

REIMAGINING IDENTITY AND BELONGING: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary South Asian English fiction reimagines identity and belonging through the lens of cultural hybridity. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's foundational theorisation of hybridity and the "third space," alongside a body of 2024 scholarship on diaspora, mimicry, and postcolonial subjectivity, the study analyses selected works by Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Nair, and Nafisa Haji. It argues that hybridity in these texts is neither a comfortable synthesis of East and West nor a simple loss of origin, but an unstable, generative process through which characters continually renegotiate selfhood against the pressures of migration, gender, class, and religious tradition. The analysis shows that recent criticism increasingly reframes hybridity as an active, resistant practice rather than a passive condition of in-betweenness, and it situates South Asian English fiction as a literary space in which new, plural forms of belonging are imagined without fully resolving the tensions from which they arise.

Keywords: cultural hybridity; third space; South Asian fiction; diaspora; postcolonial identity; belonging; mimicry

1. Introduction

South Asian English fiction occupies a distinctive position within postcolonial literary studies because it is written from, and about, a condition of cultural doubleness. Authors working in this tradition inherit the English language as both a colonial imposition and a medium of creative freedom, and their characters routinely move between homelands and host lands, ancestral customs and adopted habits, inherited faith and personal reinvention. This paper asks how contemporary South Asian English fiction represents identity and belonging under these conditions, and what recent scholarship reveals about the literary strategies through which hybrid selfhood is constructed, contested, and lived. The term "hybridity" has a long and contested history in postcolonial theory. Rather than treating hybridity as a fixed blend of two discrete cultures, this paper follows the now-dominant critical view that hybridity names an unstable process of negotiation that unsettles the very categories of "self" and "other," "coloniser" and "colonised" on which colonial authority depended. This reframing has become especially visible in scholarship published in 2024, which repeatedly returns to Bhabha's concept of the third space to explain how diasporic and postcolonial characters inhabit liminal positions that are productive rather than merely deficient.

The paper proceeds in four movements. It first outlines the theoretical framework of hybridity and the third space. It then surveys recent scholarship on South Asian and adjacent diasporic fiction published in 2024, tracing shared concerns and divergent emphases. It subsequently offers close

readings of hybridity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction, Anita Nair's novels, and Nafisa Haji's *The Writing on My Forehead*. It closes by considering what these readings suggest about identity and belonging as ongoing, unresolved literary projects rather than settled achievements.

2. Theoretical Framework: Hybridity, Mimicry, and the Third Space

Homi K. Bhabha's account of hybridity remains the single most influential framework for reading cultural mixture in postcolonial literature. For Bhabha, hybridity is not simply the combination of two pre-existing cultures into a third, composite culture. It is instead the effect of a continuous process of cultural translation that occurs in the encounter between coloniser and colonised, and later between migrant and host society, such that neither side of the encounter remains untouched or authentic in its original form. Bhabha calls the space in which this translation happens the "third space": a liminal, in-between zone where fixed cultural meanings are unsettled and new, provisional forms of identity and meaning become possible.

Closely related to hybridity is Bhabha's concept of mimicry, in which colonised or diasporic subjects adopt the language, dress, or manners of the dominant culture, but never perfectly, so that the imitation always contains a visible gap or excess. This gap, Bhabha argues, is destabilising for the dominant culture because it reveals that cultural authority was never as fixed or natural as it claimed to be. Contemporary criticism continues to use

mimicry to explain how characters in South Asian fiction adopt Western dress, language, or professional identities while simultaneously exposing the artificiality of the norms they imitate. Recent applications of third-space theory extend Bhabha's original, largely colonial-era framework into diasporic and transnational contexts. A 2024 study of Elif Shafak's *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, for instance, reads the third space as a liminal site in which transnational characters negotiate the tension between inherited tradition and the pressures of assimilation, producing hybrid identities aligned fully with neither culture. A related 2024 reading of Guy Gunaratne-adjacent diasporic fiction similarly frames hybridity as an ongoing negotiation rather than a completed synthesis, in which belonging is continually redefined rather than finally secured. These studies collectively suggest that the third space has become less a description of colonial ambivalence and more a general theory of diasporic consciousness under globalisation.

3. Review of Literature:

2024 Scholarship on Hybridity and South Asian Fiction

Scholarship published in 2024 on cultural hybridity in South Asian and diasporic English fiction clusters around several recurring concerns: identity crisis, gendered hybridity, generational conflict, and the limits of assimilation. One 2024 survey of postcolonial Indian English literature published between 2010 and 2024 synthesises theoretical frameworks and thematic patterns across major authors, including Rushdie and Lahiri, and confirms that Bhabha's third space remains the dominant lens through which critics read cultural hybridity and identity crisis in this body of writing. A 2024 study of Anita Nair's fiction extends this discussion into questions of gender, arguing that Nair situates hybridity within South Indian social norms while foregrounding the resilience of female characters negotiating cultural hegemony, transformation, and multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural dynamics. This gendered reading complicates any purely celebratory account of hybridity by insisting that the third space is unevenly accessible: for women characters, negotiating between tradition and modernity often carries higher personal and social costs than it does for their male counterparts.

Diasporic hybridity in Lahiri's fiction has also received sustained 2024 attention. One study of Lahiri's diasporic narratives argues that her characters inhabit the third space in which fragmented identities are reconfigured into new, hybrid forms of cultural expression, while another

2024 analysis of Lahiri's short story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" focuses on how a child narrator's developing consciousness registers the tensions of growing up between two cultural worlds. Together, these readings suggest that Lahiri's fiction locates hybridity not only in adult migrants but in the formative experience of second-generation children who inherit cultural doubleness without having chosen it.

Finally, a 2024 study of Nafisa Haji's *The Writing on My Forehead* reads mimicry as a survival and mobility strategy for its protagonist, who adopts elements of a Western lifestyle, including dress and romantic choices, while remaining shaped by inherited expectations regarding family duty and religious identity. This scholarship is notable for treating hybridity not as an abstract condition but as a set of embodied, everyday practices, visible in clothing, courtship, and domestic life, through which characters actively manage the competing claims of two cultural worlds. Taken together, the 2024 literature confirms that South Asian fiction is read less as a record of cultural loss than as an archive of active, ongoing cultural negotiation.

4. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and The Satanic Verses: Hybridity as Historical and Religious Negotiation

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* remains a foundational text for thinking about hybridity in South Asian fiction because it fuses the life of its narrator, Saleem Sinai, to the birth of independent India itself. Saleem's fractured, multiply-authored identity, assembled from competing family stories, historical accidents, and his own unreliable narration, dramatises the impossibility of a single, pure account of postcolonial selfhood. The novel's formal hybridity, its blending of oral storytelling conventions with the English-language novel, mirrors its thematic argument that Indian identity after independence is necessarily plural, improvised, and unfinished.

The *Satanic Verses* extends this exploration into the domain of religious hybridity. Its protagonists, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, undergo transformations that blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane, the angelic and the demonic, forcing readers to confront how migration destabilises not only cultural but spiritual certainty. Comparative 2024 scholarship on Rushdie's fiction argues that this religious hybridity intensifies the novel's broader meditation on identity negotiation, since characters must reconcile inherited religious frameworks with the disorienting freedoms and anxieties of migrant life in Britain. Chamcha's mimicry of Englishness, his cultivated accent and manner, exemplifies Bhabha's account of mimicry

as an imitation that is never quite complete, and that therefore exposes the instability of the very Englishness it imitates.

Read together, Rushdie's two novels suggest that hybridity operates simultaneously at the level of nation, family, and faith. Neither novel offers a resolved, comfortable synthesis; instead, both insist that identity in the postcolonial and diasporic condition remains permanently in process, vulnerable to fragmentation but also open to reinvention.

5. Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Fiction: Hybridity Across Generations

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction shifts the focus of hybridity from the first-generation migrant to the second generation, whose experience of cultural doubleness is inherited rather than chosen. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," the child narrator Lilia observes the political anxieties of the adults around her, particularly the Bangladeshi visitor Mr. Pirzada, while herself negotiating a distinctly American childhood shaped by school, ritual, and unfamiliar national symbols. Recent scholarship reads Lilia's confusion over Mr. Pirzada's nationality, and her growing awareness of the distance between his world and her own, as a way of dramatising the layered, sometimes contradictory forms of belonging available to diasporic children.

More broadly, Lahiri's fiction across her short-story collections stages what 2024 criticism calls a reconfiguration of fragmented identity into new cultural expression: her characters do not simply lose an original culture and gain a new one, but continuously assemble partial, provisional identities out of details, gestures, and objects, such as food, clothing, and language, that carry meaning across both worlds simultaneously. This attention to material, everyday detail is one of the distinguishing features of Lahiri's treatment of hybridity, grounding Bhabha's abstract third space in the textures of domestic immigrant life.

Lahiri's fiction also resists any triumphant narrative of successful assimilation. Her characters frequently experience hybridity as loss, dislocation, and quiet grief, alongside its more generative possibilities. This ambivalence is itself consistent with Bhabha's theory, in which the third space is not a comfortable resting place but a site of ongoing tension between competing cultural claims.

6. Anita Nair: Gendered Hybridity and Resilience

Anita Nair's fiction situates cultural hybridity within the specific social and gendered structures of South India. Her female characters must negotiate

hybridity not only between Indian and Western cultural reference points but within Indian society itself, across regional, caste, and class lines that shape what forms of self-expression are available to them. Recent scholarship emphasises that Nair's protagonists demonstrate resilience precisely because the hybrid identities they construct must survive scrutiny from multiple, sometimes conflicting, social authorities: family expectation, religious norms, and emerging modern aspirations for autonomy and self-realisation.

This gendered reading of hybridity complicates the more celebratory strands of postcolonial theory, which can sometimes treat the third space as uniformly liberating. Nair's fiction instead shows that the capacity to inhabit a hybrid identity is unevenly distributed, and that for women characters, cultural negotiation often carries the risk of social punishment, familial rupture, or enforced silence. Nair's work therefore extends the theoretical framework of hybridity by insisting that any account of identity and belonging in South Asian fiction must be attentive to gender as a structuring condition of who gets to be hybrid, and on what terms.

7. Nafisa Haji's The Writing on My Forehead: Hybridity, Mimicry, and Religious Identity

Nafisa Haji's *The Writing on My Forehead* follows its protagonist, Saira, as she negotiates a Pakistani Muslim upbringing alongside the pressures and freedoms of American life. Recent scholarship on the novel reads Saira's mimicry, her adoption of Western dress, her romantic relationship with a non-Muslim partner, and her tendency to stay out later than her mother permits, as strategies of survival and social mobility within a hybrid cultural landscape, rather than as simple rebellion or assimilation. Crucially, this mimicry is never complete or uncomplicated: Saira's choices continue to be shaped, and sometimes constrained, by inherited expectations regarding family duty and religious observance.

The novel is particularly valuable for this study because it demonstrates that hybridity in South Asian fiction is often organised around the family as the primary site of negotiation, rather than the nation or the workplace. Saira's hybridity is enacted in choices about clothing, courtship, and daily conduct that are visible and legible to her family, and that therefore carry immediate social consequences. This everyday, embodied register of hybridity complements the more abstract, structural hybridity visible in Rushdie's national allegories, suggesting that South Asian English fiction represents identity negotiation at multiple, interlocking scales simultaneously.

8. Language, Translation, and the Hybrid Text

Hybridity in South Asian English fiction is not only a matter of plot and character; it is embedded in the very language of the texts themselves. Writers working in this tradition routinely fold untranslated words, regional idioms, and transliterated speech patterns into English prose, producing what critics increasingly describe as a hybrid literary language that mirrors, at the level of form, the cultural hybridity the fiction represents at the level of content. Rushdie's prose is frequently cited as the most conspicuous example of this practice: his sentences absorb Bombay street slang, Urdu and Hindi vocabulary, and the rhythms of oral storytelling into an English syntax that has itself been transformed by the encounter.

This linguistic hybridity performs a double function. On one hand, it signals authenticity, situating the reader within a specific regional and cultural soundscape rather than a generic, deracinated English. On the other hand, it performs the very instability that Bhabha associates with the third space, since the English language itself is shown to be permeable, capable of hosting other languages without fully assimilating them. A word left untranslated on the page, for instance, resists the reader's desire for total comprehension, reproducing in miniature the partial, incomplete cultural translation that hybrid characters undergo. Recent criticism on diasporic fiction has extended this observation to Lahiri's prose style, arguing that her comparatively restrained, precise English carries its own kind of hybrid charge: it is an English inflected by Bengali domestic vocabulary, culinary terms, and forms of address that would be unfamiliar to a monolingual Anglo-American reader.

This attention to form matters for the broader argument of this paper because it suggests that hybridity cannot be reduced to theme alone. If South Asian English fiction only described hybrid characters while writing in a wholly conventional, unmarked English, the fiction would risk reproducing the very cultural hierarchies its content critiques, in which English remains the neutral, transparent medium and other languages remain decorative additions. Instead, the most critically significant texts in this tradition, including those examined above, hybridise the language itself, so that form and content reinforce one another in representing identity as an ongoing site of negotiation rather than a fixed, nameable thing.

9. Religion, Tradition, and the Limits of Hybrid Belonging

A recurring tension across the texts considered in this paper concerns the relationship between

hybridity and religious or familial tradition. Where Bhabha's original theorisation of the third space emerged primarily from a colonial context concerned with race and national culture, the fiction examined here consistently extends the concept to religious identity, showing that hybridity is not only a matter of nationality or language but also of inherited belief and ritual practice.

In *The Satanic Verses*, this extension becomes explicit: Gibreel Farishta's crisis of faith and identity is inseparable from his crisis of national and cultural belonging, such that the novel's controversial engagement with religious material cannot be separated from its broader argument about hybrid selfhood under migration. Haji's *The Writing on My Forehead* stages a comparable, if less theologically provocative, negotiation: Saira's hybrid identity is continually checked against her family's expectations regarding religious observance and marital choice, so that her mimicry of Western social behaviour is never free of religious and familial consequence. Nair's fiction situates a related tension within Hindu family and caste structures rather than an explicitly diasporic religious context, demonstrating that the pressure of tradition on hybrid identity is not limited to migrant communities but also operates within South Asia itself.

These patterns suggest an important qualification to any account of hybridity as a wholly liberating or celebratory process. Religious and familial tradition in this fiction functions as a counterweight to hybridity, a set of inherited obligations that hybrid characters must continually negotiate, evade, or partially satisfy, rather than a fixed backdrop that hybridity simply leaves behind. The third space, in other words, does not empty out prior cultural commitments; it holds them in ongoing tension with newly acquired ones, and much of the emotional and narrative energy of this fiction derives precisely from that unresolved tension.

9. Generational Contrast: First- and Second-Generation Hybridity

A comparative reading of these four writers reveals a consistent generational pattern in how hybridity is experienced and narrated. First-generation migrant characters, such as Mr. Pirzada in Lahiri's short fiction or the adult protagonists of Rushdie's novels, tend to experience hybridity as a deliberate, effortful negotiation undertaken in adulthood, often against a vivid, remembered prior life in South Asia that continues to exert a strong pull on memory and desire. Their hybridity is frequently marked by nostalgia, a longing for an origin that migration has rendered inaccessible, even as they build new lives abroad.

Second-generation characters, by contrast, including Lilia in Lahiri's fiction and, in a more complex register, Saira in Haji's novel, do not experience an original, pre-migration culture as lived memory but instead inherit it secondhand, through family stories, ritual practice, and parental expectation. Their hybridity is therefore less a negotiation between a remembered past and a new present than a negotiation between an inherited, sometimes idealised, cultural narrative and their own lived, embodied experience of growing up in a Western society. This generational distinction matters because it suggests that hybridity is not a static condition transmitted unchanged from parent to child, but a dynamic process that takes different forms depending on one's relationship to migration itself.

This generational lens also helps explain differences in narrative tone across the four writers. Rushdie's prose, though often comic, carries an undertone of historical urgency and loss appropriate to a first-generation, nation-founding perspective, while Lahiri's restrained, precise style captures the quieter, more domestic negotiations of second-generation characters whose hybridity is expressed through small, accumulated gestures rather than grand historical allegory. Recognising this generational variation allows for a more precise account of hybridity than a single, undifferentiated theory of the third space can provide on its own.

10. Discussion: Identity and Belonging as Unfinished Projects

Read together, these four bodies of fiction and their surrounding 2024 scholarship suggest several shared conclusions about identity and belonging in contemporary South Asian English fiction. First, hybridity is consistently represented as a process rather than an achieved state. None of the texts examined here resolve their characters' cultural tensions into a stable, final identity; instead, characters remain in motion between competing cultural claims, and this motion is itself the substance of their identity.

Second, hybridity is unevenly experienced according to gender, generation, and religious context. Nair's and Haji's fiction in particular demonstrate that women characters often bear a disproportionate share of the social risk involved in cultural negotiation, complicating any reading of the third space as an equally accessible or equally liberating position for all diasporic subjects. Lahiri's fiction, meanwhile, shows that hybridity is inherited by second-generation children who did not choose the migration that produced their cultural doubleness, giving their negotiation of identity a distinctly involuntary character.

Third, mimicry recurs across these texts as a key mechanism through which hybridity becomes visible and socially legible. Whether in Chamcha's cultivated English manner, Saira's Western dress, or Lilia's uncertain grasp of national symbols, mimicry consistently reveals the imitated culture's own instability even as it exposes the migrant character to social risk. This confirms Bhabha's original insight that mimicry unsettles cultural authority precisely because it is never a perfect copy.

The comparative and generational analysis offered above also indicates that any single-text or single-author study of hybridity risks overstating the generalisability of its findings. Only by reading across writers of different generations, genders, and religious backgrounds, as this paper has attempted to do, does the fuller complexity of hybridity as a literary and lived phenomenon become visible.

Finally, belonging in this fiction is represented less as arrival at a settled home than as an ongoing capacity to hold multiple, sometimes contradictory, cultural attachments at once. Characters who successfully inhabit the third space are not those who resolve their cultural contradictions, but those who develop the resilience to live within them. This has significant implications for how South Asian English fiction should be read within broader postcolonial and diaspora studies: it suggests that literary hybridity offers not a model of cultural synthesis to be admired from a distance, but a set of practical strategies for living amid ongoing cultural negotiation.

11. Implications for Postcolonial and Diaspora Studies

The readings offered in this paper carry implications beyond the four authors examined directly. If hybridity functions across such different registers, national allegory in Rushdie, intergenerational memory in Lahiri, gendered social realism in Nair, and family-centred negotiation in Haji, then postcolonial and diaspora studies should resist treating hybridity as a single, uniform experience that can be generalised across all South Asian writing. Instead, the evidence gathered here supports a more granular approach, attentive to how hybridity is inflected by genre, gender, generation, religion, and regional context within South Asia itself, as well as by the specific migration histories that shape diasporic communities in Britain, North America, and elsewhere.

This has consequences for pedagogy as well as scholarship. Teaching South Asian English fiction primarily through a generalised lens of East-meets-West cultural fusion risks flattening precisely the differences that recent 2024 scholarship has begun

to recover, between, for instance, the involuntary hybridity inherited by Lahiri's second-generation child narrators and the more deliberate, risk-laden hybridity performed by Haji's Saira as she navigates courtship and family expectation. A more historically and socially grounded approach to teaching hybridity would ask students to attend to these differences rather than treating hybridity as an interchangeable descriptive label.

Finally, this body of fiction and criticism suggests that hybridity remains a productive but incomplete critical vocabulary. While Bhabha's third space continues to generate valuable readings three decades after its initial formulation, the fiction examined here consistently exceeds and complicates the theory, particularly around questions of gender and religious obligation that were not central to Bhabha's original, largely secular and masculine account of colonial ambivalence. Future theoretical work, informed by continued close reading of contemporary fiction, will need to extend hybridity theory to address these dimensions more fully.

12. Conclusion

This paper has argued that contemporary South Asian English fiction reimagines identity and belonging through sustained, critical engagement with cultural hybridity. Drawing on Bhabha's theorisation of hybridity, mimicry, and the third space, and on a substantial body of 2024 scholarship applying these concepts to South Asian and diasporic fiction, the analysis has shown that hybridity in this literary tradition functions as an active, unresolved negotiation rather than a comfortable fusion of cultures. Rushdie's national and religious allegories, Lahiri's intergenerational short fiction, Nair's gendered social realism, and Haji's family-centred narrative each dramatise a distinct facet of this negotiation, while sharing a common refusal to resolve their characters' hybrid identities into any final, stable form.

It has further shown that hybridity, while a generative and creative process, is neither cost-free nor equally available to all characters, and that attending to gender, generation, and religious tradition is essential to understanding why some characters inhabit the third space with relative ease while others experience it as a site of ongoing risk and negotiation.

Future research might extend this analysis by considering how digital and social media technologies are reshaping diasporic hybridity for a generation of South Asian writers and characters whose cultural negotiations increasingly occur online as well as within family and national spaces. As South Asian English fiction continues to expand

beyond its historically dominant Indian and Pakistani diasporic centres to include Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Nepali voices, scholarship on hybridity will need to remain attentive to the specific historical and political conditions that shape each community's distinctive relationship to cultural doubleness, rather than treating hybridity as a single, universal condition of postcolonial experience.

What remains constant across the texts and criticism surveyed in this paper is a shared insistence that identity, in the South Asian English novel, is best understood not as a possession to be secured but as a practice to be sustained: an ongoing labour of translation, negotiation, and self-narration performed anew in every generation, every family, and every act of reading.

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