



Belonging and Resilience: Themes of Identity in Selected Indian Novels

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to conduct an extensive and comparative examination of how identity negotiation is portrayed in Indian literature, both domestically and internationally, particularly in scenarios where cultures intersect, clash, and blend. It primarily focuses on the literary works: "The White Tiger" (2008), "Water" (2006), and "The Inheritance of Loss" (2006). Each author explores identity within specific cultural contexts, addressing themes like Indian culture in foreign lands and also discusses about the Indian caste system, the varying levels of privilege among Indians, and the middle-class aspirations influencing politics and contributing to socio-cultural disparities. The complex societal framework shaped by the Indian caste system significantly influences the migrant experience, imposing constraints on their identity within society. This limitation can profoundly impact their economic well-being, thus influencing the development of their identity. The underlying premise is that protagonists, whether immigrants or locals in their homeland, aim to find a balance between economic success and cultural identity. Despite facing emotions like displacement and homelessness, the main characters in the mentioned novels succeed in forging a feeling of belonging. This accomplishment is achieved despite the presence of social, political, and cultural challenges, showcasing their resilience in challenging circumstances.

Keywords: Displacement, Rootlessness, casteism, Alienation, and Diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

This research focuses on identity crisis portrayed in Indian literature, both within the nation and in diasporic settings, as portrayed in "Water" (2006) "The Inheritance of Loss" (2006) and "The White Tiger" (2008). The choice of these novels isn't bound by a specific timeframe; instead, It is guided by investigating the themes of mobility and estrangement within and outside the borders of India. The study is finely tuned to diverse cultural and sociopolitical



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contexts, reflecting the nuanced dynamics of identity across various periods in Indian literary works. This study suggests the presence of two distinct diasporic experiences: one stems from the hierarchical caste struggles within India, leading to alienation, and the other involves physical migration. Individuals who remain in their native land often belong to ethnic minority groups, living on the outskirts of the dominant culture and grappling with challenges on its periphery. Ien Ang's assertion that aligning with the identities of "Chinese" or "Indian" shifts the individual to a symbolic space of belonging, distinct from their immediate environment, underscores the concept that these ethnic groups symbolize a feeling of absence, reaffirming a tie to a different homeland. Living in a state of exile, separated from their origins, these communities yearn for inclusion in that homeland, embodying an ongoing sense of diaspora.

In his book "Diaspora," Paul Gilroy argues that the diasporic journey isn't merely about biographical connections spanning across various locations but is moulded by diversity and characterized by contradictory feelings. This perspective validates the argument that individuals from lower Indian castes persistently exist in a diasporic state, even within the boundaries of their nation. Their narratives unveil a pervasive sense of alienation, mirroring their exclusion from the social fabric of their hometowns. These characters endure a form of dual marginalization, both within their caste and in the dominant societal group.

People who migrate to the West experience what this research terms a "double diaspora." This combined encounter transcends ethnic and national borders, resulting in individuals who identify concurrently as both Indian and American. Their country of origin evolves into an adopted nation, while the newly adopted homeland, America, amplifies their feeling of alienation. This intricate form of diaspora is marked by numerous dualities, encapsulating the complex interplay of identities as these individuals navigate the junctures of ethnicity and nationality in their pursuit of belonging.

Diaspora, essentially, captures the intricate experience of individuals or communities dispersed from their original homeland. It entails a sense of displacement, often propelled by historical, social, or economic factors. Diasporic communities wrestle with a complex interplay of identities, navigating the tensions between their native and adopted cultures. The concept extends beyond mere geographical relocation, encompassing a wider range of cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. It mirrors an ongoing negotiation of belonging, frequently characterized by ambivalence, as individuals strive to maintain ties with their roots while adapting to the challenges of their new environments. In this dynamic process, diaspora serves as a perspective through which one can comprehend the varied and evolving nature of human migration and cultural assimilation.

In today's world, diaspora has become a defining element of our interconnected and globalized society. Advancements in communication, transportation, and international relations have accelerated this trend, leading individuals and communities to increasingly move across borders in search of varied opportunities and experiences. This modern diaspora is distinguished by a diverse blend of cultural, economic, and social interactions, as individuals maintain intricate ties to their homelands while also navigating the complexities of their adopted societies. The digital era has further streamlined transnational connections, enabling diasporic communities to preserve and evolve their cultural identities in virtual realms. Within this framework, diaspora transcends mere physical relocation to encompass a dynamic process, fostering hybrid identities and challenging conventional notions of belonging. The contemporary diasporic journey involves a continual negotiation of multiple allegiances, reflecting the intricate interplay between global dynamics and individual aspirations.

The term "Indian diaspora" broadly refers to individuals who migrate, whether it's across the international borders of India or within the states and territories that constitute the Republic of India. With its twenty-nine states and eight union territories, India is a diverse nation where people may embark on journeys that take them beyond their familiar surroundings, traversing various states and territories. Interestingly, this internal migration can evoke a sense of foreignness, despite individuals remaining within the confines of national borders. The concept of



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foreignness goes beyond residing in a country outside of one's homeland; it also includes the sense of alienation felt within the familiar confines of one's own country and among different regions within the same nation.

In "The White Tiger," diasporic elements are depicted through the character Balram, the protagonist, who embarks on a journey from the outskirts of Delhi to ultimately becoming a wealthy businessman in Bangalore. The story intricately weaves diasporic themes, revealing the protagonist's evolving perceptions of location and self.

The novel "Water" portrays a diasporic voyage, particularly through the stories of characters such as Chuyia and other widows hailing from different regions and states. Left abandoned and restricted to a widows' ashram—a sanctuary for widows—these women are compelled to spend the remainder of their lives in penance. In describing Cohen's perspective on "Diaspora", which associates diaspora with collective trauma and a sense of displacement, the characters in "Water" encapsulate the bittersweet contradiction of yearning for a home they've departed from while enduring a state of exile. Cohen's assertion regarding diaspora, which incorporates both ethnic and cultural dimensions of identity, resonates with Hall's viewpoint on the dynamic and multinational nature inherent in diasporic experiences. In this context, diaspora serves as a framework through which we not only explore shared ethnic traits but also acknowledge the recognition of differences and diversity within the complex fabric of identity.

The Indian caste system significantly contributes to sustaining discrimination, leading to the marginalization and social exclusion of individuals. Caste, an intrinsic trait determined by birth, supersedes individual beliefs and establishes a rigid social hierarchy that divides Hindus into hierarchical groups. The four primary categories, with Brahmins occupying the highest position, enforce strict boundaries and customs. Brahmins, considered intellectuals, abstain from consuming food or beverages from lower castes and restrict marriage within their own caste. In rural communities, a significant divide persists between upper and lower castes, resulting in the denial of rights and social exclusion for the latter. Members of lower castes face stringent limitations, including being barred from accessing areas occupied by higher castes, resulting in complete isolation as a consequence of their inferior status in the caste hierarchy.

The dominance of the upper castes, alongside the historical legacies of the caste and colonial systems, has shaped a societal structure characterized by privilege and deprivation among Indian individuals. Within this framework, socially constructed values are deeply entrenched as accepted norms, perpetuating the hegemonic influence of the upper castes. Consequently, the less privileged and lower castes face victimization, encountering discriminatory treatment based on perceived notions of being "unclean" or "polluting" by higher caste communities. The oppressive nature of this dynamic fosters a deep-seated identity dilemma among the marginalized, as they contend with the repercussions of societal prejudices on their self-perception.

The theme of diaspora is prominently seen in Bapsi Sidhwa's "Water" and Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger," where characters grapple with profound sensations of solitude. This sense of isolation is rooted in external factors, particularly the oppressive caste system and cultural hierarchies, which leave a lasting impact on the characters' inner selves. Balram, marginalized and mocked by the upper class society, and Chuyia, encountering dual marginalization as a woman and a widow in the Indian colonial era, experience estrangement and displacement within their native land. This extends beyond simple social discrimination; it constitutes an assault on their humanity, as they are characterized by their caste and branded as impure or pariahs, leading to a twofold marginalization that impacts numerous widows like Chuyia and lower-class individuals like Balram across India. As Safran observes, they are minorities within the borders of their nation.

Gabriel Sheffer's idea of "ethnonational diaspora" echoes the experiences of Chuyia and Balram, exemplifying dispersed ethnic communities living away from their native lands to preserve unique identities amidst the complexities of cultural, social, economic, and political hurdles. The characters in Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss" embody diasporic stories, grappling with displacement and establishing new homes while maintaining connections to distinct historical contexts. According to James Clifford, diasporas are dispersed communities united



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by shared encounters of dispossession, displacement, and adaptation, with diasporic narratives portraying the endeavor to endure and maintain identities in unfamiliar territories.

The Indian diaspora, with its transnational attributes, exhibits cultural diversity marked by differences in religion, language, and social hierarchy. Within the diaspora, communities frequently emerge around linguistic or regional affiliations, such as those of Punjabi or Bengali origin. Len Ang emphasizes the broad and dynamically evolving essence of diasporas, defining them as socio-cultural entities that forge imagined communities upheld by ties to a native homeland. Furthermore, diasporas arise from migration, although not all migration nurtures diasporic awareness. Cultural pluralism profoundly shapes the development of identity in individuals' lives, particularly in a diverse and multifaceted country like India. With its myriad cultures, traditions, religions, languages, and customs, people frequently traverse various borders—geographical, cultural, political, or economic—both within the nation and beyond in pursuit of improved prospects, adding layers to the intricacies of the diasporic journey (Chang, 2010). Chang underscores that crossing borders not only results in racial hybridity but also cultural hybridity, intertwining culture and race in intricate ways (Young, 28). Individuals navigating diverse cultural paths, whether within or across borders, may find themselves vulnerable to different forms of displacement, encountering physical or psychological struggles as they negotiate hybrid identities to acclimate to new cultural environments.

Edward Said's observation regarding borders as both protective barriers and potential confinements strikes a chord, highlighting the struggles faced by individuals in exile, whether within their homeland or abroad, as they grapple with physical or psychological challenges stemming from social exclusion. Diasporic characters often embody marginalized and silenced voices, particularly within their homelands, as seen in figures like Balram and Chuyia. Despite feeling alienated and unheard, they engage in debates against patriarchal dominance and strive for liberation. In Kiran Desai's "The Inheritance of Loss," the profound portrayal reflects the experience of living in exile, marked by a lack of belonging, and the challenges faced by Indian immigrants in both the United States and England. Exile, in its various forms, profoundly shapes and constructs the identity of diasporic characters.

Authors who themselves hail from diasporic communities are often best equipped to capture the intricate diasporic experience. This complexity is vividly reflected in the writings of individuals who have traversed the globe, leaving behind ancestral roots and experiencing a sense of imbalance and uncertainty. Vijay Mishra highlights that the diaspora seeks to delve into the significance of hyphenated identities, often questioning the dichotomy between their origins and their present identities. Feng notes that the hyphen, often employed to define identities, serves as a symbol of displacement and the sensation of being in exile. Novels such as "The Inheritance of Loss" intricately weave the complexities of hyphenated identity into the characters' narratives, depicting the profound yearning to connect with one's roots while navigating the challenges of adapting to a new land.

The characters portrayed in these novels share a common theme of experiencing some form of exile, whether within their homeland or abroad. Balram, the protagonist in "The White Tiger," undergoes a profound transformation of his moral principles by separating himself from his village. This choice arises from a desire to liberate oneself from the entrenched moral standards and societal pressures imposed by the patriarchal caste system. Similarly, Chuyia in "Water" confronts the cruel stigma of being deemed impure or polluted within the Indian caste hierarchy, a result of societal prejudice and religious hypocrisy.

In the novel "The Inheritance of Loss," Biju arrives in America as an outsider, driven by the quest for the American dream and his own aspirations for success. However, his journey unfolds as a lifelong negotiation of the complex dynamics between his adopted home and his native land. Moments of uncertainty, periods of despondency, and an enduring longing for India define his experience. His sense of exile and isolation intensifies due to the absence and loss of family members. Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, also known as the Judge, bears the haunting recollection of leaving India for London, vividly remembering the segregated benches labeled as "Indians Only" and "Europeans Only." This encounter leaves him feeling powerless and shapes a life characterized by solitude and estrangement.





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Aspects such as race, religion, the caste system, and societal taboos play crucial roles in shaping the ethnic identity of these characters within the framework of redefining Indian diasporic identities. The overarching theme revolves around displacement, encapsulating a deep sense of isolation and the painful struggle to express one's innermost emotions. After delving into the intricacies of displacement and alienation within discussions of the diaspora, with a particular emphasis on the diversity present within ethnic minority communities, this study aims to raise important inquiries. It begins an inquiry into whether the encounters of lower caste Indians can be deemed diasporic even within their homeland, and if so, how this viewpoint contrasts with the diasporic journey of Indian women. Moreover, the research scrutinizes the potential for a dual diaspora resulting from migration. A key question is posed regarding how the encounters of non-hybrid Indians might be interpreted distinctively compared to individuals with hyphenated identities. The objective of this study is to offer deep understandings into the intricacies of identity challenges, aiming to construct a theoretical framework. Through reinterpreting notions like 'alienation,' 'belonging,' 'diaspora,' and 'displacement,' the study aims to provide new insights into these concepts and encourage nuanced reevaluation.

The study rigorously analyzes diverse facets of the Indian diaspora, spanning from experiences within the native land to those among migrants settling in the West, as depicted in three novels: "The White Tiger" (2008), "Water" (2006), and "The Inheritance of Loss" (2006). Characters journeying to the West confront a twofold experience of alienation, navigating the intricacies of belonging to minority cultures in both contexts. Despite the obstacles, this diasporic journey offers individuals a chance to redefine their cultural identity without the weight of their parental or ethnic heritage.

Conversely, characters within the homeland often experience double marginalization. The novels explore particular cultural settings, investigating the Indian community's dynamics in the United States, the significance of Brahmins within the Indian caste hierarchy, the diverse privileges among Indian individuals, and the influence of middle-class aspirations on socio-cultural disparities. The study seeks to illuminate two crucial elements within the complex social framework dominated by the Indian caste system. Firstly, it will investigate the intricate cultural and social limitations contributing to feelings of alienation within the native land. Secondly, it will examine the journeys of migrants, emphasizing the restrictions imposed by traditional societal norms in their home country that shape the development of their identities. Despite grappling with feelings of alienation, displacement, and rootlessness, the protagonists in these novels remarkably cultivate a sense of belonging, whether within the comforting familiarity of their homeland or amidst the unfamiliar terrain of the West. This resilience is evident despite the significant social, political, and cultural challenges they confront.

Dual Marginalization of Widows in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water*

The novel named "Water," written by "Bapsi Sidhwa" she tries the project the image of women being marginalized twice. The novel delves into an examination of the religious customs and oppressive societal norms imposed upon Hindu widows, exploring a narrative that delves into self-formation and the coexistence of its characters. Against the backdrop of Gandhi's Freedom Movement, the narrative focuses on a cohort of women sentenced by Hindu law to reside in an ashram solely due to their widowhood. The protagonist, Chuyia, faces the compounded obstacles of initial marginalization as a woman followed by further marginalization as a widow. Societal expectations dictate that widows are forbidden from remarrying or experiencing love, emphasizing the necessity to maintain chastity. Chuyia's ritual head shaving after widowhood symbolizes the surrender of their lives to repentance, as dictated by the norms of that era.

In this context, widows find themselves in a paradoxical situation where they are expected to uphold chastity, yet some are objectified to satisfy the sexual needs of others. The dominance of religion in this narrative underscores a clear bias towards privileging transcendence over convergence and favoring men over women. Brahmin men, while deeming widows inauspicious and a societal curse, paradoxically exploit the sexual vulnerability of young widows for their own gratification. This ironic paradox highlights the exploitation of a widow's sexuality to suit the



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convenience of a patriarchal society, shedding light on the inherent injustices perpetuated by societal norms and religious practices.

Marginalization in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

In his novel 'The White Tiger,' Aravind Adiga, a diasporic writer, explores the complexities of a changing Indian society, depicting how different facets of the social structure navigate diverse cultural interactions. As previously noted, cross-cultural experiences often entail engagements among individuals from distinct nations, religions, or global regions. Given India's rich mosaic of diverse civilizations spanning numerous states, cultures, religions, and languages, such encounters are inherent to its essence. Balram, originating from humble beginnings, embarks on a symbolic journey from adversity to prosperity, representing his shift from destitution to wealth. The author illustrates a stark divide in Indian society: the impoverished lower class embodies struggle and familial duties, contrasting with the affluent upper class characterized by corruption and nepotism. Similar to marginalized characters like Chuyia, Balram defies not only the oppressive caste system but also redefines his future by confronting societal and economic conventions in India. On viewing through the lens of diaspora, the character undergoes a significant transformation, raising questions such as "Who are you?" to "What can you become?" Balram, originally a village boy, rises from a chauffeur to a successful businessman, striving to ascend the societal hierarchy. This progression emphasizes that success is not solely determined by one's origins, but rather by how individuals navigate and position themselves within the changing dynamics of their current environment.

Loss of Self Identity in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

Examining the concept of Diaspora culture reveals two major themes: the quest for identity and self-discovery among diasporic immigrants. In the novel "The Inheritance of Loss," Jemubhai Popatlal Patel travels to London in 1939 to study law. Despite occupying a privileged position in Indian society, Jemubhai grapples with cultural adaptation in London, experiencing insecurity and inferiority when faced with individuals of white skin. This colonial dynamic highlights the intricate relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, as they navigate the boundaries between the Self and the Other.

Jemubhai grapples with inner turmoil, experiencing a sense of marginalization and discomfort due to his skin color. Her efforts to emulate the Other demonstrate a dual awareness, pushing back against her inherent Self. In search of an escape, he embraces European customs and culture upon returning to India, torn between his past and present, the memories of his time abroad, and his everyday life in Kalimpong. This act of imitation results in his isolation and alienation, leading to ridicule from fellow Indians. Biju, the cook's son, ventures to the US to pursue his dream but faces racial discrimination and solitude. As an undocumented immigrant, he enters the country's borders and wrestles with integrating into Western society, highlighting his struggle with identity. Many diasporic characters navigate the clash between two distinct cultures, each characterized by significant social and ideological disparities. The notion of diaspora involves being dispersed across various locations, spanning territorial, cultural, and psychological realms. These characters struggle with feelings of exile, severed communication, and a sense of not fitting in anywhere. Doubly estranged and uprooted, both psychologically and physically, characters such as Jemubhai and Biju find themselves entangled in a dual diaspora, grappling with post-traumatic stress and the intricate challenges of hybrid identity.

In examining the novels under consideration, this research asserts that the influence of caste remains potent, interwoven with post-colonialism, and the societal hierarchy continues to cast a pervasive stigma in Indian society. Lower-caste Indians experiencing diasporic journeys, as depicted in the narratives, may find their diaspora projected within the same nation, presenting a dual struggle, either under patriarchy or across borders. Characters venturing to the West encounter a twofold alienation and wrestle within the diaspora. Despite these challenges, they assert their right to American and British identities, navigating obstacles to establish themselves in new cultural landscapes. Collectively, the characters attain a sense of self-identity and worth in their pursuit of freedom. Throughout their life journeys, marked by essential facets of identity formation, they confront and surmount



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inherent pain with courage. Each novel thus explores the themes of identity and displacement, whether within or outside India. The examination of the issue of double diaspora and the unique challenges faced by minorities within the nation's space adds an intriguing dimension to the discourse.

This study aims to investigate the complexities of identity conflicts and cultural value clashes depicted among characters in Indian literature, both within their homeland and abroad. It seeks to delineate different levels of diaspora, portraying characters within India as displaced, uprooted, and devoid of a definitive sense of "home." Their concept of home is tinged with feelings of exile, stemming from experiences of exclusion by locals. Conversely, characters in the West grapple with the challenge of straddling two worlds, contending with a multitude of identities that lead to personal dilemmas. The selected novels collectively confront the trials of alienation, exile, and displacement within the framework of Indian societal norms.

This study delves into the portrayal of diasporas within and beyond India, unraveling the intricate social stratification systems that contribute to multiple forms of marginalization and oppression, particularly affecting lower castes. Women, exemplified by characters like Chuyia, endure dual marginalization—first as women and then as widows. Stranded in Ashrams with scant social support and financial security, they are dependent on charity while awaiting their uncertain fate. Characters such as Jasmine, experiencing a dual diaspora, challenge gender marginalization in India and confront societal norms by independently immigrating to the United States. Figures like Jemubhai Patel and Biju navigate the complexities of being torn between two cultures, illustrating the psychological displacement of doubly alienated diaspora in the U.K. and the U.S. Gender inequality, deeply entrenched in both biology and social hierarchy, impacts men from lower castes, subjecting them to discrimination and dehumanization. This paper explores the myriad ways in which the caste system influences Indians across diverse social, gender, and political contexts.

In summary, individuals partake in diverse intertextual processes to establish their identities and those of others in social contexts, bridging individual and societal realms. Through character expressions in Indian novels, interactions unveil personal experiences, influences, reconstructions, and submissions to the situational and structured realities they face. The theme of exile and estrangement runs throughout the novels, depicting the oppressive grip of power structures on the lives of diasporic characters. Although acknowledged as Indian minorities, they find themselves in contentious positions within the narrative of Indian national identity, yearning for acceptance and a sense of belonging. Diasporic characters, whether in their native lands or overseas, struggle with the discontent they face. India remains their birthplace, and their historical recollection of "home" becomes a conflicting realm of resistance and confinement. "Unhomeliness," distinct from mere homelessness, embodies a feeling of exile, marking their displacement and fragmentation, compelling them to construct new identities both within their home country and abroad. Within the homeland, diaspora is exemplified by characters like Chuyia in "Water," portraying the postcolonial battle against superstition. Gandhi's ideals offer the only glimpse of hope, envisioning a society that ceases to marginalize lower-caste individuals. Conversely, characters like Balram Halwai in "The White Tiger" revolt against systemic inequality, ascending the social hierarchy. "The Inheritance of Loss" exudes a pessimistic tone as characters like Jemubhai and Biju navigate the clash of Eastern and Western cultures, endeavoring to establish their identities and find a sense of belonging. Gyan resists foreign adversities to safeguard his traditional identity. The recurring themes of rejection and degradation lead to marginalization and a sense of displacement, thrusting characters into identity crises. Cultural encounters, as depicted through diasporic characters, entangle them in identity dilemmas, highlighting issues of alienation in various spheres of life, both domestically and internationally. In essence, this paper examines the intricate impacts of the caste system on Indians across social, gender, and political dimensions. It illuminates how diasporic characters navigate the complexities of dual diaspora, both at home and abroad. Each chapter showcases diverse outcomes among characters, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of identity struggles.





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