



Research Article

Between Departure and Belonging: The Representation of Migration and Diaspora in Modern Novels

Dr. Jyoti Dutt

Department of English, Govt. College for Women, Gandhinagar, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Corresponding Author: * Dr. Jyoti Dutt

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21807164>

Abstract

The closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first have witnessed the emergence of migration and diaspora as among the most consequential subjects of the modern novel, a development that runs parallel to, and is inseparable from, the accelerated global movements of people occasioned by decolonisation, economic globalisation, and, more recently, conflict-driven displacement. This paper examines how a selection of major diasporic novels -- Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* -- narrate the experience of leaving, arriving, and remaining suspended between cultural worlds. Drawing on the theoretical vocabulary of diaspora studies developed by Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, James Clifford, and Avtar Brah, and employing a qualitative methodology of comparative close reading, the paper identifies four recurring representational strategies across the novels under study: the fracturing of linear narrative time to register the psychological rupture of displacement; the use of food, language, and domestic space as sites of cultural negotiation; the figuration of the second generation as inhabitants of a hybrid, "in-between" cultural position; and the increasingly abstract, allegorical treatment of border-crossing in the most recent fiction of forced migration. The paper argues that the modern diasporic novel has progressively moved from a mode primarily concerned with nostalgic recovery of an original homeland toward one that treats hybridity and multiple belonging as a generative, if often painful, condition in its own right, and that this shift itself constitutes a significant contribution of diasporic fiction to the broader development of the novel form.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 3139-6313
- Received: 13-06-2026
- Accepted: 26-07-2026
- Published: 05-08-2026
- IJCRP:1(4); 2026: 78-81
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Dutt J. Between Departure and Belonging: The Representation of Migration and Diaspora in Modern Novels. Int. J. Creative Res. Publ. 2026;1(4):78-81.

Access this Article Online



www.jcrp.in

KEYWORDS: diaspora studies; migration literature; hybridity; postcolonial novel; transnational identity; second-generation narrative; displacement

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has always accompanied the novel as a subject, but its status shifted decisively over the course of the twentieth century from an occasional theme to one of the form's defining preoccupations. Salman Rushdie observed, in his influential 1982 essay "Imaginary Homelands," that writers who have left their countries of origin are compelled to create fictions not of any actual, recoverable homeland but of "imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind," assembled from fragmentary and often unreliable memory. This formulation, offered at the threshold of what would become a substantial body of

diasporic fiction in English, anticipates one of the central formal challenges that migration poses to the novel: how to narrate an experience of identity that is no longer anchored in a single, continuous geography, and that must instead be pieced together across the ruptures of departure, arrival, and the passage of generations.

The theoretical study of diaspora developed alongside, and in significant dialogue with, this expanding body of fiction. Stuart Hall's distinction between cultural identity understood as a fixed, essential origin and cultural identity understood as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" provided an early and

durable framework for reading diasporic subjectivity as an ongoing process of construction rather than a static inheritance. Homi Bhabha's account of cultural hybridity and the "third space" of enunciation, James Clifford's insistence that diasporic consciousness is constituted through multiple, sometimes contradictory, attachments to both a place of origin and a place of settlement, and Avtar Brah's concept of the "diaspora space" as a terrain inhabited by migrants and those who imagine themselves as indigenous alike, together supply the conceptual vocabulary through which this paper approaches the primary texts.

This paper examines how six novels, spanning roughly four decades of publication, represent the experience of migration and diasporic belonging: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). The selection is designed to capture a range of migratory circumstances -- postcolonial decolonization, professional and economic migration, and conflict-driven displacement -- as well as a range of narrative strategies, from Rushdie's maximalist magical realism to Hamid's spare, fable-like prose. The paper asks three central questions. First, what formal and structural techniques do these novelists employ to represent the psychological experience of displacement? Second, how is the second generation -- children born to or raised substantially within the diaspora -- represented in relation to the generation that migrated? Third, how has the representation of migration in the novel changed as the underlying global phenomenon of migration has itself changed, from the decolonization-era movements of the mid-twentieth century to the mass forced displacements of the early twenty-first?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Primary Materials

The primary materials for this study are six novels in English, selected for their prominence within the critical field of diaspora and migration literature and for the range of migratory experience and narrative technique they represent: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017). These texts were chosen to represent distinct diasporic geographies -- the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean and South Asian diasporas in Britain, West Africa and the United States, and an unspecified, allegorized global South in Hamid's novel -- while remaining connected by a shared thematic concern with the negotiation of cultural identity across national boundaries.

2.2 Secondary Materials

Secondary materials draw on the foundational and continuing scholarship of diaspora and postcolonial studies, including Stuart Hall's essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), James Clifford's essay "Diasporas" (1994), Avtar Brah's

Cartographies of Diaspora (1996), Salman Rushdie's essay collection *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), and Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (2007). These works were selected to provide a theoretical vocabulary spanning the concepts of hybridity, cultural translation, diasporic space, and the diasporic imaginary, against which the primary texts are read.

2.3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative methodology combining close textual reading with the application of diaspora theory. Each primary text was analyzed for its treatment of four recurring representational concerns identified through initial reading across the corpus: narrative temporality and structure; the symbolic use of food, language, and domestic space; the generational distinction between migrants and their children; and the formal treatment of the border or threshold of migration itself. Rather than proceeding novel by novel, the analysis in Section 3 is organized thematically across the six texts, allowing points of convergence and divergence among the novels to be foregrounded. The study does not employ quantitative or corpus-based methods, and its claims rest on representative textual evidence rather than exhaustive enumeration of every instance of a given theme within each novel.

3. OBSERVATIONS / RESULTS

3.1 Fractured Temporality and the Structure of Memory

A consistent formal feature across the novels under study is the disruption of linear chronology in favor of structures that mimic the fragmentary, associative operation of migrant memory. *Midnight's Children* is narrated retrospectively by Saleem Sinai, whose account moves backward and forward across three generations and repeatedly draws attention to its own unreliability and the risk of narrative disintegration, a structure that formally enacts the novel's larger claim that postcolonial identity is assembled from partial, cracking fragments rather than received as a continuous inheritance. *The Inheritance of Loss* similarly interweaves the present-day narrative set in Kalimpong with the retrospective account of Biju's precarious existence as an undocumented worker in New York, cutting between the two locations in a manner that formally enacts the simultaneous, doubled consciousness that diaspora theorists have identified as characteristic of migrant subjectivity. *White Teeth* extends this technique across three families and multiple generations, its looping, digressive structure resisting any single point of narrative origin, consistent with the novel's thematic resistance to any singular account of English, Bangladeshi, or Jamaican identity.

3.2 Food, Language, and Domestic Space as Sites of Negotiation

Across the six novels, the domestic sphere -- and particularly the preparation and sharing of food -- repeatedly emerges as the terrain on which cultural negotiation is most intimately conducted. *The Namesake* makes recurrent use of Bengali cooking, undertaken by Ashima Ganguli in her Massachusetts kitchen, as a means by which she reconstructs a fragment of

the world she has left, the narrative noting with particular attention her substitution of available American ingredients for those she cannot obtain, a small but symbolically dense act of cultural improvisation. Naming itself becomes a further site of negotiation in the same novel, as the protagonist Gogol's dissatisfaction with his Russian-derived pet name, neither fully Bengali nor fully American, dramatizes the difficulty of inhabiting a single, stable identity category. Americanah similarly uses hair -- specifically the protagonist Ifemelu's decision to stop chemically straightening her hair after moving to the United States -- as an extended symbol through which questions of racial and cultural self-presentation in a new national context are worked through across the length of the novel.

3.3 The Second Generation and the Hybrid Subject

A further recurring pattern is the distinct treatment of first-generation migrants, who typically retain a strong, often idealized, attachment to a place of origin, and their children, who are represented as occupying what Bhabha terms a third space, neither fully assimilated into the new national culture nor straightforwardly continuous with their parents' culture of origin. Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* and Irie Jones and the Iqbal twins in *White Teeth* are the clearest instances of this pattern: each is shown negotiating an identity that draws upon, without being reducible to, the cultural frameworks of both parents' homeland and the country of their own upbringing. Smith's novel is particularly attentive to the divergent responses this hybrid position can produce within a single family, as the twin brothers Millat and Magid, raised in the same household, arrive at strikingly different, at times opposed, relationships to their Bangladeshi heritage and to English society, one gravitating toward religious fundamentalism and the other toward secular rationalism, in a narrative choice that resists any single, generalized account of how second-generation identity is resolved.

3.4 From Nostalgic Homeland to Abstract Threshold

A final and historically significant pattern concerns the changing representation of the border or threshold of migration itself across the chronological span of the corpus. In *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981 and concerned principally with the aftermath of Partition and decolonization, migration and displacement are represented through richly particularized geography -- named cities, specific historical events, densely rendered local detail. By contrast, *Exit West*, published in 2017 amid an intensifying global crisis of forced displacement, represents its unnamed city of origin and the act of border-crossing itself through the deliberately abstracted device of magical doors that transport characters instantly between locations, a formal choice that strips migration of specific geographic and bureaucratic detail in order to foreground its psychological and ethical dimensions as a near-universal condition rather than a particular national history.

4. DISCUSSION AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Hybridity as Generative Condition

The patterns identified in Section 3 substantially support Bhabha's contention that diasporic identity is best understood not as a compromised or diminished version of a prior, whole cultural identity, but as a genuinely generative "third space" in which new cultural meanings are produced through the encounter of previously distinct traditions. The second-generation characters examined above are rarely represented as simply caught between two cultures in a condition of pure loss; Gogol's eventual, qualified reconciliation with his given name, and Irie Jones's tentative construction of a sense of self that draws selectively from her Jamaican, English, and adopted intellectual influences, both suggest that hybridity, while frequently a source of narrative conflict, is treated by these novelists as a productive rather than purely privative condition. This reading aligns with Hall's argument that diasporic identity should be understood through the lens of continual production rather than rediscovery of a pre-existing essence.

4.2 The Limits of Hybridity: Trauma and Precarity

Against this broadly generative account, however, several of the novels under study insist on the continued reality of trauma, precarity, and unresolved loss within the migrant experience, complicating any reading of diasporic hybridity as a wholly celebratory condition. Biju's storyline in *The Inheritance of Loss*, structured around his undocumented and economically exploitative existence in New York kitchens, offers a sustained counterweight to more celebratory accounts of cosmopolitan hybridity, insisting on the material and legal precarity that structures much contemporary labor migration and that is frequently obscured in more abstract theoretical treatments of diasporic identity. Adichie's *Americanah* similarly insists, through Ifemelu's blog commentary embedded within the novel, on the persistence of racial categorization as an involuntary condition imposed upon the migrant subject in the United States, a condition that exists prior to and independent of any individual negotiation of hybrid identity. These narrative strands suggest that the generative account of hybridity offered by Bhabha and, to a degree, enacted in the novels' second-generation storylines, requires supplementation by continued attention to the structural and economic conditions -- immigration law, racial hierarchy, labor exploitation -- that constrain the migrant subject's capacity to freely construct a hybrid identity.

4.3 Allegory and the Ethics of Representing Forced Migration

Hamid's use of abstraction in *Exit West* raises a distinct critical question concerning the ethics and effectiveness of allegorical representation in fiction addressing contemporary forced displacement. By declining to specify the national origin of his protagonists' city or the precise mechanics of the magical doors through which they migrate, Hamid arguably universalizes the experience of displacement, inviting readers to recognize the migrant condition as a potential rather than a distant reality. Critics reading the novel through Clifford's framework of diaspora as constituted through multiple, simultaneous attachments have noted that this abstraction also risks eliding the specific political, legal, and historical circumstances that

produce forced migration in particular places, a risk that stands in some tension with the more historically and geographically particularized approach of earlier diasporic fiction such as Rushdie's. This tension between the universalizing and the particularizing impulse recurs across the critical reception of contemporary migration fiction and suggests that no single formal strategy -- whether Rushdie's maximalist historical specificity or Hamid's spare allegory -- offers a complete solution to the representational challenge posed by contemporary displacement.

4.4 The Diasporic Novel as a Developing Form

Read together chronologically, the six novels suggest a discernible development within the diasporic novel as a form, moving from an early emphasis, exemplified by Rushdie, on the nostalgic and ironically qualified reconstruction of a lost or transformed national homeland, toward an increasing emphasis, exemplified by Hamid and, in a different register, by Smith, on hybridity and simultaneity as conditions to be represented in their own right rather than measured against an original, whole identity. This shift corresponds broadly to the changing historical circumstances of migration itself, from the decolonisation-era movements informing Rushdie's and Desai's fiction to the accelerated, often forced, transnational movements informing Hamid's, indicating that the form has evolved in response to the changing global conditions it represents.

5. CONCLUSION

The representation of migration and diaspora in the modern novel constitutes one of the most formally and thematically significant developments in contemporary fiction in English. This study has identified four recurring representational strategies across a chronologically and geographically diverse selection of diasporic novels: the disruption of linear narrative temporality to register the psychological rupture of displacement; the use of food, language, naming, and domestic space as intimate sites of cultural negotiation; the distinctive treatment of second-generation characters as inhabitants of a generative, if often contested, hybrid cultural position; and an evolving, increasingly abstract or allegorical treatment of the border and the act of migration itself in the most recent fiction addressing forced displacement. Read against the theoretical framework developed by Hall, Bhabha, Clifford, and Brah, these strategies together suggest that the modern diasporic novel has progressively reconceived migrant identity not as a diminished remainder of a lost original culture but as an ongoing, actively constructed condition, even as several of the novels under study insist on the continued material precarity, racial categorization, and legal vulnerability that constrain the migrant subject's capacity for such construction. Future research might extend this study through closer comparative attention to diasporic fiction beyond the Anglophone tradition, and through more sustained engagement with second-generation and refugee-authored fiction published since.

REFERENCES

1. Adichie CN. *Americanah*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 2013.
2. Bhabha HK. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge; 1994.
3. Brah A. *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. London: Routledge; 1996.
4. Clifford J. Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology*. 1994;9(3):302-338.
5. Desai K. *The inheritance of loss*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press; 2006.
6. Hall S. Cultural identity and diaspora. In: Rutherford J, editor. *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart; 1990. p. 222-237.
7. Hamid M. *Exit West*. New York: Riverhead Books; 2017.
8. Lahiri J. *The namesake*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; 2003.
9. Mishra V. *The literature of the Indian diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. London: Routledge; 2007.
10. Rushdie S. *Midnight's children*. London: Jonathan Cape; 1981.
11. Rushdie S. *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism, 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books; 1991.
12. Smith Z. *White teeth*. London: Hamish Hamilton; 2000.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license. This license permits sharing and redistribution of the article in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, provided that appropriate credit is given to the original author(s) and source. No modifications, adaptations, or derivative works are permitted under this license.

About the author



Dr. Jyoti Dutt is a faculty member in the Department of English at Government College for Women, Gandhinagar, Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir, India. She is dedicated to teaching English literature and language, mentoring students, and contributing to academic research and scholarly activities within the field of English studies.