

# Between Worlds: Diaspora and Identity in selected American literary works

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## Abstract:

Diaspora is not only about leaving one place and living in another. Diaspora is about memory, identity, and the search for self, search for belonging. Writers who have gone through migration they often describe the feeling of being caught between two worlds- the homeland that is left behind and the new land where life must begin again. In American literature, this struggle is described in many powerful ways, African American writers deal with the painful history of slavery and forced displacement. South Asian American writers described the challenges of migration, cultural differences, and conflicts between generations. Caribbean American writers write about exile and use storytelling to keep traditions alive.

This paper depicts that finding identity in a diaspora is not about going back to a single origin but about creating new and mixed identities by storytelling. In works such as Toni Morrison's Beloved, Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine, Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake, Edwidge Danticat's Breath, Eyes, Memory, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstones, we see how literature becomes a way to remember the past, resist loss and shape a new self.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Identity, American literature, Memory, Hybridity

## Introduction:

Diaspora is all about broken ties and scattered lives. People have crossed borders, and it's not all the time because they wished to, but sometimes they had no choice. They were forced to cross the border. The word diaspora carries both loss and survival. For those living it, the Idea of "home" is never simple. It is both here and there, both past and present.

While studying literature, diaspora has become an important idea. Writers often use it to ask: Who am I, when my past belongs to one land and my present to another? In America, this question feels even sharper. The United States is often called a nation of immigrants, but belonging has never been easy. Slavery, racism, strict immigration laws, and cultural stereotypes show that the promise of freedom has always had limits.

Writers from different communities in America depicted these tensions very effectively. African American writings make us to realise the deep scars of forced displacement and the struggle for recognition. South Asian writers

This paper does not deal with all American literature. Instead it looks at a few selected works that show different sites of diaspora and identity. Through the writings of Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Edwidge Danticat, and Paule Marshall, we see how literature gives voice to memory, cultural mixing and the search for belonging.

## Diaspora and Identity: A Theoretical glimpse

Different scholars have given us ways to understand diaspora and identity. Stuart Hall says that identity is not something fixed - it changes with history and culture. Edward writes that exile is painful because it denies belonging, but it also gives a new way of seeing the world. Homi Bhabha talks about hybridity, a "third space," where migrants create identities that are not fully from one place or the other.

These ideas help us when we read American diasporic literature. The popular idea of the United States as a "melting pot" often suggests harmony, but literature shows that life is far more complicated. For African Americans, diaspora is tied to the forced history of a slavery. For South Asian and Caribbean immigrants, it is about balancing the pressure to fit in with the wish to keep traditions alive. In all these works, identity is shown as something fluid, shifting, and constantly being remade through memory and storytelling.

### **African American voices, memory, and the Legacy of Slavery**

African American literature speaks to one of the most painful kinds of diaspora - being taken from the homeland and through slavery. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) depicts this through the story of Sethe, a mother haunted by her past and by the ghost of her child. Morrison uses the idea of "rememory" to say that forgetting is impossible and that remembering-through painful- is necessary for healing.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) gives another perspective. The narrator feels invisible because society refuses to see him as a human being. Yet by telling his own story, he makes himself visible.

Both Morrison and Ellison show that reclaiming identity in diaspora means breaking the silence, remembering history, and speaking out against erasure. These works tell us that for African Americans, the struggle for identity is deeply tied to the memory of slavery and the fight for recognition.

### **South Asian American writers: Hybridity and Generational Conflict**

South Asian migration to the United States is usually by choice, but the challenges of fitting in and holding on to tradition are clearly shown in literature. In Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), the main character keeps changing her name and identity -Joti in India Jasmine in America-and later, Jane is in Iowa, each change shows how migrants must constantly adapt and reshape who they are.

Jumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) looks at these struggles across generations. The character Gogol feels caught between his Bengali roots and his American life. He denied his given name at first. But later learned to accept it as a part of his identity.

Both Mukherjee and Lahiri show that, for South Asian Americans, identity is not about choosing either the old culture or the new one. Instead, it is about finding strength in hybridity, living in both worlds at once.

### **Caribbean American Perspectives: Exile and Storytelling**

Caribbean writers mainly focus on the feeling of exile and the power of storytelling in diaspora. Powle Marshall's *Brown Girl Brownstones* (1959) tells the story of Selina, a young girl who is struggling because of her Barbadian family traditions and the pressure of American life. Through Selina, Marshall shows how identity is shaped by the push and pull between heritage assimilation.

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) depicts the plight of Sophie, who grows up with the weight of Haitian culture and painful memories. Storytelling in this novel becomes a way to heal, to remember, and to carry culture forward.

For Caribbean American writers, literature is a way to preserve history, culture, and memory in the face of exile. Story telling becomes survival itself.

### **"Hybridity" and "in-between" Identity**

A common theme in these works is hybridity - the experience of living "In- Between." Migrants, most of the time, feel that they do not fully belong to either their homeland or their new country. Homi Bhabha termed this space the "third space," where people create identities that mix both cultures.

We can see this clearly in characters, like Gogol from Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Jasmine from Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. Both struggle with who they are but also show that being "in between" can be a strength. Hybridity is not weakness- it allows people to reinvent themselves, to take from both worlds, and to form something new.

### **Gender and Diasporic Identity**

In many of these works, women's experiences show how diaspora and gender are closely connected. Toni Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved* reclaims herself as both a mother and a survivor of slavery. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* remakes herself again and again, breaking away from traditional limits placed on women. Edwidge Danticat's Sophie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* faces cultural trauma but finds strength by telling her own story.

These women characters show that reclaiming identity in Diaspora is not about culture but also about resisting gender-based silence. For them, survival means creating a voice of their own and refusing to be erased.

### **Storytelling as Survival**

The theme, which connects all these works, is power off storytelling. Storytelling is the way to keep alive histories, which is silenced by slavery and a Morrison used it very well. For Lahiri, stories help to breach the gap between immigrant Parents and their American-born children. For Danticat, storytelling keeps Haitian culture and memory alive, even in exile.

In each case, storytelling is more than just writing - it becomes survival. It resists forgetting, fights invisibility, and gives migrants and their children a way to hold on to identity while living in new worlds.

### **Challenges of Belonging**

Even with the hybridity, these works show that belonging is not always easy. Racism, stereotypes, and feeling like an outsider often make it hard to fully fit in. African American writers show how society often excludes them. South Asian American stories reveal the sense of being different or "other" in daily life. Caribbean writers highlight how their culture can be misunderstood or exoticized.

These challenges show that reclaiming identity in diaspora is also an act of resistance. Finding a place in a new world often means fighting against exclusion, prejudice, and misunderstanding.

### **Conclusion**

Diaspora changes who we are in both painful and creative ways. The selected American literary works depict how writers from different backgrounds deal with this complexity. For African Americans, reclaiming identity means remembering history and refusing to be invisible. For South Asians, it means accepting a mixed identity and connecting generations. For Caribbean writers, it means preserving culture through storytelling.

Finding oneself in diaspora is not about going back to a homeland or fully becoming part of the new country. It is about creating new, hybrid identities that hold memory, culture, and change together. These works show how literature gives space for memory, resistance, and belonging in a world of movement and change.

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