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A Study on Migration, Belonging, and the Idea of Home in Contemporary Indian Diasporic Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Migration i.e. geographical relocation is a common experience today, but literature shows that spatial movement is about much more than just changing physical locations. For migrants, it involves dealing with memories, languages, family traditions, social class, race, and the need to fit in. Contemporary Indian fiction shows that "home" is not just a fixed place on a map. Instead, home is something people create in their minds, emotions, and relationships, changing over time and across generations. This paper studies how migration, belonging, and the idea of home are portrayed in three novels: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Using cultural theories from several thinkers, the study argues that these books break away from the simple idea of being split between an old homeland and a new host country. In these stories, home is not an untouched place a person can simply return to; it is constantly rebuilt through memories, history and human connections. The paper also shows that not everyone experiences migration the same way. For some, it brings wealth and freedom, while for working-class or undocumented migrants, it brings discrimination, money struggles, and loneliness. Ultimately, these novels show that home is not a permanent piece of land, but an ongoing process of remembering, relating to others, and finding where one belongs.

Keywords: Migration, diaspora space, relational belonging, contemporary Indian fiction, hybridity, cultural identity, Third Space, transnationalism, territorial displacement.

INTRODUCTION

People have moved across borders throughout human history, and migration remains a defining feature of the modern world. Driven by reasons such as financial necessity, higher education, war, professional goals, or marriage, individuals continually seek new beginnings in unfamiliar places. Yet, migration is far more than an entry in census data or a line crossed on a map. Behind every journey lies a personal struggle involving emotional ties, native languages, ancestral customs, and local expectations. Fiction serves as an essential tool for uncovering these quiet realities, capturing the internal conflicts and personal transformations that come with relocation.

Indian diasporic literature holds an important place in postcolonial studies because it re-examines traditional notions of nationality, culture, and roots. Instead of portraying migration merely as a nostalgic longing for a lost homeland, South Asian writers show that the immigrant's relationship with home is layered, divided, and constantly shifting. Formal citizenship or years spent in a country do not guarantee inclusion; an individual can live somewhere for decades while feeling excluded, just as someone else can build a meaningful life far from where their family began.

In *Cartographies of Diaspora (1996),* Avtar Brah highlights this complexity by distinguishing between where a person physically lives and their deeper "homing desire"—the emotional longing for community and belonging. Brah's framework shows that "home" is not simply a synonym for "homeland". It can represent an actual location, a treasured memory, a family custom, a mother tongue, or a web of meaningful relationships.

Homi K Bhabha expands on this in *The Location of Culture* (1994) through his concepts of hybridity and the "Third Space". Bhabha rejects the idea that cultures are fixed or pure. Instead, he suggests that cultural meaning develops in an in-between space where different backgrounds meet, challenge, and reshape one another. This idea helps explain the lives of second-generation immigrants, who do not merely choose between their parents' traditions and local customs, but actively blend them into fresh, adaptive ways of living.

Stuart Hall's influential essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) similarly describes cultural identity as an ongoing process of "becoming" rather than an unchanging inheritance. Hall argues that identity is continually formed through history, social narratives, and power structures. For diasporic individuals, neither ancestral heritage nor the new host nation alone can fully define who they are. This paper explores these interconnected themes across three major novels: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988). While each work varies in style, period, and geography, all three explore the deep links between movement, memory, and the search for belonging.

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri traces two generations of a Bengali family moving between Calcutta and Massachusetts. She focuses on Gogol Ganguli's second-generation struggles, where his unusual name mirrors the tension between family heritage and personal autonomy. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai offers a sharp critique of global capitalism, connecting the Himalayan foothills of Kalimpong to the underground kitchens of New York City. Through this contrast, she reveals how colonial history and legal status make the immigrant experience far from equal. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh questions the very validity of political borders across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London. He illustrates how historical partitions and violence divide lands without ever truly severing human relationships.

Together, these novels challenge the rigid divide between homeland and host nation. Rather than treating home as a fixed location one can simply return to, they portray it as an ongoing, lived practice described here as relational belonging. Ultimately, these texts reveal that leaving home does not just cause loss; it prompts people to redefine what finding a home truly means.

Conceptualizing Diaspora, Mobility, and the De-Territorialisation of Home

The concept of diaspora has expanded well beyond older definitions that focused strictly on tragic exile, forced displacement, and the dream of returning to an ancestral land. While those traditional views remain relevant to certain historical events, modern migration requires a broader approach that can explain complex journeys and layered cultural loyalties.

In *Global Diasporas* (2008), Robin Cohen highlights the sheer diversity of modern migration, showing that people move for many different reasons—including manual labor, international business, empire-building, and higher education. Building on this variety, James Clifford (1994) cautions against looking at diaspora communities only through their ancestral "roots". Instead, he stresses the equal importance of "routes"—the actual travels, cultural exchanges, and everyday interactions that shape how migrants live. Diasporic identity is therefore formed in the balance between holding onto traditions and adapting to constant movement.

The South Asian diaspora reflects this wide variety of experiences. It includes indentured plantation workers sent abroad during British colonial rule, skilled professionals moving to Western nations after independence, contemporary service workers, and global intellectuals. Because these backgrounds are so different, they cannot be treated as a single, uniform group. In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie points out that migrants separated from their birthplace by time and distance cannot recover the past as it was. Instead, they rebuild their homeland in their minds using fragmented memories and personal impressions, making the remembered home a creative act rather than an exact replica.

Avtar Brah develops this further with her idea of "diaspora space" in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996). She argues that diaspora involves not just the immigrants themselves, but the shared social world where both long-term residents and newcomers live together. This interaction is constantly shaped by social realities like class, race, gender, and power. A diaspora space is a shared social arena rather than an isolated community. As a result, "home" stops being a permanent physical address and becomes an evolving mix of human connections, spoken languages, cooking traditions, and shared stories.

Theoretical Framework: Interstitial Spaces, Iterative Identity, and Social Stratification

In order to analyse the varied migration experiences across these novels, this study brings together four key cultural and postcolonial theories: Homi K Bhabha's Third Space, Stuart Hall's evolving cultural identity, Avtar Brah's diaspora space, and James Clifford's concept of roots and routes.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha dismantles the idea that any culture is pure or unchanging. He argues that colonial encounters naturally break down claims to cultural authenticity. His concept of the "Third Space" describes an in-between zone where familiar cultural symbols are questioned, combined, and reinvented. This framework is especially useful for looking at second-generation characters, who are often described as being stuck between two opposing worlds. Instead of being trapped, these individuals navigate an open, creative ground where new forms of hybrid identity can take shape.

Stuart Hall reinforces this view by separating identity from rigid, inherited labels. Hall argues that identity is not a fixed truth waiting to be uncovered, but an ongoing process shaped by history, social representation, and perspective. It is

less about what someone fundamentally "is" and more about how they are viewed and how they place themselves within society. This perspective helps us see the characters in Lahiri, Desai, and Ghosh not as static figures, but as adaptable individuals whose senses of self-evolve alongside their social and historical surroundings.

At the same time, Brah's diaspora space and Clifford's focus on travel routes keep the idea of cultural mixing grounded in real-world challenges. Blending cultures is rarely easy or equal. A person's ability to feel at home is heavily influenced by legal systems, racial bias, economic pressure, and institutional barriers. Recent research—such as Angela Naimou's edited collection *Diaspora and Literary Studies* (2023) and work by Morve et al. (2024)—shows that studying diaspora requires looking at both cultural adaptation and the harsh realities of legal exclusion and financial hardship.

The Namesake: Patronomy, Commemorative Inheritance, and Relational Dwelling

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), the struggle to belonging is mediated through everyday details such as personal names, family language, and household habits. The story follows Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli as they move from Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts, showing how relocating to another country transforms their private lives.

For Ashima, the move initially feels like a painful loss. Her early years in the United States are intensely lonely. Ordinary experiences such as going through pregnancy, cooking without familiar Indian ingredients, or walking on icy sidewalks—only deepen how much she misses her extended family back in Bengal. Lahiri highlights that displacement is felt not just during major historical events, but in small, everyday routines. Over time, however, Ashima's house in New England changes from an unfamiliar place into a comforting home where Bengali customs and American life blend together. Her concept of home becomes split: she is no longer fully anchored to a modern Calcutta that moved on without her, yet she never feels completely at home in an America where she remains an outsider. For her, home becomes a delicate balance between two worlds.

The generational gap is clearest in her American-born son, Gogol Ganguli. Unlike his parents, Gogol inherits his cultural heritage second-hand, with no personal memories of leaving India. His unusual Russian name, chosen by his father after surviving a horrific train crash, becomes the main source of his identity struggles. Growing up, Gogol views his name as an embarrassing burden like an awkward label that draws confused looks from peers and makes fitting into American society difficult. Changing his name legally to "Nikhil" is an effort to reinvent himself and break free from family expectations and cultural duties.

Yet the novel shows that finding oneself is not as simple as completely blending into Western society. After his father dies suddenly, Gogol comes to understand that his original name represents his father's survival and deep love. By trying to discard it, he had also pushed away the history that allowed him to be born. Lahiri shows that growing up does not mean Gogol must choose between returning to Bengal or becoming entirely American; instead, it means learning to live comfortably with mixed feelings. Pooja Mohan (2025) and Aparna Singh (2024) concluded that Lahiri presents immigrant identity as an ongoing balance between family roots and personal freedom. Ultimately, belonging is not about picking a single spot on a map, but about understanding and accepting the relationships that shape who you are.

The Inheritance of Loss: Globalized Precarity, Racial Hierarchy, and Estranged Modernity

While Lahiri focuses on the private and emotional life of middle-class immigrants, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) offers a sharp critique of the financial and political inequalities behind modern globalization. Desai connects the politically unstable hills of Kalimpong with the cramped basement kitchens of New York City, revealing how colonial history continues to shape the modern world.

The story of Biju, an undocumented kitchen worker in New York, exposes the harsh reality behind the dream of moving abroad. Driven overseas by poverty, Biju ends up trapped in the lowest ranks of Manhattan's restaurant trade. His daily life is defined by the constant fear of deportation, harsh bosses, low pay, and crowded rooms shared with other vulnerable workers from developing countries. In this way, Desai challenges cheerful claims of a borderless world: while wealthy travelers and corporate investments move across countries without trouble, undocumented workers remain legally defenseless and socially ignored.

Desai contrasts Biju's struggles with the life of Jemubhai Patel, a retired, Cambridge-educated judge living alone in Kalimpong. The Judge's time studying in mid-twentieth-century England did not lead to personal freedom or cultural acceptance; instead, it left him with deep racial insecurity and self-loathing. By adopting rigid English manners to fit in, Jemubhai returned to India completely disconnected from his family, his wife, and his own traditions. Desai shows that a person does not have to live in another country to feel displaced: The Judge is physically in India, yet he feels entirely homeless inside his own culture.

Through these two lives, Desai makes it clear that belonging depends heavily on wealth, social class, and race. Authors Babina Bohra and Usha Kumari Tigga (2024) observe, Desai strips away the romantic image of the easy going global traveller. New York depends on Biju's hard work, yet the city denies him legal rights and basic dignity. At the same time, Sai's sheltered, Westernized upbringing in Kalimpong is disrupted by the violent Gorkhaland political movement,

showing how ethnic divisions and old grievances can unravel a community. In Desai's writing, home is never a peaceful refuge; it is a space deeply unsettled by colonial memories, national boundaries, and economic inequality.

The Shadow Lines: Cartographic Illusions, Intersecting Histories, and Imaginative Geographies

Chronologically preceding Lahiri and Desai, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) provides an essential groundwork for understanding how migration, violence, and borders intersect. Set across Calcutta, Dhaka, and London, the novel questions the validity of national borders by weaving together personal memories, historical tragedies, and family stories.

The title itself highlights how artificial state boundaries really are. While politicians and mapmakers draw borders to mark national territory, Ghosh shows that these "shadow lines" have a tragic double nature: they cannot cut through shared memories, family ties, or intertwined cultures, yet they have the power to incite religious violence, forced displacement, and lasting trauma. Key historical events in the novel—such as the 1947 Partition of Bengal and the riots of 1964—demonstrate how political borders often create the very violence they claim to stop.

This contradiction appears most clearly in the narrator's grandmother, Tha'mma. Raised in pre-Partition Dhaka, she views nationality in rigid, black-and-white terms. When flying from Calcutta to newly formed East Pakistan to bring back her elderly uncle, she wonders aloud if she will see trenches, trenches of wire, or painted markers from the plane. Seeing an unbroken, continuous landscape below leaves her deeply unsettled: if there is no physical line on the ground, where does one country end and another begin? When she finally visits her childhood home, she finds that her memories no longer match a city reshaped by religious partition. For Tha'mma, going back to where she was born does not bring her back home; political maps have turned her into an outsider within her own past.

In contrast, Ila represents a privileged, rootless traveler. Moving frequently between London, Calcutta, and various Western capitals with her diplomatic family, she claims absolute personal freedom. Yet Ghosh reveals the emptiness behind this constant mobility. Ila's lack of roots leaves her isolated in England, where her desperate wish to fit in makes her overlook quiet racism and personal mistreatment. Through Tha'mma and Ila, Ghosh demonstrates that neither fierce nationalism nor shallow global wandering leads to true belonging.

Instead, the unnamed narrator finds a deeper sense of home through imagination and empathy. Influenced by his mentor Tridib, he learns that distance is not just a matter of miles. Two cities thousands of miles apart can share deep cultural connections, while neighbors living side by side can be torn apart by prejudice. In their research work, Shameem Black (2008) and Arnab Das and Madhumita Roy (2023) noted that Ghosh describes a form of global belonging rooted in family conversations and human connection. In *The Shadow Lines*, home is ultimately an imaginative bond that reaches far beyond political maps.

Comparative Analysis: Triangulating Home, Memory, and Materiality

Comparing these three novels reveals strong common themes, showing that modern Indian diasporic writing consistently rebuilds the idea of home through memory, daily habits, and generational shifts.

- **Home as Living Memory:** Across all three books, memory is not just a quiet storehouse of past events; it actively creates a sense of home. For Ashima in *The Namesake*, cooking traditional meals and keeping family routines recreate a Bengali environment inside an American house. In *The Shadow Lines*, personal memories challenge official national history by highlighting connections that cross divided borders. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, colonial memories haunt the Judge, while fond recollections of Kalimpong give Biju brief moments of comfort while working in New York basements.
- **The Physical Side of Everyday Life:** Belonging is continually tied to ordinary objects and sensory experiences, such as home cooking, native languages, clothes, letters, and household rooms. In *The Namesake*, the family kitchen serves as a bridge keeping Bengali traditions alive across generations. In *The Shadow Lines*, old letters, pictures, and family tales connect Calcutta with London. Desai, however, highlights the harsh financial side of housing: while the Judge stays in a crumbling colonial mansion, Biju is forced into crowded, run-down basements, proving that having a decent home depends directly on financial security.
- **Generational Gaps and Social Inequality:** Together, the novels dismantle the idea that cultural traditions pass down without alteration. Parents like Ashoke and Ashima keep strong emotional attachments formed before moving abroad, whereas second-generation children like Gogol must figure out how to reshape that heritage within a Western society. More importantly, Desai shows that finding a place to belong is not just a mental or emotional exercise. Legal status, racial prejudice, and economic inequality ultimately decide whether moving abroad brings personal freedom or painful hardship.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Indian diasporic writing provides deep insight into modern life by challenging the common belief that where a person is born permanently defines who they are. Through distinct storytelling styles, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The*

Namesake, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* show that searching for a sense of home is one of the most urgent and emotional struggles in our interconnected world.

In Lahiri's novel, finding a place to belong relies on quiet household traditions, family affection, and coming to terms with inherited names. In Desai's work, the idealized image of the global traveler is taken apart, drawing direct attention to the financial barriers, legal troubles, and colonial history that decide who gets to live safely. In Ghosh's narrative, national borders are shown to be artificial lines drawn across shared historical suffering and mutual empathy.

Together, these three books prove that moving abroad does not simply lead to permanent loneliness or a loss of identity. Instead, it pushes people to rethink how they connect with others. Belonging today does not require staying tied to a single plot of land or claiming a pure national background. Instead, it means living within an open, adaptable space built on memories, shared understanding, and genuine human connection. Ultimately, modern Indian diasporic fiction turns the idea of home from a closed piece of territory into an active, creative, and ongoing part of daily life.

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