

Intersectional Feminism and the Politics of Belonging in Diasporic and Transnational Narratives

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Abstract: This paper examines intersectional feminism and the politics of belonging in Indian diasporic and transnational literature through a close reading of **Anita Desai's** *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), **Bharati Mukherjee's** *Jasmine* (1989), and **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's** *Queen of Dreams* (2004). Drawing upon intersectional feminist theory, the present research explores how women's experiences of migration are shaped not solely by gender but by the intersecting forces of race, class, culture, nation, and migration status. The paper argues that diasporic belonging is not a neutral or inclusive condition but a politically regulated and gendered process, in which women are required to negotiate cultural loyalty, racial visibility, and patriarchal expectations simultaneously. In *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, Desai foregrounds psychological alienation and racial exclusion in post-imperial Britain, revealing the emotional cost of migrant belonging for women confined within domestic and marital structures. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* presents a more radical feminist trajectory, portraying identity as fluid and repeatedly reconstructed through migration, violence, and survival within racialized American spaces. Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* situates belonging within memory, motherhood, and post-9/11 racial surveillance, highlighting the affective and intergenerational dimensions of diasporic womanhood. By placing these texts in comparative dialogue, the paper demonstrates how Indian diasporic women writers reconfigure belonging as a contested space shaped by intersectional marginalities. The study ultimately contends that feminist diasporic narratives move beyond assimilationist paradigms to articulate alternative modes of belonging grounded in resistance, memory, and self-authored identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, intersectional, marginalities, assimilation, self-authored identity

The phenomenon of diaspora has long occupied a central place in literary and cultural studies, particularly in relation to questions of identity, displacement, memory, and cultural negotiation. In recent decades, critical approaches have increasingly addressed the gendered aspects of diasporic experience, recognizing that migration does not affect all subjects equally. Women's experiences of displacement are shaped not only by geographical movement but also by the interconnected forces of gender, race, class, nation, culture, and legal status. Indian diasporic and transnational literature, especially fiction written by women, offers a crucial space to examine how these interconnected structures of power regulate belonging and subjectivity in migrant contexts (Crenshaw 1989).

Avtar Brah's concept of traditional diasporic discourse often portrays belonging as a straightforward process of assimilation or cultural adjustment within host societies. Such models prioritise male migrant narratives and ignore the complex negotiations undertaken by women, whose bodies, labour, and emotional lives often become sites of cultural preservation, racialised visibility, and patriarchal control (Brah 1996). Feminist critiques have challenged these reductive frameworks by foregrounding women's voices and emphasising the need for intersectional approaches that account for multiple, overlapping forms of marginalisation.

Intersectional feminism, as articulated by theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw and further developed within transnational feminist scholarship, offers a critical perspective that reinterprets diasporic belonging as a politically regulated, unequal, and gendered process rather than a neutral condition of inclusion. Brah's framework allows us to view belonging not as a simple arrival into a host culture, but as a continuous negotiation of memory, alienation, and cultural power. Similarly, Floya Anthias's idea of translocational positionality emphasises that migrant identities are not fixed but are constantly constructed within shifting social spaces such as race, class, gender, and nation (Anthias 2002). These theoretical insights are particularly useful for analysing the stories of Indian diasporic women, where belonging is fragmented, conditional, and context dependent.

Research Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology grounded in intersectional feminist theory and transnational feminist criticism. Rather than employing empirical or sociological methods, the paper undertakes close textual analysis of three selected Indian diasporic novels: Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) to examine how narratives of migration articulate gendered experiences of belonging across different historical and cultural contexts.

The present research has three objectives first, to analyze how intersectional feminism reflects women's diasporic experiences in selected Indian English novels; Second, by examining the politics of belonging as shaped by overlapping structures of power rather than distinct identities; and third, by contributing to feminist diasporic literary studies by offering comparative readings that emphasize the psychological, emotional, and cultural aspects of transnational womanhood. In doing so, this paper seeks to reaffirm the importance of feminist perspectives in reimagining diaspora not as a place of arrival, but as an ongoing process of negotiation and resistance.

In this theoretical context, the writings of Indian diasporic women emerge as a powerful counter-discursive space. Writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni do not simply describe migration as a movement across borders; rather, they question the emotional, psychological, and cultural costs of belonging in racialised and patriarchal transnational spaces. Their stories reveal how women often must negotiate the competing demands of cultural loyalty, racial legitimacy, and domestic responsibility, even as they face exclusion, surveillance, and identity fragmentation in host societies.

Anita Desai's novel, set in post-imperial Britain, exposes the psychic loneliness experienced by Indian migrants, especially women confined within Indian marriage and hierarchical domestic structures. The novel illustrates how racial exclusion and cultural dislocation intersect with gender expectations, making belonging an emotionally burdensome and often unattainable ideal. The novel explores the lives of Adit Sen, an established immigrant who initially romanticises London, and Dev, a newcomer whose arrival triggers a crisis of identity for everyone in their circle. However, it is Sarah Sen, Adit's English wife, who embodies the most complex politics of belonging in the narrative. Sarah exists at the intersection of two worlds, belonging to neither, nor her character provides a profound look at the emotional cost of migrant belonging.

"Across the overcoats.....them disappear" (Desai 1971)

This dialogue suggests that for Sarah, belonging is not an additive process but a subtractive one. To belong to Adit's Indian world, she must relinquish her English self, yet she is

never fully accepted as Indian. Conversely, in the English public space, she must hide her Indian association to avoid the *inquisitiveness* and judgment of her peers. She feels like an impostor in both roles because she can never achieve wholeness. However, the paper walls of her fort in her office represent her attempt to use bureaucracy and order to keep these conflicting identities apart, and they were eventually *swamped* by the unreality of her existence (Hall 1990).

Domestic Space and the Impostor Syndrome: Sarah Sen's experience is defined by a deep psychological fragmentation. Desai describes her as '*someone who has shed her ancestry and identity to inhabit a nameless state between her English heritage and her Bengali marriage.*' This fragmentation is most visible in her performance of two roles—the efficient school secretary in the public sphere and the traditional Indian wife in the private domestic space.

In contrast, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) offers a more transformative feminist narrative in which identity is repeatedly dismantled and reconstructed through migration, violence, and survival in racialised American spaces. In this novel, character Jasmine moves the discourse of belonging into a more *radical feminist trajectory*, portraying identity as a series of lifetimes that must be repeatedly reconstructed. The protagonist, born Jyoti in the village of **Hasnapur**, undergoes a '*metamorphosis*' that is inextricably linked to migration, violence, and the rejection of traditional Indian fatalism. The dialogue with her sisters after the accident highlights her refusal to be defined by a '**scar**':

"It's not a scar, I shouted, it's my third eye... Through that eye, they peered out into invisible worlds. Now I'm a sage" (Mukharjee 1989)

This interpretation of the wound is a foundational act of intersectional feminism. Jyoti recognises that as a woman in a feudal society, she is viewed as a curse and cattle, but claiming the third eye, she asserts a spiritual and intellectual foresight that transcends her gendered status (Kumari & Saloni 2025). The *politics of belonging* here is internal; she refuses to belong to the *fatalism* of Hasnapur and instead sets her sights on invisible worlds. Mukherjee challenges fixed notions of self-identity, portraying belonging as sudden, unstable, and self-acquired, rather than inherited. Mukherjee's dialogue emphasises the violence of this shift: *We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams*. This is not a harmless or compassionate process; it involves the literal and figurative death of past selves. Jasmine's ability to shuttle between identities allows her to survive the trauma of being raped and the *stench* of her past, suggesting that for the **diasporic woman**, belonging is a tornado of constant motion rather than a fixed point of arrival (Mohanty 2003).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) extends this conversation to the post-9/11 era, situating belonging abroad within the context of memory, motherhood, and intergenerational change, while also highlighting the increasing racial surveillance faced by South Asian communities in the United States. The *Queen of Dreams* is physically situated in Rakhi's coffee shop, the **Chai House**, located in **Berkeley**. Unlike the domestic confinement seen in Desai's work, **Rakhi's** shop is a public space that provides her with something tangible to hold on to during her personal crises, such as her divorce. Rakhi's dialogue regarding her customers highlights the communal nature of her belonging:

"Our customers allow us into their lives just as we've invited them into ours. That our shop stays with them even after they leave it" (Divakaruni 2004).

When a corporate chain named **Java** threatens her business, Rakhi's father helps her reclaim the shop's ethnic sensibility by renaming it **Kurma House** and serving authentic **Bengali dishes**. This transition is a performance of *cultural solidarity*; the shop becomes a place

of expression and celebration of their ethnic culture. However, the politics of belonging is shown to be precarious; the Kurma House is not just a business but a target for those who view the immigrant community with suspicion.

Post 9/11 surveillance: Global events like the attack of 9/11 disrupt immigrants' sense of community. It argues that political crises, as immigrants face stereotypes as terrorists or culprits. This racial scrutiny directly affects Rakhi's life and business. The post-9/11 shock results in a fire at the Kurma House, symbolizing both literal and metaphorical assaults on immigrant spaces. Rakhi and her peers become doubly displaced, rejected as neither fully Indian nor American amid public suspicion. Heightened U.S. security measures intensify an internal conflict for second-generation immigrants like Rakhi, underscoring their urgent search for belonging (Crenshaw 1989).

By placing these three books in comparative conversation, this study examines how Indian women writers living abroad represent belonging as a contested and negotiated space, constructed by different marginalized individuals. The paper argues that diasporic belonging is not a singular or all-encompassing experience, but rather a gendered and politically regulated process that requires constant negotiation by women at the intersections of race, nation, culture, and patriarchy. Through an intersectional feminist framework, this study shows how these stories resist the assimilationist paradigm and instead suggest modes of belonging based on resistance, memory, emotional labor, and self-authored identities.

In conclusion, the present research studying writings of Indian diasporic women, when read through an intersectional feminist framework, offers a critical rethinking of belonging. By placing *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, *Jasmine*, and *Queen of Dreams* in comparative dialogue, the paper has shown that belonging in diasporic and transnational contexts is neither neutral nor universally accessible; rather, it is a politically regulated, gendered, and uneven process shaped by the intersections of race, gender, class, culture, nation, and historical moment.

Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* exposes the psychological and emotional costs of migrant life, showing how women like Sara Sen experience belonging in domestic and public spaces as loss, fragmentation, and emotional invisibility. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* radically disrupts fixed notions of identity, theorizing belonging as fluid, self-authored, and constantly reconstructed through migration, violence, and survival. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* furthers this conversation. It foregrounds memory, motherhood, and intergenerational impact, as well as diasporic belonging in a climate of racial surveillance and cultural suspicion following 9/11. Together, these stories resist assimilationist models of diaspora and challenge masculinist and nation-centric frameworks of migration. They reframe belonging as a continuous negotiation rather than a final state of arrival, emphasizing emotional labor, resistance, memory, and feminist agency. This research thus underscores the need for intersectional feminist approaches in diasporic literary studies, as they highlight how women's transnational experiences are shaped by overlapping structures of power rather than individual identities. Ultimately, this study confirms that Indian diasporic women's fiction does not simply depict displacement but actively theorises alternative and feminist modes of engagement based on critique, survival, and self-definition.

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