Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)
A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

Vol.14.Issue 2. 2026 (April-June)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

New Spaces of Belonging and Renewed Identities

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DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.14.2.416

Article info
Article Received: 21/05/2026
Article Accepted: 18/06/2026
Published online: 25/06/2026

Abstract

Multiculturalism signifies heterogeneity, diversity, difference, and plurality, within which immigrants retain elements of their native cultural identities, often giving rise to fragmented subjectivities. The immigrant encounters a multiplicity of selves and consequently oscillates between multiple affiliations and a complete absence of belonging. Contemporary diasporic discourse documents the doubly liminal, fluid, and evolving contours of diasporic existence. Migrant writers have examined the possibilities inherent in the borderland where the migrant engages with the host culture. This process necessitates a negotiation between what may be relinquished and what must be preserved from the indigenous culture, while also shaping the migrant's response to the adopted homeland. The aesthetics of dislocation articulated by South Asian writers evoke the anxiety, anguish, and violence associated with cross-cultural mobility and displacement. The multicultural paradigm further envisages the possibility of inhabiting two or more distinct worlds simultaneously, often fostering a sensibility that is at once rooted and estranged, familiar with both home and abroad.

Key words: dislocation, diaspora, homeland, hostland, identity, anguish

In contemporary discourse, the term "diaspora" has acquired an expanded semantic range, denoting the dispersion of peoples associated with a recognised nation or united by a shared cultural heritage. Experiences of homelessness, displacement, and alienation within the host society constitute central concerns of diasporic communities. Dislocation, in this context, extends beyond geographical relocation and assumes the character of a profound psychological and existential condition. The hardships and consolations accompanying migration have generated a search for non-territorial forms of affiliation and collective solidarity among diasporic populations. Consequently, diasporic subjectivity has increasingly been theorised through contemporary frameworks of identity politics, including notions of hybridity, liminality, border zones, the "third time space"

(Lavie 56), and the impure category of the "hyphenated subject" (Mishra 433). The complex cultural formations of diaspora, as Stuart Hall observes:

> bear upon them the traces of particular traditions, languages and history by which they are shaped. The difference is that they are not and never be unified in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures: belong at one and the same time to several homes. (310)

The diasporic consciousness articulated by writers of the Indian diaspora frequently oscillates between multiple affiliations and an acute sense of "unbelonging". Indeed, their creative impulses are often nourished by the precarious and liminal spaces they inhabit. Such a condition renders their writings, in Uma Parameswaran's formulation, "doubly liminal" (98). Migrant writers have consistently explored the transformative possibilities of the borderland where migrant and host cultures intersect. This process involves a continual negotiation between the elements of indigenous culture that may be relinquished and those that must be preserved, while simultaneously shaping the migrant's response to the adopted homeland. Their engagement with the past is therefore marked alternately by nostalgia and estrangement, particularly as the homeland itself undergoes transformation during their absence. Avtar Brah's most influential contribution to diaspora theory is the concept of "home". Brah distinguishes between "home" as a lived experience of belonging and "homeland" as an imagined place of origin. For her, home is not necessarily a place to which one wishes to return; rather, it is a site of emotional attachment, memory, and everyday social practices.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed poet, novelist, and co-founder as well as former president of MAITRI, a support organisation for South Asian women, has emerged as a significant literary voice articulating the experiences of Indian women in the United States. Through her nuanced exploration of the innermost dimensions of her protagonists' consciousness, she foregrounds the complexities of migration, identity, and cultural negotiation. *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), a collection comprising nine stories, three of which are set in India, offers a compelling representation of diasporic experiences. The present study examines the challenges of inhabiting multiple cultural worlds, the fluid and evolving contours of diasporic existence, and the enduring connections with the homeland as portrayed in the six stories featuring Bengali immigrants in the United States.

While delineating the defining features of diasporic formations, Robin Cohen identifies "the memory of a single traumatic event" (22) as a sustaining force within diasporic consciousness. In "The Blooming Season for Cacti," it is such a traumatic memory that defines the identity of the protagonist. The memories of the Bombay riots constitute the foundation of Mira's diasporic identity. Her journey towards self-discovery originates in the devastating experiences of the riots, during which she loses her mother. Subsequently, she accepts her brother's invitation to migrate to the United States and live with him and his wife, as she "needed something as different as possible from Bombay" (169). She nurtures the hope that America might provide respite from the anguish of her past. Nevertheless, memories continue to haunt her, particularly recollections of searching for her mother "through streets filled with the stench of kerosene and burned flesh, calling her name" (176). The trauma persists even in the new environment, especially through sensory reminders such as the smell of the water tank in her Bombay home, where she remained concealed for nearly two days during the violence. Yet, the adopted homeland fails to provide the refuge Mira seeks. Her brother's

plans to arrange her marriage compel her to leave Dallas for California, driven by a profound fear of intimate relationships. She confesses, "How could I tell them that when I thought of a man touching me, I smelled the water tank, smoke and corroding metal" (183). In California, she encounters fresh challenges embodied by Radhika and Ajith. Radhika evokes memories of her mother, prompting Mira to associate her with multiple identities— "friend, sister, mother" (190-191) although the maternal image remains the most dominant. A profound emotional shock occurs when Radhika kisses her, leading Mira to interpret the gesture as an outcome of Radhika's marital unhappiness and an attempt to cultivate an unconventional intimacy. Consequently, Mira feels that she is "being sucked into a vortex from which whispered words rise like ancestral ghosts, disgusting, perverted, unnatural" (201).

Although her indigenous cultural values prevent her from embracing a lesbian relationship, Mira nevertheless experiences a phase of what Kaur terms "cultural flowering while away" (56). Influenced by the liberal social ethos of America, she enters into a sexual relationship with Ajith in order to explore "the possibilities of my new American life" (203). However, her attempt to achieve self-understanding and emotional liberation through premarital sexual experience proves unsuccessful. Rather than offering fulfilment or resolution, the experience culminates in disappointment, underscoring the complexities and uncertainties that characterise the diasporic search for identity and belonging.

Mira thus remains incapable of fully embracing either the "absent topos" or the "present topos" (Mishra 16). In this regard, she exemplifies the paradigms of diasporic subjectivity that Vijay Mishra conceptualises as "the semantics of the hyphen" (16). The unresolved and often conflicting nature of her affiliations to both homeland and hostland renders her identity simultaneously severed and sutured, positioning her within a liminal "third time space" (Lavie 16). Her existence is characterised by an ongoing negotiation between competing cultural and emotional allegiances, resulting in a fractured yet evolving sense of self.

Similar to Mira, Monisha in "The Love of a Good Man" migrates to the United States on a student visa in pursuit of a renewed life and as a means of escaping the emotional void created by her father's abandonment, her mother's prolonged suffering from cancer, and the traumatic experience of performing her mother's funeral rites in isolation. As Robin Cohen observes, the experiences endured in the homeland significantly shape "the nature of the diasporic group in its countries of exile" (22–25). Monisha's father had departed for America years earlier, abandoning both his wife and daughter for reasons that remain largely unexplained. When he eventually visits Monisha in California and expresses profound remorse for his actions, she forgives him with remarkable ease. Through this process of introspection, she arrives at the realisation that her initial error "lies in trying to find motive, in thinking of humans as rational beings whose actions spring from logical causes" (101). Monisha's response to her father's return reflects not merely personal growth but also the extent to which she has distanced herself from the emotional burdens of her past and assimilated into the cultural ethos of her adopted homeland.

The concept of hybridity, as stated by Homi Bhabha, has emerged as one of the most influential frameworks for understanding diasporic formations in migratory contexts. According to Bhabha, cultural identities are not predetermined entities rooted in a single tradition; instead, they are continuously shaped through encounters between diverse cultural systems. This process of interaction gives rise to hybridity, a condition in which elements from different cultures merge and generate new forms of meaning that cannot be reduced to either source culture. The hybrid individual

emerges from this intercultural negotiation, inhabiting multiple cultural frameworks simultaneously and developing an identity that transcends fixed notions of belonging. Bhabha locates this transformative process within the Third Space, an in-between cultural realm where established values, symbols, and practices are reinterpreted and reconfigured. As a result, identity becomes fluid, relational, and evolving, reflecting the complex dynamics of cultural exchange rather than the preservation of a singular cultural essence. Iain Chambers defines hybridity as a process of cultural intermixture through which migrants appropriate elements of the host culture while simultaneously reworking and reconstituting them to produce new hybrid cultures and identities (50).

Tarun in "The Intelligence of Wild Things" exemplifies this process through his adoption of American cultural norms and his reinterpretation of indigenous values in the formation of a hybrid identity. He is sent to America against his wishes by his mother, who fears that his involvement in the Naxalite movement in Calcutta might result in his death. Her desperation leads her to accuse him of being "ungrateful, a burden" (42), words that leave a lasting emotional wound. Upon arriving in America, Tarun encounters indifference from his sister and brother-in-law, and this emotional neglect becomes a catalyst for the gradual abandonment of his former identity and the adoption of a distinctly American self. To his sister, "even the expression on his closed face is so totally American" (41). His romantic involvement with an American woman further signifies this cultural transformation.

The apparent completeness of Tarun's assimilation initially deepens the emotional distance between him and his sister, who struggles to communicate the urgency of their mother's deteriorating health in India. However, towards the conclusion of the narrative, Tarun undergoes a renewed transformation when he encounters a bird resembling the marsh crane, or *sharash,* as it is known in Calcutta. The sight of the bird evokes powerful memories of his homeland and rekindles dormant emotional attachments. Significantly, he addresses his sister affectionately as Didi, signalling a symbolic return to his cultural roots. In response, his sister displays a newfound willingness to accept his relationship with the American woman and perceives the bird as a messenger from Bengal, emerging from the realm of memory and folklore to restore fractured familial bonds. Through this process of reconciliation, both Tarun and his sister arrive at hybrid identities that successfully negotiate the tensions between origins and destinations, ultimately achieving a harmonious balance between their roots and routes.

The protagonist of the titular story, "The Unknown Errors of Our Lives," Ruchira derives coherence and meaning for her diasporic identity through a sustained attachment to her cultural roots, exemplifying what William Safran terms "ethno communal consciousness" (83). Although raised in the United States, she demonstrates a profound faith in Indian mythology and cultural traditions, which find expression through her artistic creations. Her periodic visits to India during childhood vacations enabled her to cultivate a deep emotional bond with her grandmother, whom she cherished above all others. Her commitment to preserving this relationship is further reflected in her decision to learn Bengali so that she could correspond with her grandmother through letters. Following her grandmother's death, painting becomes a symbolic medium through which she continues this intimate dialogue across the boundaries of life and death.

Ruchira's paintings are deeply informed by Indian mythological imagery. She depicts "Hanuman, the monkey god, Kamadhenu, the magic cow" (222) and "Jatayu, who died to save Sita" (223), incorporating within these figures the faces of her father, grandmother, and grandfather respectively. The image of Jatayu is

particularly significant, as its feathers are rendered in the colours of the Indian national flag—saffron, white, and green—thereby reinforcing her enduring emotional and cultural affiliation with her ancestral homeland. Her final work portrays Kalpataru, the wish-fulfilling tree, which she intends to present to her fiancé Biren as a wedding gift following their marriage.

A crucial turning point in Ruchira's life emerges when she is confronted with Biren's past relationship. Arlene visits her and reveals her affair with Biren, a relationship that resulted in pregnancy. Although Ruchira initially contemplates cancelling the marriage, her love for Biren ultimately prevails. The affectionate message on his voicemail, "And in case this is Ruchira, I want you to know that I'm crazy about you" (233), acts as a catalyst for reconciliation. Since Biren has already disclosed the relationship to her, she chooses forgiveness over resentment. Nevertheless, she symbolically incorporates the face of Arlene's child into one of the birds in her *Kalpataru* painting and reflects, "And if Biren asks about him? This is what Ruchira wants from the *Kalpataru*, that when Biren asks, she'll know how to ask him back" (235). Ruchira's unwavering attachment to her cultural heritage, particularly its emphasis on compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness, provides her with a stable foundation from which to negotiate the complexities of life in the host society.

Diasporic writing frequently engages with themes of displacement, nostalgia, alienation, and adaptation. As Raminder Kaur observes, "In the relationship between home and away that marks out diasporic understandings, away signifies some sort of loss" (6). This pervasive sense of loss fundamentally shapes the diasporic consciousness of Mrs. Dutta in "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter." As a first-generation immigrant in the United States, she remains unable to detach herself from her roots or fully reconcile herself to the realities of her adopted environment. In contrast, her son Sagar, daughter-in-law Shyamoli, and grandchildren Mrinalini and Pradeep, representing the second and third generations of immigrants, have assimilated with relative ease into Western culture and often dismiss Mrs. Dutta's traditional Indian values and practices.

Following the death of her husband, Mrs. Dutta had maintained an independent life in Calcutta. A committed traditionalist, she eventually relocates to America to live with her son's family, motivated by a deep desire to be close to her grandchildren. The initial phase of her diasporic experience is marked by intense nostalgia, which is further exacerbated by the emotional indifference she encounters within the household. Unable to establish meaningful connections in her new environment, she retreats into memories of her homeland and imagines writing letters to Mrs. Basu, her closest friend and the sole emotional link to her life in Bengal. In one such imagined communication, she laments, "Oh Roma, I miss it all so much, sometimes I feel that someone has reached in and torn a handful of my chest" (8). This poignant expression encapsulates the emotional dislocation, longing, and profound sense of cultural bereavement that characterise her diasporic existence.

Immersed in nostalgia, Mrs. Dutta attempts to recreate her homeland within the American landscape by adhering steadfastly to traditional customs and practices. She begins her day at five o'clock in the morning, performs her religious devotions, and prepares Indian meals, thereby seeking to reconstruct a familiar cultural environment in an unfamiliar setting. However, her efforts to create a symbolic replica of India are repeatedly undermined by Shyamoli. At this stage, Mrs. Dutta's identity remains firmly anchored in what Weber characterises as "persistent ties with the old cult" (390). Gradually, however, she moves beyond the initial phase of nostalgia, reminiscence, and emotional attachment to the homeland and makes a conscious effort to

assimilate into the cultural framework of her adopted country for the sake of her son's family. As Driedger observes, "many immigrants would no longer wish to continue the traditions of the restricted old world, but would opt for the opportunities of the new. Openness to abandoning the restrictive past for future opportunities" (23) constitutes a common feature of changing ethnic patterns.

In her attempt to adapt to American society, Mrs. Dutta actively embraces new modes of behaviour and interaction. At times, she even takes pride in her efforts at assimilation. In an imagined letter to Mrs. Basu, she remarks, "I'm fitting in so well here, you'd never guess. I came only two months back. I've found new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively" (17). Yet, despite her earnest attempts, she remains unable to adjust fully to the cultural ethos of her adopted homeland. What she misses most profoundly is the strong sense of kinship and communal solidarity characteristic of Indian society, which stands in marked contrast to American social conventions, where "they don't like their neighbours to invade their privacy" (21–22). Her disillusionment reaches its culmination when she overhears Shyamoli angrily complaining to Sagar that she can no longer tolerate Mrs. Dutta's traditional ways. As Wadhwa notes, In their day-to-day interaction with their children, these first-generation mothers of second generation Indian children are repeatedly reminded of the fact that they are Indian and their offsprings are American in their beliefs, outlook and style" (134). Mrs. Dutta's experience exemplifies this generational and cultural divide. She gradually realises that she has become an unwelcome presence within her son's Indo-American household: "A silhouette-man, wife, children- joined on a wall, showing her how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary!" (33). Confronted with this painful recognition, she resolves to return to her homeland in the hope of recovering the sense of fulfilment and companionship she once enjoyed, particularly in the company of Mrs. Basu.

For certain diasporic subjects, the liminal condition proves too prolonged and emotionally taxing to sustain, compelling a return to ancestral modes of identity. Such a trajectory is evident in the character of Aparna in "What the Body Knows." Following her separation from her newborn child, she experiences a brief emotional attachment to Dr. Byron Michaels, the surgeon who performs her second operation. However, this period of emotional uncertainty is short-lived. Her liminal state ultimately gives way to self-awareness and introspection, prompting her to reaffirm her commitment to the cultural and familial values that have shaped her identity. This process of self-realisation enables her to recognise that her deepest source of fulfilment lies in her relationship with her husband, Umesh, whom she regards as the ideal life partner.

The six stories in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* collectively map the diverse experiences of diasporic individuals negotiating the complexities of migration, identity, and belonging. The characters, confronted by the tensions of bicultural existence, embody a range of responses to displacement and cultural transition, illustrating the multiple pathways through which diasporic subjects navigate movement within, between, and across cultures. Their narratives chronicle the anxieties, losses, adaptations, and moments of fulfilment that accompany migration and mobility. A recurring concern throughout the collection is the search for belonging and the desire to establish meaningful forms of identification in unfamiliar cultural contexts. For some characters, such as Mrs. Dutta, nostalgia engenders a return to the homeland, while for others, such as Monisha, assimilation into the host culture facilitates the construction of a renewed identity. Several stories further explore hybrid, liminal, and hyphenated subjectivities, highlighting the complex negotiations that define diasporic existence. By engaging with the possibilities

offered by routes while remaining conscious of their roots, the characters render their diasporic journeys meaningful and transformative. The collection also foregrounds the tensions between generations, contrasting the deeply rooted identities of first-generation immigrants with the route-oriented identities of second- and third-generation descendants. As a significant diasporic text, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* documents the often painful yet transformative process through which immigrants create new spaces of belonging in the adopted land while continuing to acknowledge the homeland as an indispensable component of their cultural and emotional existence.

In *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni employs multiple narrative perspectives, shifting focalization, and memory-driven storytelling to depict the complexities of diasporic existence. Her use of intimate first-person and close third-person narration enables readers to access the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement, nostalgia, and cultural negotiation. The fragmented structure of several stories mirrors the discontinuities and uncertainties that characterize migrant experiences. Divakaruni also integrates recollections of the homeland with present realities in the host country, creating a narrative space where past and present continually intersect. This interplay of temporal and cultural locations reflects the fluid and evolving nature of diasporic identity. Consequently, her narrative techniques effectively represent diasporic subjectivity as a dynamic process shaped by memory, migration, and the constant negotiation of belonging.

While Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and the Third Space, along with Stuart Hall's formulation of cultural identity, provide valuable insights into diasporic subjectivity, these frameworks tend to understate the persistence of social hierarchies and structural inequalities within diasporic communities. Furthermore, the theoretical models discussed are often broad in scope and may not fully capture the specificity of individual experiences represented in literary texts. Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to existing scholarship by offering a nuanced reading of *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* as a site where identity is continually reconstructed through memory, displacement, and intercultural encounters. The paper's originality lies in its integrated application of Bhabha's and Hall's theories to demonstrate how Divakaruni's narratives move beyond simple binaries of homeland and hostland, revealing the complex and evolving nature of diasporic belonging.

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Bio-note

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