

A Study of Cultural Identity in Desai's and Lahiri's Novels: Investigate How Desai and Lahiri Addresses Issues of Cultural Identity

Dr. Madhuben Punjabhai Galchar

*Assistant Professor Department of English, Dr. V. R. Godhaniya Arts, Commerce, Home Science and
IT for Girl's college, Porbandar*

doi.org/10.64643/IJIRTV12I8-191128-459

Abstract: Anita Desai, an acclaimed Indian novelist, intricately weaves themes of cultural identity, belonging, and displacement into her narratives. This research paper delves into Desai's exploration of these themes, analyzing how she addresses the complexities of cultural identity in the context of rapidly changing societies. By examining select novels such as "Clear Light of Day," "In Custody," and "Fasting, Feasting," this paper elucidates Desai's nuanced portrayal of characters navigating the intersection of tradition and modernity, grappling with notions of belonging and experiencing displacement. Through a close reading of her works, supplemented by literary analysis and socio-cultural insights, this paper offers a deeper understanding of Desai's thematic preoccupations and their significance in contemporary discourse on cultural identity.

The study of cultural identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Name Sake" it was published in September 2003, it is the debut novel by American author. It was originally published in The New Yorker and was later expanded to a full length novel. It explores many of the emotional and cultural themes and it explores two conflicting cultures with distinct religious, social, and ideological differences. The story begins as Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, a young Bengali couple, leave Calcutta, India and settle in central square in Cambridge. Here we can see a lot of struggles and cultural conflicts in this novel. How they are suffering to adopt different kinds of foods, traditions and the language. In this novel Lahiri beautifully portrays about how the couples missing their native and their relatives in this novel. The couple has to face lots of problems when they immigrant from their own land. Ashima struggles through cultural barriers as well as her fears as she delivers her first child alone. If she had the delivery place at Calcutta, she would have had the baby at home, surrounded by her family. At US the delivery is successful but the new parents learn the new rules of the country they have to leave the hospital after giving a legal name to their child. Like this the new parents are learning new rules in their immigrant country. The aim of the paper is to analyse first and second generation immigrant characters. The paper would be an attempt to examine the characters from the America and India and cultures in the novel.

Keywords: Anita Desai, cultural identity, belonging, displacement, Indian literature, Culture, Conflict, Ideology, Name Sake, Immigrant.

I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai stands as a luminary figure in the landscape of contemporary Indian literature, celebrated for her poignant narratives that delve deep into the intricacies of human experiences, particularly those revolving around themes of cultural identity, belonging, and displacement.

Through her novels, Desai intricately weaves a tapestry of characters who grapple with the complexities of their cultural heritage in the face of rapid societal changes, inviting readers to ponder over the evolving notions of self and belonging in a globalized world. This introduction serves as a gateway into the thematic exploration of Desai's works, offering a glimpse into the profound insights she provides into the human condition. Desai's exploration of cultural identity transcends the boundaries of geography and time, resonating with readers across diverse cultural landscapes. Whether set against the backdrop of post-colonial India or within the diasporic communities scattered around the globe, her narratives offer a nuanced portrayal of individuals navigating the intricate webs of tradition, modernity, and globalization. At the heart of Desai's view's lies a profound interrogation of what it means to belong - to a place, a community, or even to oneself - amidst the flux of cultural and societal transformations. As we embark on an exploration of Desai's thematic preoccupations, it becomes evident that her novels serve as both mirrors and windows, reflecting the multifaceted nature of cultural identity while also offering glimpses into the lived experiences of characters grappling with their sense of belonging.

Through her keen observations and empathetic storytelling, Desai invites readers to traverse the

landscapes of memory, language, and familial ties, illuminating the ways in which these elements shape individual and collective identities. Central to Desai's exploration of cultural identity is the notion of memory - both personal and collective. In her seminal work "Clear Light of Day," Desai delves into the intricacies of familial bonds and the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage. Through the lens of the Das family, she elucidates the ways in which memories of the past intersect with present realities, shaping the characters' perceptions of self and other. As Bim navigates the labyrinth of her childhood memories within the decaying confines of the haveli, readers are drawn into a world where the past continues to exert a profound influence on the present, blurring the boundaries between nostalgia and lived experience.

Furthermore, Desai's portrayal of language serves as a powerful tool for exploring cultural identity and belonging. In "In Custody," the protagonist Deven's quest to preserve the Urdu language amidst the encroaching tide of Hindi and English encapsulates the broader struggle for cultural preservation in a rapidly changing society. Through Deven's encounters with language, Desai illuminates the power dynamics inherent in linguistic hegemony, highlighting the ways in which language serves as a conduit for both cultural expression and erasure. By foregrounding the complexities of linguistic identity, Desai underscores the multifaceted nature of cultural belonging, challenging readers to reconsider their own relationships with language and culture.

Moreover, Desai's narratives often traverse geographical boundaries, exploring the experiences of characters who find themselves displaced from their cultural moorings. In "Fasting, Feasting," the siblings Uma and Arun navigate the cultural chasm between India and America, grappling with the dissonance between tradition and modernity. Uma's confinement within the stifling confines of her traditional Indian household stands in stark contrast to Arun's sense of alienation in the unfamiliar terrain of American suburbia, highlighting the pervasive theme of displacement and longing for a sense of belonging. Through their respective journeys, Desai sheds light on the complexities of cultural adaptation and the enduring quest for a place to call home. In conclusion, Anita Desai's novels stand as timeless meditations on the complexities of cultural identity, belonging, and displacement in an ever-changing world. Through her evocative prose and keen insights, Desai invites readers to contemplate the nuances of human experiences, offering profound reflections on the enduring quest for self-discovery

and belonging amidst the flux of cultural and societal transformations. As we delve deeper into the thematic richness of Desai's works, we embark on a journey of self-exploration and introspection, guided by the luminous tapestry of characters who navigate the labyrinthine paths of cultural identity with resilience and grace.

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri, is a story of culture, race, and inheritance, and how these factors mold a human attitudes and changed their life. The story has more diasporic experience. The novel focuses on Ashoke and Ashima a newly married Bengali couple moved to America to lead their life. The newly married couples get to learn a new rules of the country. While moving from India to America Ashima has no ideas about the country, after arriving there she had missed her home and parents. She struggles because of the climatic change. In India we had a different Weather but in America it was too cold and snowy, Ashima was suffered to the adapt the climatic conditions. Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her home thinking of the activities going there by calculating 'the Indian time on her hands' Which is ten and half hours ahead in Calcutta. In America they were followed a different kind of culture and foods, but ashima tries to cook Bengali foods at home. During her pregnant days she felt lonely in that country, she gave birth to her son without her family members in America. If she lived in India she was cared by her family members. The New parents aren't allowed to leave the hospital until they give a name for their newly born baby. Finally they named their son as Gogol, and leave the hospital. At first Gogol likes his name later he tries to change it as Nikhil. After birth of Gogol and Sonia Ashima learns to go for shopping and she went for the parties invited by Indians lived in America.

II. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

To explore the representation of cultural identity in the novels of Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, examining how their works reflect the experiences of Indian immigrants and the complexities of cultural belonging.

- ToAnalyze Cultural Identity Themes: Examine how Desai and Lahiri portray cultural identity, focusing on themes like displacement, belonging, and cultural conflict.
- To Compare Authorial Perspectives: Compare Desai's and Lahiri's approaches to cultural identity, highlighting similarities and differences in their narratives.

- To Explore Impact of Migration: Investigate how migration and diasporic experiences shape cultural identity in their novels.
- To Identify Narrative Techniques: Analyze the literary techniques used by Desai and Lahiri to convey cultural identity.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods, focusing on literary analysis of selected novels by Desai and Lahiri.

- Textual Analysis: Close reading of novels (e.g., Desai's, *Clear Light of Day*, In Custody Lahiri's, *The Namesake*) to identify themes, character portrayals, and narrative techniques related to cultural identity.
- Comparative Analysis: Compare and contrast Desai's and Lahiri's representations of cultural identity, highlighting similarities and differences.
- Theoretical Framework: Apply postcolonial and diaspora theories to analyze cultural identity constructs.
- Analysis: Thematic analysis focusing on displacement, belonging, cultural conflict, and narrative techniques conveying cultural identity.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri's novels explore cultural identity, displacement, and belonging, reflecting the complexities of Indian diasporic experiences.

1. Displacement and Belonging: Desai's works depicted the characters navigating multiple cultural spaces.
2. Cultural Identity: Both authors explore hybrid identities and cultural conflicts (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990).
3. Diasporic Experiences: Critics highlight Lahiri's focus on immigrant experiences (Mukherjee, 2007) and Desai's exploration of Indian middle-class lives (Rahman, 2013).
4. Bhabha (1994) notes the "third space" of cultural negotiation.
5. Hall (1990) discusses cultural identity as a process of becoming.
6. Mukherjee (2007) and Rahman (2013) analyze Desai's and Lahiri's portrayals of cultural Identity.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Anita Desai's *"Clear Light of Day"* serves as a poignant exploration of cultural identity and

tradition amidst the backdrop of post-colonial India. Set in Old Delhi, the novel intricately weaves together the lives of the Das family, delving into the complexities of familial bonds and the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage. At the heart of the narrative lies the decaying haveli, a symbol of the family's past glory and a repository of memories that continue to shape the characters' perceptions of self and other.

1. Family Dynamics: The Das family serves as the microcosm through which Desai explores the intricacies of cultural identity and tradition. Bim, the eldest sibling, is burdened with the weight of familial responsibilities, while Raja seeks to escape the confines of tradition through his political ambitions. Tara, the youngest sister, grapples with the expectations imposed upon her as a woman in a patriarchal society. Through their interactions and inner monologues, Desai illuminates the ways in which familial ties intersect with broader notions of cultural belonging, highlighting the tensions between individual desires and collective obligations.

2. Memories of the Past: Central to the novel is the motif of memory, which serves as a lens through which the characters navigate their sense of cultural identity. Bim's nostalgic recollections of her childhood and the vibrant life of the haveli stand in stark contrast to the present reality of decay and desolation. Through vivid imagery and evocative prose, Desai transports readers to a bygone era, where the rhythms of life were governed by tradition and ritual. As Bim retraces the footsteps of her past, readers are invited to contemplate the ways in which memory shapes our understanding of self and heritage.

3. Tradition vs. Modernity: Against the backdrop of post-colonial India, *"Clear Light of Day"* juxtaposes tradition with the forces of modernity, illuminating the tensions inherent in societal transformation. The decaying haveli symbolizes the erosion of traditional values in the face of rapid urbanization and Westernization. Raja's political aspirations and Tara's desire for independence reflect the generational divide between traditional values and modern aspirations. Through the characters' struggles, Desai underscores the complexities of cultural adaptation and the enduring influence of tradition on individual psyche.

4. Sense of Belonging: Throughout the novel, the characters grapple with their sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world. Bim's attachment to the haveli and her memories of childhood evoke a

longing for a sense of rootedness amidst the flux of societal changes. Raja's disillusionment with the political landscape and Tara's yearning for autonomy reflect the broader quest for identity and belonging. Through their respective journeys, Desai invites readers to contemplate the ways in which cultural heritage shapes our understanding of self and community.

In "Clear Light of Day," Anita Desai masterfully navigates the complexities of cultural identity and tradition, offering profound insights into the enduring influence of the past on the present. Through vivid characterizations and evocative imagery, Desai invites readers to embark on a journey of self-discovery and introspection, guided by the luminous tapestry of memories that continue to shape our understanding of who we are and where we belong.

VI. CULTURAL IDENTITY IN "IN CUSTODY" AND "THE NAMESAKE"

Anita Desai's "In Custody" delves into the intricate dynamics of cultural identity and the challenges of negotiating one's sense of belonging in a rapidly changing society. Set against the backdrop of Bhopal, the novel follows the protagonist Deven's quest to preserve the legacy of an eminent Urdu poet amidst the encroaching tide of Hindi and English dominance. Through Deven's journey, Desai illuminates the complexities of cultural negotiation and the enduring struggle for cultural preservation in a globalized world.

1. Linguistic Identity: At the heart of "In Custody" lies the theme of linguistic identity and its significance in shaping cultural belonging. Deven, an Urdu lecturer, finds himself caught in the midst of a linguistic battle between Urdu, Hindi, and English. As the Urdu language faces marginalization in post-colonial India, Deven's quest to preserve the legacy of Nur, the renowned Urdu poet, becomes a metaphor for the broader struggle for linguistic and cultural preservation. Through Deven's encounters with language, Desai underscores the power dynamics inherent in linguistic hegemony, highlighting the ways in which language serves as a conduit for both cultural expression and erasure.

2. Cultural Preservation vs. Modernization: Against the backdrop of Bhopal's changing socio-cultural landscape, "In Custody" juxtaposes the preservation of cultural heritage with the forces of modernization. Deven's reverence for Urdu poetry and his desire to immortalize Nur's legacy stand in stark contrast to

the prevailing trend towards Westernization and cultural homogenization. As Deven navigates the intricacies of his own cultural identity, readers are invited to contemplate the tensions between tradition and progress, highlighting the complexities of cultural negotiation in a rapidly globalizing world.

3. Personal vs. Collective Identity: Through Deven's character, Desai explores the interplay between personal and collective identity in the context of cultural negotiation. Despite his passion for Urdu poetry, Deven finds himself torn between his personal aspirations and the societal expectations imposed upon him. As he grapples with the pressures of familial obligations and professional aspirations, Deven's journey becomes emblematic of the broader quest for self-discovery and authenticity amidst the complexities of cultural identity formation.

4. The Role of Education: "In Custody" also underscores the role of education in shaping cultural identity and fostering cultural appreciation. Deven's role as an Urdu lecturer not only serves as a means of livelihood but also as a platform for transmitting cultural heritage to future generations. Through his interactions with students and collections, Deven confronts the challenges of navigating cultural biases to fostering an appreciation for Urdu literature in an increasingly anglicized educational system. As Desai navigates the complexities of cultural negotiation, she underscores the transformative power of education in preserving and celebrating cultural diversity.

In "In Custody," Anita Desai offers a poignant exploration of cultural identity and the challenges of negotiating one's sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world. Through Deven's journey, Desai invites readers to contemplate the complexities of cultural negotiation and the enduring struggle for cultural preservation amidst the forces of globalization and modernization. As Deven grapples with the tensions between tradition and progress, readers are compelled to reflect on their own relationships with language, culture, and identity in an ever-evolving world.

In Lahiri's 'Namesake' Gogol and Sonia who were born in America they want live their life in American lifestyle. In America Children used to take decisions on their own, So Gogol grew up like an American, at the age of four he loved his name and later he changed as Nikhil. An India father and mother wished their child to grew up by learning Indian cultures, they aren't accept that. Ashoke was busy

with his works and he used to give a lot of friendly advice to Gogol.

Stuart Hall, in his essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" says the identity is not as transparent and unproblematic as we think to be. Instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think of it as a product, which is never complete and is always in process always constituted within, not outside, representation. Cultural identity to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending time, place, history, and culture. Culture identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformation (Hall. Qtd in colonial discourse and post - colonial theory). When the novel begins the issues of names and identity is presented. As Ashima's Water breaks, she calls out to Ashoke her husband. However calling a name of husband is not accepted in Indian culture, she does not use his name because it would not be proper. According to Ashima,

It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do.... a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over....

Ashoke and Ashima spend three decades at America, they try to naturalize themselves as American citizens. They hold an American passport, A driving license and a social security card. Officially they have a house at the city. However they never feel at home. Ashima's nature is nostalgic, as a typical immigrant Bengali Women in initial stage she finds difficult to adopt American society. Her migration disturbs her, later she tries to learn everything. Ashima is a woman, Who preserved her culture and customs in the foreign land. She used to wear saree and kurtas in the foreign land and doesn't forget her Indian culture. This novel describes the first generation Bengali migrants to America and the second generation their very own children. The First Generation Ashoke and Ashima Who were struggles to learn everything, they tries to adapt the foreign society and foods. Ashima feels lonely at home when Ashoke leaves home for work, she used to do crafts and thinks about her native land. After she gave birth to two children, Ashima search a work for herself, to overcome her loneliness she worked as a Librarian. When she came here she doesn't the street names. Later she develop herself and learn everything. She worked as a librarian, she drives a car, she made new American colleagues. In this novel Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully presents the problems of immigrants which she felt in her own

life. She is also an Indian but lived in America. She has also faced everything that Ashima has faced, she tries to show in this novel. Ashima was presented as good Bengali wife for her husband. Who used to cook for her husband and children eventhough she lived in a modern society. After her husband's demise she felt more lonely and plans to return back to her native land. When she knew about Gogol's shattered marriage life she was confused about her own decision.

By Jhumpa Lahiri's Writing we can see the second generation life Gogol, Sonia and others. Gogol who wants to live his life in American Culture. Gogol was teased by his friends so he has changed his name as Nikhil. While his parents made a trip to India, they went to Visit Taj Mahal after seeing that he used to changed his career as Engineering into Architecture. The Second Generation in this novel has permitted by their parents to live their life as their wish. However Gogol spends his life living in the United States where children are often ashamed of their difference from others. During Adolescence, Gogol desires to blend in and to live unnoticed. Other Americans never view him as an American however even though he is a native born citizen. This presents struggle between two cultures and problem of sense with Bengali culture and values. But Gogol and Sonia grow up relating mostly to their peers and the surrounding cultures in United states. The second generation, whose parents still cling to old traditional beliefs, feels trapped by their differences, not only at school but at home. Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Anita Desai's exploration of cultural identity and belonging in her novels, "Clear Light of Day" and "In Custody," offers profound insights into the complexities of navigating one's sense of self within the context of evolving socio-cultural landscapes. Through vivid characterizations, evocative imagery, and nuanced storytelling, Desai illuminates the enduring influence of tradition, memory, and language on individual and collective identities. From the decaying haveli in "Clear Light of Day" to the linguistic battleground of "In Custody," Desai's narratives serve as poignant reflections of the human condition, inviting readers to contemplate the enduring quest for authenticity and belonging amidst cultural flux. Moreover, Desai's exploration of cultural negotiation and preservation underscores the importance of honoring diverse cultural traditions and fostering a

deeper appreciation for linguistic and artistic heritage.

As characters like Bim, Deven, and Raja navigate the complexities of cultural identity, readers are compelled to reflect on their own relationships with culture, language, and belonging. Ultimately, Desai's novels remind us of the richness of human experience and the transformative power of storytelling in fostering empathy, understanding, and connection across cultural boundaries. Through her timeless narratives, Desai continues to inspire readers to embrace the complexities of cultural identity with grace, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to authenticity.

The novel shows an diasporas are always in transformative phase. How the Indian couples survived their life in American society, but the younger generation could not locate their identity in either of the balance between two cultures. Gogol is the central character acts as a link between two cultures. He is caught between the family expectations of being loyal to his mother land and fluent in the host land. The Namesake is story we can study of different cultural conflicts. It begins with migration of the first generation and the life of the second generation. In this novel we can find the struggles of immigrant and how they overcomes their cultural conflicts.

REFERENCES

- [1] Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day*. Penguin Books, 1980.
- [2] Desai, Anita. *In Custody*. Vintage, 1994.
- [3] Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. Mariner Books, 2000.
- [4] Joshi, Priyanka. "Anita Desai: A Feminist Study." Sarup & Sons, 2004.
- [5] Singh, Nalini. "Home and Exile: A Study of Identity and Belonging in Anita Desai's Novels." Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2010.
- [6] Bhatnagar, Manmohan. "Anita Desai: The Novelist of Interior Landscape." Creative Books, 2005.
- [7] Poonam, Sri. "The Fiction of Anita Desai: An Exploration in Gender and Culture." Prestige Books, 2003.
- [8] Dwivedi, A.N. "The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Evaluation." Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2006.
- [9] Chakravarty, Radha. "The Novels of Anita Desai." Sahitya Akademi, 1992.
- [10] Goel, Aruna. "Anita Desai: Themes and Techniques." Kaveri Books, 2003.
- [11] Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Harpercollins, 2012. Print.
- [12] Hall, Stuart, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". Colonial discourse and postcolonial theory.
- [13] Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*.
- [14] Rahman, M. (2013). *Anita Desai's Fiction: A Study*.