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## Roots, Routes, and Self-Reliance: Identity, Caste, and Migration in Indian Literature through IKS and the Ethos of Atmanirbhar Bharat

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### Abstract

This study examines how cultural identity is negotiated in Indian literature across contexts of migration, social inequality, and cultural conflict, both within India and in the diaspora. Focusing on Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* (2006), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), the research explores how characters experience displacement, alienation, caste hierarchies, class disparities, and transnational mobility while continually seeking belonging and selfhood across shifting social and geographical spaces. These narratives depict diverse cultural settings—from the Bengali diaspora in the United States to identities shaped by caste, community ethics, and power structures within Indian society. Interpreted through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), the study analyses how ideas such as dharma, kinship, cultural memory, and community values shape individuals' understanding of self and society. It also examines the tensions that arise when indigenous worldviews encounter global modernity, revealing how identity is negotiated between inherited traditions and transnational experiences. In this framework, "home" emerges not merely as a physical location but as a philosophical and civilizational idea that sustains resilience, meaning, and continuity. In alignment with the ethos of *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, the study further highlights forms of cultural self-reliance that emerge from IKS-based values. The characters' journeys illustrate how self-making in conditions of mobility draws strength from indigenous ethics and memory, reflecting India's broader aspiration to balance global engagement with civilizational rootedness.

**Keywords:** Identity Negotiation, Diaspora and Migration, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Cultural Memory and Belonging, Atmanirbhar Bharat

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## Introduction:

This study investigates the identity dilemmas that are depicted in Indian literature in the homeland and diasporas, as showcased in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* (2006), and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). The meticulous selection of novels is not based on a specific time frame, but rather on the diverse cultural and sociopolitical contexts of India, as the study is concerned with movement and alienation within and beyond the borders of the homeland.

The study envisions several layers of diaspora: one resulting from the hierarchical caste conflict in the homeland that engenders estrangement, and the actual individuals who migrate to the West. The characters residing in their homeland belong to ethnic minorities, coexist with the dominant culture, and contend within its frontiers. They reside in exile, are displaced from their homeland, and anticipate reintegration into that homeland. According to Paul Gilroy in his article "Diaspora," the concept of diaspora is not characterized by biographical ties across geographical regions but is established via differentiation. The diaspora is founded on conflicting emotions and the ambivalence of belonging, particularly highlighted by processes of exclusion (Gilroy, 1994). This validates the concept that those from the lower Indian caste exist in a perpetual state of diaspora, even within the confines of their nation. The protagonists saw themselves as misfits from the social fabric of their hometown throughout their lives. Their narratives exemplify a form of isolation that marginalizes minorities from the Indian majority. Ultimately, they are doubly marginalized, both by external and internal agencies, within their own category and from the dominant category. Individuals relocating to the West become part of what this study designates as a "double diaspora", a hybrid experience that transcends ethnic and national boundaries. This diaspora is marked by various dualities, as individuals identify as both Indian and American, with their motherland transforming into an adopted homeland, while their new adopted country, America, intensifies their alienation.

One of the most significant themes of diaspora is the movement away from one's cultural context, abandoning one's hometown, and dispersion. In his article "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", William Safran defines diaspora in the context of multiple groups: as the dispersion of collective memory, vision, or myth from a center to two or more peripheral or foreign regions. It also denotes the conviction that the host country is incapable of complete acceptance, which results in displacement and alienation (Safran, 1991). Thus, diaspora generates a variety of contested concepts and images. It incorporates a variety of cultures, languages, histories, people, places, and times. It implies that individuals are not only dispersed to various locations, but also that they convene in other locations to establish new communities. As Brah asserts in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), "the experiences of diasporas are distinct, and all diasporas refer, in essence, to a specific type of displacement" (183). As a result of these circumstances, a novel culture and a new consciousness emerge to complement the existing culture. Consequently, new imagined communities emerge that do not merely supplant the old ones; rather, they establish a new community that is referred to as the "New Diaspora" by Benedict Anderson (2006).

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In “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return” (1991), William Safran contends that the concept of diaspora has undergone a transformation in the present day. More specifically, “diasporic communities” are employed as metaphorical terms to refer to a variety of groups, including expatriates, refugees, foreign residents, and ethnic and racial minorities. This is similar to the way in which “ghettoization” has come to represent all forms of constrictive and impoverished urban environments (Safran, 83). The term “diaspora” also encompasses populations, including members of ethnic or religious groups who are initially from the same location but have since relocated to new locations. Safran also identifies sentiments of alienation, isolation, or nonacceptance as additional characteristics of diaspora.

The Indian diaspora refers to those who migrate beyond the nation’s borders or inside the states and territories of the Republic of India. India comprises twenty-nine states and seven union territories. Individuals depart from their accustomed environments, traverse states and regions, and encounter what they regard as unfamiliarity, although remaining within the confines of the same nation. Consequently, foreignness extends beyond residing in a nation that is unfamiliar to one’s native country. It also encompasses emotions of alienation that one may encounter inside the confines of one’s home country and among states within the same nation. It pertains to the migration of individuals from one state to another, as noted by Madhu Tyagi in his book, *Theory of Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Global Migration* (2017). In this regard, Aravind Adiga’s novel *The White Tiger* demonstrates diasporic characteristics. The diasporic experience is reflected in Balram, the protagonist, who recounts his transition from his rural hamlet to Delhi and then to a prosperous entrepreneurial life in Bangalore. The diasporic experience is visible in *Water* when Chuyia and the other widows from other regions are relegated to a widows’ ashram, an institution where they are compelled to spend the remainder of their lives in penance. The idea of diaspora pertains to identity, encompassing ethnic and cultural identities (Hall, 1990), as it emphasizes international and dynamic processes associated with ethnic commonality while recognizing variances and diversity.

The discrimination that results in marginalization and in-between is significantly influenced by the Indian caste system. Regardless of the beliefs that an individual holds, caste is a characteristic that is determined by birth. It is a system of social stratification that divides Hindus into rigid, hierarchical organizations. Hindus are divided into four primary categories by the caste system. The Brahmins, who are intellectuals, are at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Additionally, rural communities are divided into higher and lower castes. Food and drink from inferior castes are not accepted by Brahmins, and individuals are only permitted to marry within their own caste. Many liberties are denied to lower castes, and they are socially isolated. They are prohibited from crossing the boundary between their own section of the village and the area inhabited by the higher castes. Consequently, the lower caste is entirely precluded due to their position at the bottom of the caste system. In the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1930), A.L. Kroeber characterizes the caste system as a system of social stratification that is generally rigid, determined from birth, and does not permit individual mobility. The upper caste occupies a dominant position in society and endeavours to exhibit its influence over the lower caste. The

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privileged and less privileged status of Indian individuals is a result of the hegemonic influences of the caste and colonial system. Consequently, in India, socially constructed values are regarded as the custom, culture, or norm of a specific society, and are thereby validated. The lower strata or the less privileged are victimized by signs of their status, regardless of the cause. Their treatment is dehumanizing due to the fact that they are deemed too “dirty” or “defiling” by the higher or upper caste communities, which leads to an identity crisis.

The diasporic element is evident in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Water* and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, where the characters’ isolation is depicted. External circumstances, the hegemonic caste system, and cultural hierarchy are the causes of this loneliness, which are evident in the characters’ interior psyches. Balram, the oppressed, is despised by the privileged society; Chuyia, who was marginalized as a woman and later as a widow during the Indian colonial period. They are displaced and alienated in their homeland. This is not only a form of social discrimination, but also a stain on the face of humanity. Initially, they are classified according to their caste, and subsequently, they are considered unholy or ostracized. Therefore, they are doubly marginalized. An abundance of widows, such as Chuyia, and members of the lesser class, such as Balram, reside throughout India. In their native country, they are referred to as minorities, as Safran (1991) documents. In *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (2003), Gabriel Sheffer also refers to the term “diaspora” as “ethnonational diaspora”. This term is used to describe the cultural, social, economic, and political struggles that dispersed ethnic groups, such as Chuyia and Balram, engage in in order to preserve their distinctive identities. These groups are located in host countries or nation states, such as India, and are dispersed within the same nation.

Diasporas are defined by James Clifford as “distributed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession, displacement, and adaptation” (Clifford, 309). Clifford further defines “diaspora discourses” as “experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home, while remaining rooted in specific, discrete histories” (302). In a foreign nation, they encounter challenges in preserving their identities and surviving. *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai both engage with diasporic discourses in this context. Nevertheless, the diasporic characters are deeply rooted in their past, despite their current location in the West. Both novels address the themes of displacement, identities, and immigration experiences, which are associated with Indian Western identities. They are members of a double diaspora that is defined by a variety of dualities, including their Indian, American, and British heritage. Knott and McLoughlin contend that the double diaspora demonstrates the influence of multiple homelands and contested relationships between individuals with distinct subjects on diasporic space (2010). Werbner emphasizes that the double diaspora is not a homogeneous, unitary, monolithic, harmonious form of sociality, but rather a heterogeneous and conflictual one (Werbner, 77). Internal conflicts are the primary focus of both novels, which depict the protagonists’ voyage from India to a foreign country and the cultural shifts that result in exile and alienation.

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Movindri Reddy asserts in “Transnational Locality: Diasporas and Indentured South Asians” (2015) that the diaspora is frequently recognized as a hazard to state security in certain circumstances. Movindri Reddy observes that diasporas are frequently perceived as hazards to state security in certain circumstances. He contends that diasporas are insiders in the nation state, but they are also exiles in all states. They are situated in transnational locations that are both rooted and distant. They have marked Indians, but they are also estranged from other national ethnic groups (2). Some concepts that are associated with diasporic consciousness include guilt, nostalgia, displacement, alienation, double consciousness, and the pursuit of identity. Shilpa Goyal asserts in her 2017 article “The Saga of the Journey of Indian Diaspora” that it also encompasses concerns regarding the merger or dissolution of cultures. Balram and Chuyia’s suffering is illustrated in the sagas *The White Tiger* and *Water*. Their agonies and sufferings are not the result of destiny, but rather of the social atmosphere and their fellow human beings. Despite this, the sufferers continue to harbor high and steadfast aspirations for a better life. The Indian caste system is responsible for the construction of the categorized less privileged, as evidenced by their inner conflict and resistance, which reflects their double consciousness. Du Bois elucidates that “Double consciousness” is a sensation of “twoness”, which encompasses two souls, two ideas, and the perception of oneself through the perspective of others (1903, 2). Additionally, Du Bois asserts that the duality of consciousness appears to suggest a fragmented psychic space, a volitional human activity that challenges the self (Bois, 1996).

In the sense that it is defined by cultural diversity, including religions, languages, and other forms of social stratification, the Indian diaspora is transnational. Punjabis and Bengalis are examples of diasporic communities that have emerged as a result of their linguistic or regional identities. Ien Ang (2005) contends that diasporas are “transnational, spatially, and temporally sprawling socio-cultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland’” (pp. 25). Moreover, diasporas are established through migration; however, not all migrations are associated with diasporic consciousness (Vertovec, 2000, 12). Being transnational entails being a member of two or more societies simultaneously, as is the case in Indian societies (Vertovec, 2005). Therefore, transnationalism can encompass the traditional concept of cross-border migration, as well as the movement of citizens across different states within the same country. This leads to a greater degree of interconnectedness among individuals, which in turn affects the social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes of the origin and destination societies. Consequently, the diaspora functions as a transnational entity when individuals migrate between states (Vertovec, 2005). Nevertheless, migration induces an identity crisis by fostering a sense of alienation and displacement.

Identity formation in individuals’ lives is also significantly influenced by cultural pluralism. India is a country that is multifaceted, encompassing a variety of cultures, traditions, languages, and practices. In search of a better life, individuals have crossed borders within the country, as well as subnational or transnational borders, frequently abandoning their homeland

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(Chang, 2010). Chang contends that frontiers are not merely geographical; they also have cultural, political, and economic implications, which places the diaspora in a predicament. In this regard, an individual who migrates within Indian jurisdiction and traverses borders becomes not only racially hybrid but also culturally hybrid: “culture and race, which have co-evolved, are intertwined...” (28 years old). Individuals are susceptible to varying degrees of homelessness when they adhere to cultural paths that differ from their own, whether within or across borders. In their dislocated lives, migrants have become exiles, which has led to physical or psychological conflict. However, in order to survive in the new culture, they must navigate foreign spaces and contend with hybridized identities. According to Edward Said, “Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become a prison and are often defended beyond reason or necessity” (Said, 185). Said elucidates that exile is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is dismal, colorless, and frigid. Consequently, the exile character is present, regardless of whether it is an exile within the borders of one's own country due to social exclusion, an exile outside the homeland, or an exile in the homeland. The diasporic characters in the homeland are individuals who have been marginalized, victimized, or exploited, and whose voices are either suppressed or unheard. Balram and Chuyia, who experience feelings of alienation, lack a distinct identity or existence and are not represented in their host country. In spite of their marginalization and isolation, we observe them engaging in discussions regarding patriarchal domination and their pursuit of liberation. The sensation of living in exile is readily apparent in Kiran Desai's works, including *The Inheritance of Loss*. This includes the challenges of relationships, the sense of not belonging anywhere, and the distinct experiences that Indian immigrants have in the United States and England. It also demonstrates how individuals experience a sense of isolation in their homeland and experience a loss of identity (Subbulakshmi, 2019). In *Jasmine*, Jasmine rebels against the patriarchal society and ethnic fixation, fleeing her homeland for the United States, rather than being in exile in India. The identity of diasporic characters is inextricably influenced and constructed by exile.

The diasporic experience is most effectively depicted by authors who are actually part of the diasporic group. Stuart Hall contends that as an individual navigates the intersection of two cultures, the endeavour becomes increasingly intricate and challenging, as it is anchored in memory, tradition, and familial obligations (Hall, cited in *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory*, 1994). An individual who has journeyed globally, forsaking his native homeland and origins, experiences disarray and ambiguity; this is clearly reflected in his writings. Vijay Mishra, in a presentation at Victoria University of Wellington, contends that “diaspora refers to individuals who are discontent with their non-hyphenated identities as reflected in their passports” (Mishra, 1). They seek to elucidate the significance of the hyphen, a symbol of dual identities. Feng asserts that the hyphen has frequently been employed to delineate identities instead of contemplating the potential for a singular identity (1996). Consequently, they embody the episteme of displacement and the experience of exile. In *The Inheritance of Loss*

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and *Jasmine*, the interconnection of hyphenated identities is evident. All the characters in the novels find it essential to connect with their roots while still belonging to this new nation.

All characters depicted in the works experience a form of exile, whether in their homeland or outside. In *The White Tiger*, Balram redefines his moral framework by departing from his village to evade the entrenched moral values and behavioral norms of the patriarchal caste system, whereas Chuyia in *Water* is deemed unholy or tainted due to societal prejudice and religious hypocrisy within the Indian caste system. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist Jasmine liberates herself from the constraints of the prevailing Indian culture, opting to transcend the societal taboos of traditional norms and redefine her identity as an immigrant: “Paradoxically, exile to Jasmine is safety; through it, she breaks free from a conventional Indian society,” as posited by Fadla, S. & Awad, Y (2018). Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss* arrives in America as an outsider, seeking the American dream to attain his interpretation of success, although he ultimately dedicates his life to navigating the intricate relationships of home and country. He experiences episodes of uncertainty and melancholy and frequently longs for India. The loss and absence of family members elicit in him sensations of alienation and alone. Jemubhai Popatlal Patel, the Judge, is unable to forget his experience of departing India for London, where he encountered “the platform between benches labeled ‘Indians Only’ and ‘Europeans Only’” (Desai, 41), a circumstance that rendered him powerless and subsequently resulted in a life characterized by solitude and estrangement. Race, religion, caste, and social taboos can significantly influence the formation of ethnic identity in the redefinition of Indian diasporic identities. Numerous individuals exemplify a profound sensation of displacement, symbolizing intense solitude and a distressing incapacity to articulate their innermost emotions.

Consequently, the study provides a comprehensive perspective on ‘diaspora’ that includes various forms of displaced identities, both within India and beyond. The diaspora in the homeland is intricately connected to several caste, social, and political elements. Chuyia is excluded in two ways: firstly, due to her gender, and secondly, as a widow. Balram is ostracized due to their association with disadvantaged populations and lower socioeconomic classes. They are categorized as “others” by the political power dynamics and hegemony wielded and benefitted from by a privileged class. Hall contends that marginalized individuals regarded as “Other” cultivate a “double consciousness” during cultural hybridization (1996). The migration of diasporic experiences in the West can be categorized as a “double diaspora”, a hybrid phenomenon marked by various dualities, including identities as both Indian American and British, while serving as a cultural mediator among India, America, and Britain. Regardless of their location, diasporic individuals experience estrangement in both physical and psychological dimensions. Homi K. Bhabha theorizes the concept of cultural hybridity in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), addressing identity formation within cross-racial and cross-cultural contacts. He contends that immigrants and other minority groups frequently experience isolation and alienation or exist in a liminal condition, striving to assimilate into new cultures to conform to the parameters of their emerging identity (54). In this context, hybrid or non-hybrid individuals are displaced either within or beyond their country, whether

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Indian or hyphenated. Non-hybrids have feelings of displacement, isolation, or alienation in their motherland due to the diverse cultures or caste systems in India, as one caste ultimately marginalizes another. The sensation of displacement arises when one individual achieves superior fitness while the other tends to evolve in a manner that diverges from the former.

This study examines the many layers of the Indian diaspora within the homeland and the individuals who migrate to the West, as illustrated in the subsequent four novels: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* (2006), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. The protagonists relocating to the West experience dual alienation and dual conflict within the diaspora, stemming from both minority (ethnic or parental) and majority (mainstream or host) cultures. The new cultural identity facilitates an alternative interpretation of culture, unencumbered by the cultural baggage linked to parental or ethnic identification. Nevertheless, the majority of the characters within the homeland experience dual marginalization. These novels explore identity through distinct cultural contexts: the Indian community in the United States, the Brahmins within the Indian caste system, the disparities between privileged and underprivileged Indian individuals, and the hegemonic ambitions of the middle class manifesting in politics, resulting in socio-cultural inequalities. Owing to the intricate social framework governed by the Indian caste system, the study will illuminate two facets: firstly, the multifaceted cultural and social impediments that result in alienation within the confines of the country. Another factor to examine is the migrants' experience of the constraints imposed by the conventional society of their native country, which subsequently influences identity development. Notwithstanding their feelings of alienation, dislocation, and rootlessness, the protagonists in the aforementioned works successfully establish a sense of belonging, whether domestically or internationally, despite facing social, political, and cultural challenges.

## **Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* portrays widows as doubly marginalized**

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* critiques the religious tradition and the restrictive limitations placed on Hindu widows, illustrating the characters' journey towards self-construction and forms of coexistence. The novel, set during Gandhi's Freedom Movement, centers on a group of women who, due to Hindu law, are forced to spend their lives in an ashram as widows. Chuyia, the heroine, encounters dual marginalization: firstly, due to her gender as a woman, and secondly, as a widow. Widows are prohibited from remarrying or engaging in romantic relationships due to the requirement of maintaining chastity. Chuyia's head is shaved upon her widowhood and subsequent expulsion from her residence. In accordance with the Hindu customs of that era, widows had their hair shaved and devoted their lives to repentance. Widows are required to uphold their virginity; nonetheless, the sexuality of certain widows is used to fulfill sexual desires. Religion, which holds a prominent position in society, demonstrates a distinct tendency to favour transcendence over convergence, and men over women. The sexuality of a widow is manipulated for the benefit of a patriarchal society. It is

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paradoxical that Brahmin males see widows as inauspicious and a societal scourge, while yet deriving pleasure from the sexual promiscuity of young widows.

Similarly, *Water* foregrounds gendered vulnerability within social and religious hierarchies while also revealing forms of quiet resistance, spiritual endurance, and ethical community care. The characters' assertion of dignity within oppressive structures resonates with the cultural dimension of Atmanirbhar Bharat, wherein self-reliance arises not from isolation but from collective ethics, compassion, and restorative cultural consciousness. Across the novels, self-reliance therefore emerges as an inward and culturally anchored process—rooted in IKS values of dharma, kinship, and community—while simultaneously responding to modernity, migration, and global mobility.

## **Balram as a marginalized character in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***

Another diasporic writer, Aravind Adiga, depicts an Indian society in flux in his novel *The White Tiger*. The novel depicts the multiple cultural encounters that various sections of the social order encounter. Generally, cross-cultural experiences are encounters between individuals from various nations, religions, or global regions, as previously mentioned. India is a nation of diverse civilization, comprising numerous states, cultures, religions, and languages. Consequently, cross-cultural experiences are inevitable. Balram (The White Tiger, 12) is born into a lower-class family and begins his existence in “darkness” before eventually finding his way to the “light”. Balram, the author, depicts two classes of Indian society through the protagonist's perspective: the lower class, which is characterized by poverty and a sense of duty to the family, represents “darkness”, while the higher class is characterized by nepotism, malfeasance, and a spawning ground for corruption. Chuyia, who is marginalized and doubly alienated, not only rebels against the patriarchal system of caste hierarchy but also manages to improve his fate by defying all social and economic protocols of India. This exemplifies what Stuart Hall (1990) means by diasporic experience when he asserts that “The diaspora experience is defined, not by essence or purity but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity” (235). Therefore, the inquiry of cultural identity is not “Who are you?” but rather “What can you become?” It does not observe the foundation, the essence of your birth, but rather the current position you occupy, as evidenced by Balram's transition from a village child to a chauffeur, and subsequent ascent up the social ladder to become a successful businessman.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai's trajectory from subaltern servitude to entrepreneurial assertion reflects a complex and ambivalent form of self-reliance. His rise embodies a desire for autonomy and agency, yet it also exposes ethical fissures generated by unequal social structures. Read through the spirit of Atmanirbhar Bharat, Balram's journey foregrounds the tension between material mobility and ethical responsibility grounded in dharma and social justice, inviting reflection on how self-reliance must remain rooted in moral accountability rather than mere economic advancement.

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## **In Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the widow is depicted as a minority**

In her novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee provides a glimpse into the realities encountered by minority communities. In a patriarchal society, Jasmine was born as Jyoti in a small Punjabi village, where giving birth to a girl was a source of suffering and agony. She encounters identity crises and cultural conflict both within and outside of her own culture as a woman. She travels to the United States alone after being bereaved, where she undergoes numerous tribulations in an effort to reestablish her identity and self. She also rebels against patriarchal and racial fixity discourses. Jasmine is in a double diaspora, as she transcends the boundaries of nationalism and ethnicity. In order to assimilate into the American lifestyle, Jasmine adopts a new identity at various stages of her life: “Jasmine”, “Jazzy”, “Jane”, and later “Jase”. F.T. Ruppel posits that “she must change in order to survive and to continue her journey” (Ruppel, 183). The divergent names and identities she has encountered throughout her life are accepted in order to establish a harmonious relationship with them. This definition of identity is formulated in Hall’s essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990), in which he contends that “identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture” (225). Cultural identities are perpetually evolving, as they are inextricably linked to “the various ways in which we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 225). In other words, identity is both consciously constructed and predetermined. Consequently, identity is not an entirely transparent, pure, or inherent human characteristic.

In *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Jasmine*, the diasporic protagonists negotiate fractured identities across borders while sustaining emotional and cultural connections to memory, belonging, and community ethics. Their search for selfhood illustrates that self-reliance in migratory spaces does not imply severing ties with homeland or tradition; instead, it unfolds as a dialogue between roots and routes, where resilience is sustained through cultural memory and inherited sensibilities. This speaks to an Atmanirbhar vision of global Indian identity—self-assured, mobile, and adaptive, yet grounded in civilizational depth.

## **Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: The Loss of Identity and Self**

Cultural influences are essential for the pursuit of identity and self, particularly for diasporic immigrants. In Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*, Jemubhai Papatlal Patel, born in colonial India, is dispatched to London in 1939 at the age of twenty to pursue a Law degree and grapples with adapting to the host society. Notwithstanding the Judge’s esteemed status within the Indian social order, he has a sense of inferiority when faced with an individual of Caucasian descent. This exemplifies the colonial mandates of both the colonized and the colonizer, as well as the Self and the Other. He is alienated and feels discomfort in his colored skin, attempting to imitate the Other, which illustrates his internal struggle of resistance against his original Self. This mimicry serves as a mechanism for escapism, allowing him to conceal his inferiority complexes and illustrating his dual consciousness. Upon his return from London, he emulates European customs and adopts British behavior. He seemed to be ensnared between the past and the present, oscillating between his experiences in a faraway nation and his

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mundane existence in Kalimpong, Northeast India. This renders him absurd and is rejected by the Indians, resulting in his isolation and alienation. Biju, the cook's son, is a significant character who is dispatched to the United States to pursue his American dream. He faces racial discrimination and endures profound loneliness. As an undocumented immigrant, he struggles to integrate into Western society, highlighting his identity crisis. Nearly all diasporic characters are ensnared between two opposing cultures, characterized by their markedly divergent social and ideological distinctions. Brah contends, "Diaspora frequently evokes the imagery of traumas associated with separation and dislocation, which is undoubtedly a vital component of the migratory experience" (190). Brah contends that "the concept of diaspora refers to multilocality within and across territorial, cultural, and psychic boundaries" (194). They have a feeling of exile, disconnection, and a lack of belonging. They are profoundly estranged and uprooted, both psychologically and physically. Jemubhai has lost nearly everything, including his identity, while Biju has profound sentiments of loss during his time in America. Similar to Jasmine, they also became participants in the double diaspora. Their post-traumatic stress results in complex challenges related to hybrid identity. According to Hall in his essay, identity is both "a matter of 'becoming' and of 'being'" (1990, 225). In this regard, certain variances contribute to 'who we are' and 'who we have become.' It is an interplay between the individual and the social circumstances in which we exist, influenced by factors such as race, class, politics, religion, language, gender, and societal changes.

This study seeks to analyze the identity issues and cultural value conflicts depicted in characters both domestically and internationally within Indian literature. The study seeks to illustrate various degrees of dispersion. The characters in their homeland are displaced, uprooted, and without a definitive spot to designate as 'home'. Their dwelling signifies a sense of exile due to their marginalization from the local populace. The protagonists in the West are ensnared between dual realms, grappling with an expanding diversity of identities, whose cultural seclusion engenders personal conflicts. All the books in my analysis address the issues of alienation, exile, and displacement within the context of Indian social practices.

The topic of exile and alienation is profoundly evident in all four novels, with the authors articulating the repressive nature of the power structure via the experiences of the diasporic protagonists. Despite being acknowledged as Indian minority, the characters occupy a contentious place within the discourse of Indian national identity, longing for identification, recognition, and affection. All characters from the diaspora are ensnared in issues stemming from the discontent they encounter in both their home countries and abroad. While India serves as their origin and the domain of their historical recollections, "home", in both a tangible and psychological context, affirms its role as a paradoxical locus of resistance and constraint. Thembisa Waetjen's paper "The 'Home' In Homeland" (1999) posits that "Unhomeliness" is not merely a condition of homelessness, but a condition of exile, characterized by a disconnection from a place of belonging (662). Lois Tyson characterizes "unhomeliness" as the feeling of displacement and disintegration experienced by a colonized individual (Tyson,

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421). This necessitates the emergence of diverse diasporic characters to cultivate a novel sense of identity both in their homeland and outside.

Furthermore, the gender issue concerning women in the Third World aligns with Spivak's theory that Indian women frequently face discrimination based on race, gender, and class. Women have consistently had a marginal position, as illustrated by Jasmine, the widow in *Jasmine*. Nonetheless, Jasmine resists and evolves into an American woman by "becoming rooted" (Mukherjee, 179).

The identity tensions explored in *The White Tiger*, *Water*, *The Inheritance of Loss*, and *Jasmine* may be meaningfully situated within the epistemic and civilizational frameworks of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), particularly those concerned with selfhood (*ātman*), place (*deśa*), and social order (*varṇa-jāti*). IKS recognizes identity as relational and embedded within ethical, social, and cosmological matrices rather than as purely individual or psychological. Concepts such as *ṛta* (cosmic order), *dharma* (social-moral responsibility), and *svadharma* (situated duty) illuminate how characters negotiate belonging amid the dislocations of migration, caste stratification, and class hierarchies. These systems foreground how cultural memory, kinship, and community knowledge mediate identity and mobility—structures that persist even as characters traverse national borders or negotiate postcolonial modernity (Raghuramaraju, 2011; Balagangadhara, 2010). The conflicts between rootedness and displacement in the novels reflect tensions between traditional epistemes of continuity and globalized regimes of economic aspiration and political power, demonstrating how IKS-inflected social arrangements continue to shape subjectivity in both homeland and diaspora.

At the same time, these texts reveal how identity negotiation becomes a site of cultural synthesis, reinterpretation, and resistance, resonating with the IKS emphasis on *samanvaya* (integration) and *anukūlan* (adaptation) as dynamic processes within lived tradition. The protagonists' alienation, mobility, and search for belonging exemplify how individuals recalibrate utility, dignity, and self-worth at the intersection of indigenous value frameworks and transnational realities. Refugee precarity, caste-conditioned exclusion, and class asymmetry in the narratives can be read through IKS perspectives on social ethics, economic justice (*artha-dharma* balance), and community reciprocity, while diasporic experiences echo classical notions of *pravāsa* (life away from homeland) as both loss and possibility (Rao, 2019; Chakrabarti, 2020). Thus, by placing these literary representations within IKS discourses, the study underscores how cultural knowledge, social ontology, and moral worlds continue to inform identity formation across the porous boundaries of "home" and "abroad."

Through this synthesis of IKS and the ethos of Atmanirbhar Bharat, the study demonstrates that Indian literary narratives conceptualize identity not as a binary opposition between tradition and modernity, but as a creative negotiation between rootedness and movement. The literature reveals how self-reliant identities evolve from cultural memory, ethical responsibility, and belonging, even within contexts of displacement and social inequality. In this way, the novels echo India's broader aspiration to cultivate a self-confident, culturally grounded, and globally engaged civilizational self.

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