiculous," a "messy map" of warring and betrayal among Nepal, England, Tibet, and India (Desai 9).

The novel's title, *The Inheritance of Loss*, refers to the "thwarted identities" and "broken values" that are passed down through generations (Migration, Globalisation). The Judge, Jemubhai Patel, represents the "failure to accept the Western lifestyle completely," resulting in "self-loathing, shame, and alienation" (Migration, Globalisation). He is a "surrogate Briton" in his own country, inhabiting a "separate community of anglophiles" that is increasingly out of touch with the "modernising nation" (Hyperfabula). Desai vividly describes his "fixed gaze" and "reptile" features, a metaphor for his "inwardly directed, selfish feelings" and his "failure to accept completely" (Desai's The Inheritance). Through this "fragmentary narrative," Desai underscores the complexity of "postcolonial chaos and despair," suggesting that the loss of a nation's "true identity" is an inevitable consequence of neocolonial and global influences (Hyperfabula).

Comparative Synthesis: Naming, Belonging, and Cultural Resilience

A comparative look at these three writers reveals profound insights into the role of culture in the global humanities. While their styles and ideological leanings differ, they all engage with the core challenges of diasporic existence: naming, belonging, and the struggle for a coherent identity in a fragmented world. The role of culture in these works shifts from a "fixed essence" to a "process of negotiation." In Lahiri's *The Namesake*, culture is an "anchor" that can also become a "curse," leading to a search for "liberation from the past" (Displacement 23). In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, culture is a "tool for reinvention," where the "docile Indian widow turns into an independent, active modern American woman" (Diasporic Identities). In Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, culture is a "site of trauma," where the "global" and "local" are inextricably wedded through a history of power inequalities (Migration, Globalisation).

Cultural Hybridity: All three writers engage with Bhabha's theory of "hybridity." Lahiri sees it as a "torturous route" to adulthood, a reality that "begs for no celebration" but requires understanding (Munos 112). Mukherjee views hybridity as a "maximalist" opportunity for "exuberance" and "empowerment" (Maximalist Transformation). Desai depicts it as a "dilemma" where identity and resistance are both at stake, often leading to a "divided sense of self" (Migration, Globalisation).

The Gendered Experience: The treatment of women characters in these stories demands close attention. In Lahiri's novel, we see women such as Ashima defining their identities through "motherhood and caregiving" (Namesake 2). Mukherjee's Jasmine, however, is a "tornado" who asserts her agency by leaving men and reshaping her destiny (Exploring the Nuanced Dynamics). Desai's Sai represents a "new identity" that understands her surroundings and is "capable of suffering and facing the atrocities of life" (Desai's The Inheritance).

Conclusion

The role of culture in global humanities, as articulated through Indian diaspora literature, is essentially a micro-historical project. It provides a way of "seeing the world like a microhistorian," focusing on individual lives and specific localities to understand broader global trends (From Global Studies). This approach challenges the "hegemonic definition of literature" and the "neocolonial biases" of traditional academic institutions (Introduction 32). The humanities provide the "tools for leading a richer, more meaningful life" and for critically evaluating the "social and economic pressures" of the 21st century (Migration, Globalisation). By documenting the "psychological and emotional dimensions of migration," these writers contribute to a "truly global humanities" that speaks to an "extraordinarily diverse student body" (Reimagining 45). Furthermore, the transition toward a "public literary humanities" emphasises the importance of going beyond the "parochial" and the "Western" to address a "global public" (Towards a Global Public).

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