

# Targeted Belongings: Indians and the Struggles of Diasporic Identity in the West

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## Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the figure of the Indian migrant in the West embodies one of the great paradoxes of globalisation: mobility without belonging. The postcolonial promise of cosmopolitan inclusion, celebrated in the language of meritocracy, multiculturalism, and global citizenship, conceals deeper structures of exclusion rooted in race, class, and colonial memory. Even as Indians in the West are heralded as model minorities and agents of global success, their position remains precarious, marked by social invisibility, cultural alienation, and renewed racial hostility. The recent rise of anti-immigration sentiment in the United States and Europe, the post-Brexit hardening of national borders, and the persistence of everyday microaggressions in professional and academic spaces attest to the persistence of these contradictions. This paper, “Targeted Belongings: Indians and the Struggles of Diasporic Identity in the West,” argues that the novels of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, though published two decades ago, remain prescient cultural texts that help us read this contemporary predicament with acute sensitivity. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) and Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) together map the psychic, social, and political terrain of the Indian diaspora in ways that illuminate the structures of exclusion still operative in Western societies. Their fiction, far from being mere accounts of immigrant life, functions as diagnostic literature—works that theorise the conditions of global migration, racial visibility, and neoliberal displacement through the grammar of the novel.

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon postcolonial and diaspora theory—particularly the insights of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Paul Gilroy—this paper reads Lahiri and Desai as writers who anticipate the contemporary crisis of belonging for Indians abroad. Both novelists reveal that diaspora, rather than being an emancipatory condition of hybridity, often operates as a site of structural vulnerability shaped by enduring imperial legacies. Their narratives help decode how, beneath the liberal façade of multiculturalism, the West continues to reproduce a racialised social order that positions nonwhite immigrants as conditionally included yet perpetually othered.

## Purpose of the Study

In the current climate, where Indians are paradoxically hyper-visible in professional sectors like technology, academia, and medicine yet subject to xenophobic suspicion, workplace discrimination, and cultural tokenism—Lahiri’s *The Namesake* reads as an intimate genealogy of the migrant psyche. The protagonist Gogol Ganguli’s struggle to reconcile his Bengali heritage with American modernity mirrors the emotional dissonance of contemporary second-generation Indians who must perform integration while managing inherited difference. Lahiri’s exploration of naming, nostalgia, and selfhood reveals how belonging in the West remains contingent upon erasure: the erasure of accent, of ritual, and often of cultural memory. Gogol’s discomfort with his name—the signifier of a foreign ancestry—evokes the psychic burden of racialised identity that persists even among the socially successful. In this sense, Lahiri’s novel anticipates the contradictions faced by today’s Indian diaspora, who are simultaneously agents of global capital and subjects of racialisation. The “tech migrant” or the “H-1B worker” in the post-9/11 United States embodies this paradox: economically indispensable yet socially disposable, celebrated as proof of global competence yet viewed as an intruder in the national imagination. Lahiri’s restrained domestic realism exposes how the neoliberal celebration of immigrant success masks deep emotional alienation and the silent reproduction of racial hierarchies. Her characters’ longing for home and difficulty in transmitting memory to the next generation reflect what Avtar Brah terms “diaspora space”—a zone where belonging is constantly negotiated under the shadow of exclusion.

## Analysis

Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* extends this analysis beyond the personal to the global structures that sustain such contradictions. Through its transnational setting, divided between the Himalayan borderlands of Kalimpong and the immigrant kitchens of New York, Desai exposes the material inequalities underpinning globalisation. The novel’s two narrative strands, that of Sai, the Anglicised granddaughter of a colonial judge in India, and Biju, the undocumented worker in the U.S., illuminate the duality of the Indian diaspora: privilege and precarity, aspiration and exclusion, mobility and immobility. Desai’s Biju, trapped in a cycle of exploitation across New York’s ethnic restaurants, anticipates the plight of the underclass Indian migrant workers who sustain the infrastructure of Western modernity—delivery drivers, gig-economy labourers, and service-sector employees—whose presence is indispensable yet invisibilised. His dream of legitimacy, constantly deferred, mirrors the systemic precarity of South Asian migrants today, whose existence is circumscribed by immigration laws, racial profiling, and the insecurity of global labour markets. Desai’s narrative insists that globalisation, far from dissolving inequality, reproduces it under the guise of mobility.

When viewed through the lens of current global politics, *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* offer a framework for understanding the contradictions confronting Indians in the West today. The rise of racial nationalism in host countries, from anti-Asian hate crimes in the U.S. to anti-immigrant rhetoric in the U.K., has revealed that professional success and cultural adaptation do not insulate migrants from systemic vulnerability. Lahiri's and Desai's works expose the psychic and moral costs of this condition. Their characters' alienation, oscillating between pride in Indian identity and the compulsion to assimilate, resonates with the lived experience of many Indians abroad who must navigate the politics of representation—being “almost the same but not quite,” in Bhabha's phrase.

Moreover, both writers help us theorise the contemporary Indian diaspora as a postcolonial subject of globalisation: one whose cultural hybridity is commodified by neoliberal multiculturalism even as their racial difference remains a site of anxiety. The recent valorisation of the Indian global professional, often celebrated as proof of meritocratic success, conceals the unevenness of Indian migration itself—the deep divide between elite technocrats and precarious labourers, between visible success and invisible servitude. Desai and Lahiri, in different registers, lay bare this inequality. Ultimately, these novels illuminate the paradox of “targeted belonging”, the condition of being simultaneously desired and disavowed. The Indian diaspora's predicament today—of conditional inclusion, of pride coexisting with paranoia—echoes the ambivalences that Lahiri and Desai articulated two decades earlier. Their fiction thus serves not merely as representation but as cultural theory: it helps us perceive how the intimate experiences of identity, love, and loss are inseparable from the geopolitical forces that produce them.

## Conclusion

By reading *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* alongside the current socio-political landscape of the Indian diaspora, this paper argues that literature remains a crucial interpretive tool for understanding global inequality. Both novels expose the myth of cosmopolitan belonging and remind us that mobility in a world structured by empire is never neutral. They compel us to confront the enduring truth that for many Indians in the West, belonging continues to be not a right but a negotiation—always provisional, always shadowed by the history of being other.

## References

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