



# Generational Conflict and Cultural Transmission in the Indian Diaspora

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**Abstract:** The Indian diaspora encompasses a globally diverse population that often navigates complex intergenerational relationships shaped by migration, cultural preservation, and adaptation. This paper examines the theme of generational conflict and cultural transmission within Indian diasporic literature, focusing on how immigrant families mediate identity, language, tradition, and belonging across generations. Through a close reading of key texts by authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, this paper explores the multifaceted tensions and negotiations between first-generation immigrants and their descendants. The analysis reveals that despite conflicts, cultural transmission persists in evolving forms, producing hybrid identities and fostering intercultural understanding. This study contributes to diaspora studies and postcolonial literature by illuminating the resilience and adaptability of cultural identity across generations.

**Key Words:** History, Identity, Language, Literature, Tradition, Hybridity.

## 1. Introduction

The Indian diaspora, one of the largest and most culturally rich diasporic communities in the world, has long been the subject of academic and literary inquiry. Spanning continents and generations, it encapsulates a broad range of experiences that are shaped by migration, memory, adaptation, and identity. At the core of many diasporic narratives lies a recurring tension between generations: the elders, who often carry the cultural values, religious beliefs, and linguistic traditions of their homeland, and the youth, who grow up navigating a different cultural landscape shaped by the norms of their host society. This intergenerational dynamic becomes a powerful lens through which to examine questions of cultural transmission, identity formation, and belonging.

In literary works by Indian diasporic authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the family is frequently portrayed as the primary site of cultural transmission within the family is seldom smooth; rather, it is marked by misunderstandings, resistance, emotional estrangement, and eventual reconciliation. Generational conflict is not merely a result of age differences but is rooted in deeper ideological, cultural, and social disjunctions. These conflicts are further intensified in the diasporic context where children, growing up in Western societies, are socialized into value systems that may differ starkly from those of their immigrant parents. As Hall (1990) suggests, identity in the diaspora is never stable but constantly “in process”, shaped by the push and pull of cultural influences.

This paper explores how generational conflict and cultural transmission are represented in Indian diasporic literature, emphasizing the evolving nature of identity and cultural continuity. By analysing literary texts and theoretical perspectives, the study aims to understand how families navigate these conflicts and how younger generations reinterpret inherited traditions. The subtopics discussed include the historical context of diaspora and family structures, identity formation, language as a cultural bridge and barrier, literary representations of intergenerational tension. Through this multifaceted analysis, the paper seeks to illuminate the transformative processes by which cultural heritage is preserved, contested, and reimagined across generations in the Indian diaspora.

## 2. Historical Context of the Indian Diaspora and Family Structures

The history of the Indian diaspora is complex and layered, involving waves of migration due to colonial indentured labor, post-independence economic mobility, and contemporary globalization. Each wave brought distinct patterns of family organization and cultural retention. Families who migrated during the colonial period often faced coercive circumstances that led to the dissolution of traditional joint family systems. However, post-1960's migration-especially to the United States, Canada, and UK- re-established these structures in nuclear forms that attempted to preserve Indian cultural practices.

In these diasporic contexts, the family emerges as a critical site of cultural continuity. It becomes the first institution where children are socialized into Indian traditions, language, and values. The elders- often immigrants themselves- carry the responsibility of transmitting cultural practices to younger members. Vertovec (2000) has highlighted the diaspora as a “community of co-responsibility”, which underscores the familial and cultural accountability embedded in these migrant networks.

However, the family also becomes the first battleground for cultural negotiation. As children are educated in foreign settings, exposed to host cultures, and grow in environments often contradictory to their parents' worldviews, the traditional hierarchies and expectations embedded in Indian family structures begin to erode. This shift creates generational friction that characterizes much of Indian diasporic experience, as seen in both real-life narratives and literary representations.

### 3. Identity Formation and Generational Tensions

Identity among second-generation diasporic Indians is often described as fluid, hybrid, and contested. Caught between the expectations of their parents and the influences of their host societies, these individuals frequently experience cultural dislocation. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) offers a vivid portrayal of such tensions. Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist, struggles with significance of his name and heritage, oscillating between acceptance and rejection. The tension is emblematic of a broader diasporic condition wherein individuals must constantly negotiate their selfhood.

The generational divide arises primarily from differing value systems. While first-generation immigrants tend to emphasize duty, familial obligation, and cultural preservation, the younger generation often prioritizes individual autonomy, self-expression, and adaptation. This divergence results in misunderstandings, emotional distance, and sometimes, overt conflict. Stuart Hall (1990) aptly describes identity as "a production, which is never complete, always in process". This process is particularly fraught within diasporic contexts where competing cultural narratives vie for legitimacy.

Such identity conflicts are further intensified by societal pressures. Diasporic youth must content with stereotyping, racialization, and cultural marginalization in their host countries, which complicates their relationship with both their inherited culture and their social environment. Many turn to literature, art, or community activism to reconcile these tensions, thereby forging new identities that are neither entirely Indian nor completely Western but a synthesis of both.

### 4. Language as a Medium of Transmission and Division

Language functions as both a bridge and a barrier in diasporic families. For first-generation immigrants, the mother tongue is a vital conduit for transmitting cultural memory and familial intimacy. Speaking in Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, or Gujarati reinforces cultural ties and affirms one's ethnic identity. However, second-generation youth often find themselves distanced from these languages, particularly if English is the dominant language of education and peer interaction in their host country.

This linguistic gap can create emotional disconnects within families. Children may struggle to express themselves fully in their parents' language, while parents may feel alienated by their children's linguistic preferences. As Bharati Mukherjee (1989) notes, "Immigrants don't simply pack up and leave their homeland; they reconstitute their lives in foreign lands with the tools they carry". When the linguistic tool is underutilized or lost, a significant aspect of cultural heritage is compromised.

At the same time, the language gap can also be a site of innovation. Diasporic youth often create hybrid forms of communication—combining English with Indian idioms or inventing new slang—that reflect their dual heritage. These linguistic practices not only signal identity but also offer avenues for cultural negotiation. Kramsch (1998) argues that language is a "symbolic system through which we interpret the world". The evolution of language within the diaspora thus mirrors the broader transformations in identity and cultural transmission.

### 5. Literary Representations of Intergenerational Conflict

Indian diasporic literature is replete with portrayals of intergenerational conflict, often using it as a central narrative device. These texts offer intimate insights into how families negotiate cultural differences, misunderstandings, and emotional distance. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) centres on Rakhi, a second-generation Indian-American artist, who struggles to understand her mother's mystical world steeped in Indian traditions. Through dreams and memories, the novel unpacks the layers of misunderstanding that separate the two generations.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) also explores these themes. The short story "Only Goodness" depicts the strained relationship between a responsible older sister and her rebellious younger brother, shaped by their differing interpretations of familial duty. Lahiri writes, "She felt the weight of her parents' expectations as if they were rocks in her pockets". Such narratives articulate the psychological burdens that children of immigrants often carry, which include not just cultural confusion but also the responsibility of mediating between two worlds.

These literary representations go beyond simple depictions of cultural conflict. They often chart the journey toward understanding, reconciliation, and emotional healing. Mishra (2007) contends that diasporic literature functions as a "space of return"—not necessarily to a geographical homeland but to an emotional and cultural centre where fractured identities can be reassembled. The literature thus becomes a site of catharsis and cultural reconstruction.

### 6. Cultural Practices and the Politics of Retention and Adaptation

Cultural transmission in diasporic settings often occurs through tangible practices such as festivals, rituals, food, and dress. These practices serve as cultural anchors and identity markers within multicultural societies. First-generation immigrants often make concerted efforts to maintain these traditions, viewing them as essential to preserving cultural integrity. For instance, the celebration of Diwali or Pongal in the diaspora becomes not only a religious event but also a community gathering that reinforces ethnic solidarity.

However, these practices can also be points of contention. Younger generations may view them as outdated, irrelevant, or even oppressive. The negotiation over cultural practices often takes the form of generational debates—over what to wear, whom to marry, what language to speak at home, or whether to fast during festivals. Rayaprol (1997) notes that the diaspora involves "constant negotiation between continuity and change", a dynamic clearly visible in these everyday conflicts.

Interestingly, adaptation does not always equate to loss. Many second-generation individuals reinterpret these cultural practices in ways that are meaningful to them. Wearing a sari at a graduation or preparing traditional food with modern twists are examples of how traditions are not abandoned but reimagined. Appadurai (1996) argues that culture is "dialogic process", shaped through interactions with changing social realities. Diasporic cultural practices thus exemplify this dialogic negotiation.

## 7. Reconciliation, Hybridity, and Evolving Diasporic Identities

Despite the tension, many diasporic narratives culminate in moments of reconciliation and hybrid identity formation. These stories often depict a gradual understanding between generations, where both parties come to appreciate each other's experiences. In *The Namesake*, Gogol eventually embraces his name and heritage, realizing its significance only after his father's death. This transformation symbolizes the resolution of his identity conflict and the acceptance of a hybrid self. Hybridity as conceptualized by Homi Bhabha (1994), refers to the "third space" where new cultural meanings are produced. This space is neither purely Indian nor entirely Western but a fusion that reflects the realities of diasporic life. Such hybridity is not without its tensions, but it allows for greater fluidity in identity construction. Individuals learn to navigate multiple cultural codes, drawing from both heritage and contemporary environments to shape their sense of self. This evolution is not just personal but also collective. Diasporic communities increasingly promote cultural pluralism and intergenerational dialogue. Community centres, literature, and digital media platforms offer spaces for sharing and understanding divergent experiences. Brah (1996) argues that diasporic identity is "embedded in the genealogies of dispersion and the practices of everyday life". It is through these everyday practices and dialogues that reconciliation and hybrid identities are formed.

Generational conflict and cultural transmission are central themes in the literature of the Indian diaspora. While these tensions reflect real challenges in maintaining cultural continuity across borders and generations, they have also reveal opportunities for growth, adaptation and mutual understanding. Through literary representations, we gain insights into the lived experiences of diasporic families and the evolving nature of cultural identity. These narratives affirm that culture, though contested, is never lost-it is transformed.

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