



## Nostalgia And Cultural Hybridity In Indian Diaspora Literature

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### Abstract

This paper places Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee side by side a pairing that is more contentious than it first appears. Both are Indian American writers; both deal with immigration, identity, and the pull of the homeland. But their temperaments are so different, their formal choices so divergent, that reading them together illuminates the full range of the Indian diasporic imagination rather than a single point within it. Using Bhabha's "third space," Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, and Hall's dynamic model of cultural identity, I argue that Lahiri's fiction inhabits a space of melancholic liminality where the past is both wound and refuge, while Mukherjee's writing plunges into transformation with a recklessness that is either exhilarating or alarming depending on where you stand. Neither writer sentimentalizes nostalgia. Both treat it as a lens sometimes distorting, sometimes clarifying through which the contradictions of diasporic life become visible and available for literary exploration.

**Keywords:-** Diaspora, Nostalgia, Cultural Hybridity, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Identity, Third Space

### Introduction

The Indian diaspora is vast, various, and in literary terms astonishingly productive. From V.S. Naipaul's Caribbean dislocations to Salman Rushdie's transatlantic fictions, from the plantation narratives of indentured laborers to the campus novels of H-1B professionals, the literature of the Indian diaspora spans continents and centuries. But certain themes recur with almost obsessive regularity: the gravitational pull of the homeland, the bewilderment of arrival, the negotiation of competing loyalties, and running through everything like a bass line nostalgia. The diasporic subject is, almost by definition, someone for whom the past is elsewhere.

But nostalgia is not one thing, and this paper is an attempt to demonstrate that by reading two writers who are often grouped together and should not be. Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee are both Indian American, both women, both concerned with immigration and there the resemblance essentially ends. Their generational positions differ (Mukherjee arrived as an adult in the 1960s; Lahiri was born to immigrants and raised in Rhode Island). Their aesthetics differ (Lahiri's spare, muted realism versus Mukherjee's lush, energetic

maximalism). And their relationship to nostalgia differs in ways that, I think, reveal something fundamental about the range of possible responses to diasporic displacement.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The theoretical vocabulary for talking about diaspora has grown enormous, perhaps too enormous hybridity, liminality, third space, cultural translation, creolization, transculturation. I will try to use only what I actually need. Safran's typological essay (1991) provides the baseline: a diasporic community is dispersed from an original homeland, maintains collective memory of it, feels some degree of alienation in the host country, and harbors a desire however attenuated for return (Safran 83). Clifford's complication is essential: diasporic identities are shaped not only by roots but by routes, by ongoing processes of travel and connection (Clifford 306).

Hall's notion of cultural identity as "not an essence but a positioning" (Hall 226) as production rather than inheritance is central to my argument. So is Bhabha's "third space," the site of hybridity where cultural meanings are negotiated and transformed rather than simply received or rejected (Bhabha 227). But the single most useful theoretical text for what I am doing here is Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, with its distinction between restorative nostalgia (which tries to reconstruct the lost home) and reflective nostalgia (which lingers over fragments, accepting incompleteness and impermanence) (Boym 41). That distinction maps onto the Lahiri-Mukherjee contrast with almost uncanny precision though, as I will show, the mapping is not quite as clean as it first appears.

### **Lahiri: The Weight of Small Displacements**

Lahiri's fiction is quiet in a way that can make you underestimate it. The stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* and the novel *The Namesake* operate at low emotional volume no melodrama, no pyrotechnics, just the steady accumulation of precise, heartbreaking detail. A mispronounced name. A spice jar that triggers a wave of homesickness. A telephone call to Calcutta that costs more per minute than the caller can afford but that she makes anyway, because the alternative silence, disconnection, the slow decay of a relationship conducted across twelve time zones is worse.

The title story of *Interpreter of Maladies* stages a miscommunication between Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide in India, and Mrs. Das, an Indian American tourist. He imagines a connection between them; she needs someone to confess to. Their "interpretations" never align (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 66). It works simultaneously as a realistic vignette and as a parable of the diasporic condition: the longing to be understood across cultural distance is real, but the understanding itself remains elusive, partial, shadowed by assumptions that neither party can see clearly enough to correct.

*The Namesake* traces the Ganguli family through three decades, and it is through the parents Ashoke and Ashima that nostalgia takes its most restorative form. They recreate Bengali rituals in suburban Massachusetts, maintain a network of friends who share their displacement, and keep planning a return to Calcutta that never quite happens. Their son Gogol, saddled with a name that links him to a Russian writer he has never read, enacts a different struggle: not between India and America but between competing versions of himself (Lahiri, *Namesake* 76). Mishra's concept of "the diasporic imaginary" a structure of feeling defined by "the trauma of separation" and the impossibility of full return (Mishra 7) captures Lahiri's world with painful accuracy.

### **Mukherjee: The Exuberance of Becoming**

Mukherjee refused nostalgia. Or at least, she refused what nostalgia typically requires: a backward glance, a lingering attachment to what was left behind. She called herself an

"American writer" not Indian American, not South Asian, not hyphenated and she meant it polemically, as a rejection of the exile's melancholy that she saw as a trap (Mukherjee, "Immigrant Writing" 28). Her characters do not mourn the homeland. They consume America with an appetite that is sometimes joyful, sometimes violent, always transformative.

Jasmine is the exemplary text. Its protagonist cycles through identities Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, Jane each corresponding to a different phase of life in America. The novel is propelled by violence (her husband murdered, a rapist killed in self-defense) and by a refusal to let the past determine the future. Mukherjee described it as an attempt to "rewrite the book of America" from the immigrant's perspective (Mukherjee, "Beyond Multiculturalism" 454), and the rewriting is exhilarating even as it raises uncomfortable questions about what is lost in the process of perpetual reinvention.

Alam has noted that Mukherjee's embrace of assimilation and transformation is anomalous in South Asian diaspora writing, which tends to emphasize cultural preservation and the pain of displacement (Alam 72). This is true, and it is part of what makes her work valuable as a counterpoint to Lahiri. But even Mukherjee's fiction is not uncritical of the American promise. *The Middleman and Other Stories* includes brutally frank depictions of exploitation, precarity, and the violence that the immigrant body absorbs in the process of becoming American. Exuberance, in Mukherjee's world, is never innocent. It always has a cost.

## Reading Them Together

The differences are clear enough. But what about the convergences? Both writers are obsessed with domestic space as the primary theater of cultural negotiation. Kitchens, dinner tables, bedrooms these are the sites where the tensions of diasporic existence are actually lived, where the smell of turmeric coexists with the sound of American television, where children absorb their parents' longings without quite understanding what they are absorbing. Brah's concept of "diaspora space" the point where genealogies of dispersion intersect with genealogies of staying put (Brah 16) captures this domestic terrain precisely.

Caesar's characterization of Lahiri as "minimalist realist" and Mukherjee as "maximalist transformation narrative" (Caesar 51) is a useful shorthand, if a somewhat blunt one. What it misses is the degree to which both writers understand nostalgia as a mode of cognition rather than a mere emotion a way of knowing the present through the lens of an absent past. The difference is in what they do with that knowledge. Lahiri sits with it, lets it ache. Mukherjee pushes through it, uses it as fuel for reinvention. Neither response is more "authentic" than the other. Together, they map the full emotional and political terrain of the Indian diaspora in America.

## Conclusion

What I take from this comparative reading is a conviction that nostalgia is not a weakness of diasporic literature but one of its most powerful resources. In Lahiri's hands, it becomes an instrument of precision, illuminating the hairline fractures that run through immigrant families with an almost clinical attention to detail. In Mukherjee's hands, it becomes something to resist and transcend, a gravitational pull against which the immigrant selfdefines its freedom. Neither writer sentimentalizes the homeland or idealizes the host country. Both understand that diaspora is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be inhabited with difficulty, with loss, with occasional moments of unexpected grace. That is not a comforting conclusion. But it is, I think, an honest one.

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