



Conditional Belonging and Selective Visibility: Exploring Racial Politics and Diasporic Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Abstract

This article examines the “model minority” stereotype attributed to the Indian Diaspora in the United States that celebrates the remarkable professional achievements and socioeconomic contributions of the community. The article argues that the “model minority” discourse is sustained by the dominant white Euro-American structures of power mechanisms to selectively legitimize certain classes of a diaspora while marginalizing others within the same community. Through a close textual analysis of *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, this article highlights the selective visibility of the flourishing Indian Diaspora as skilled capital, yet subtly withholds a fuller integration of both privileged and precarious Indian migrants. The study is informed by the frameworks of Foucauldian discourse, diaspora studies, and Critical Race Theory in analyzing the experiences of the heterogeneous Indian diaspora community, who are discriminated against on the basis of race and culture.

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Introduction

The term “model minority” was popularized in the U.S. public discourse during the 1960s as positive stereotyping for the economic success of the Asian communities (Saran, 2016, p. 9). The Asians are praised for their high educational achievements and law-abiding nature. Initially, the term was applied to Japanese-Americans who were once considered as “Yellow Perils.” The label has engulfed the Asian Indians, particularly after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, when plenty of skilled Indians started to migrate and subsequently prosper in the American economy. But the critics excavate the hidden layers of the model minority myth and bust it as a pure racial discourse, as Saran (2016) describes it as the hegemonic racial power of whites in America to counter the racial implications of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. The model minority discourse normalizes the success of Asian-Americans achieved through hard work and cultural discipline without begging for government welfare (Saran, 2016). It constructs Indians as a “successful” minority community, but not included in the “majority” frameworks of the white Americans. Further, critics find that the generalization of Asians/Indians as successful obscures the internal heterogeneity of the Asian communities, which ultimately restricts any financial aid to the needy (p. 10). The stereotype posits that the working-class migrants, undocumented individuals, and low-paid service workers are beyond focus.

Diasporic Subjectivity

Diaspora refers to populations “dispersed” from an original homeland who maintain material, cultural, or emotional ties to it (Cohen, 1996; Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 2018). They often experience a sense of partial belonging in host societies due to their homeland connections. Thus, the diasporic individuals destabilize the idea of a single nation-state as they bear traces of culture from their original homeland, but subsequently adopt the cultural values and norms of the host society. The issue of citizenship becomes problematized for the “de-territorialized” community. However, legal inclusion in the host nation therefore coexists with “racialized otherness”, where the immigrants face marginalization for their ambivalent ideological commitment (Owen, 2005). The diasporic subjects retain a vague sense of original home, culture, and belonging and encounter diasporic ambivalence at the question of cultural identity (Bhabha, 1994; Davis, 2006). Scholars of diaspora studies refer to diasporic subjectivity as the formation of identity under conditions of spatial “dispersal” along with corresponding issues of cultural alienation and transnational affiliations (Pandurang, 2017). Demir (2022) reports that many

diaspora theorists and scholars propose understanding the diaspora conditions through the study of “subjectivity”, rather than focusing on Diaspora as a formation (p.19). The critic also argues that conceptualization such as ‘hybridity’ originated from the cultural identity of the diaspora community, but it has invariably focused on diasporic subjectivity (p.23). Anand (2009) proposes that analyzing individual experience within the collective Diaspora would call for a hyper-aware diasporic experience rather than pondering on a collective sense of unhappiness (p. 104). However, many scholars refute the proposal of looking at Diaspora as a subjective experience that neglects the political agenda of the “exemplary community.” Therefore, in this paper, diasporic subjectivity is conceptualized as not merely individual consciousness of cultural and spatial disorientation of living away from a homeland, but it subsumes historically and politically charged factors of migration along with individual negotiation of social, economic, and political parameters of both home and host countries.

Review of Related Literature

The scholarship on Indian Diaspora engages with critical explorations on migration and settlement with different phases and patterns of migration (Jayaram, 2009: p. 392). The scholars of the Indian diaspora study issues such as identity formation, cultural negotiations in a foreign hostland (p. 412). Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary works highlight the discomfort of the hyphenated identity of the Indian Diaspora, especially the American-born (Mishra, 2007). Pius (2014) finds Lahiri’s *The Lowland* as a tale of personal misery where the characters face “isolation” and stay away from the “politics” of the nation. However, Khadka (2021) and Kumar (2026) trace out the elements of identity crisis in the narrative by critically looking into migration and identity construction. Neha (2025) explores the “nation” as a recurrent theme in Lahiri’s *The Lowland*, delineating how migration across borders transforms the “national” connection. Eldiasty (2022) decodes the spatial-temporal perspective in the novel, highlighting the nostalgia and traumatic experiences connected to the geographic locations.

Raina (2018) finds that both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, as Indian-American authors, harp on the “duality” of diaspora discourse of home and hostland, overtly meditating on the cultural identity. Many scholars explore the Postcolonial dilemmas, identity issues, human violence, and marginalization in Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* (Abraham, 2017; Alkhodairy, 2024; Ferguson, 2009; Golla, 2016; Gnanasekaran, 2008; Kour, 2016). However, Sabo (2012) finds Desai departing from the Diaspora or transnational theorization, who, as an author, focuses on socioeconomic inequalities under global capitalism. In the same line, Dash (2014) finds that

Desai is preoccupied with the multicultural and multinational experiences of the characters under the influence of globalization. Critics also uncover that Desai's work *The Inheritance of Loss* carries less potential to be called a postcolonial or diasporic narrative as it contains more than the issue of cultural identity, rather exposing the unequal capital flow (Jackson, 2016).

The scholarly studies on the “model minority” stereotype frequently focus on socioeconomic success and professional mobility of South Asian Americans, including Indian-Americans. However, very little attention has been paid to the internal stratifications within these communities. There lies a significant gap in understanding diaspora subjectivity employing the model minority discourse in the experiences of the internally stratified Indian Diaspora in the US. The objective of this study is to involve “model minority” discourse as a racial politics in constructing conditional belonging and selective visibility among the Indian Diaspora in the United States through the literary representations of diasporic subjectivity. This article advances existing scholarship on the Indian Diaspora by bringing Foucauldian discourse theory and Critical Race Theory to demonstrate that the “model minority” is not a simple and positive stereotype, but it is a disciplinary racial mechanism that legitimizes economically productive migrants and renders the precarious migrants as socially excluded.

Methodology

The literary representations of Indian migrants in *The Lowland* (2013) by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai are taken as cases to analyze the mechanism of racial governance and conditional belonging of both privileged and precarious Indian migrants in the United States. Lahiri's novel represents an educated and professional Indian migrant negotiating assimilation within the United States. On the other hand, Desai's novel delineates the experiences of a precarious migrant worker and racial marginalization. These two novels offer contrasting but complementary representations of privileged and vulnerable Indian diasporic subjectivities, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the “model minority” discourse that selectively recognizes certain migrant bodies while excluding others. The study employs qualitative close textual analysis of the primary materials, focusing on the representations of living conditions, racial encounters, and their perception of assimilation and exclusion in the American social structure. The details are extracted from the dialogues and narrative descriptions tracing the moments of racial discrimination underpinning selective visibility and conditional belonging.

This paper draws upon three interrelated theoretical frameworks in analyzing diaspora experiences. First, the diaspora theory provides the conceptual basis for understanding migration and negotiation of cultural identity in the hostland. The scholarly insights of Hall (1990) and Bhabha (1994) inform the study by conceptualizing fluid diasporic identities, hybridity, and ambivalence of belonging. Second, the Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse is used to show that power produces and sustains it to regulate social structures. Discourse as a system of knowledge produces and normalizes social reality, which in turn legitimizes power relations (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Third, the frameworks of Critical Race Theory (CRT) inform this inquiry by foregrounding race as a structural attribute to humankind. Thinkers such as Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw evaluate “race” as structurally embedded in institutional and everyday practices. CRT argues that racial discrimination is an ordinary practice that privileges whites over people of colour, and the racial categorization is socially produced and sustained through institutional arrangements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 9). Both Foucauldian discourse theory and Critical Race Theory are employed to examine the production and institutional perpetuation of racial power. Foucauldian discourse theory enables the study to analyze the “model minority” narrative as a regime of knowledge that normalizes the selective inclusion of productive and docile migrant subjectivities. Critical Race Theory complements this framework by exposing institutional structures that privilege white Euro-Americans and marginalize other races. These frameworks inform the article in interpreting the “model minority” stereotype as a discursive construct and racial governance strategy that dictates the conditional belonging of Indian migrants.

“Model Minority” Discourse and Minority Experience

Critiques of the “model minority” have consistently underscored its racialized strategy to mask the structural inequalities since it emerged during the mid-1960s, alongside the Civil Rights Movement in America. The narrative was strategically deployed to contrast Asian-American “success” with the struggles of African-American communities to obscure the systemic racism and stereotyping of minority groups in the US. From a Foucauldian perspective, this operates as a “disciplinary” discourse by the white Euro-American “majority” to produce the “docile” minority subjects (Foucault, 1995). Thus, the “model minority” is not about reflecting the “truth” but is used as a power mechanism of racial politics. Critics also argue that the “model minority” homogenizes diverse communities and erases intra-diasporic inequalities, privileging a narrow, class-specific narrative of achievement (Lee, 2009). The literary representations of the

experiences of Subhash in Lahiri's *The Lowland* and Biju in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* offer a testimony to diametrically varied diasporic experiences of the Indian community. Subhash appears to embody the idealized "model minority" who is an educated migrant who achieves professional stability, which helped him to integrate into American society with minimal disruption. Subhash easily mingled with Richard, the fellow American student at the university. They shared meals; even Subhash learned to drive with Richard's car. Later, Subhash befriended Holly, a separated American lady, to build an intimate relationship. However, the relationship did not last long, as Holly reconciled with her husband. In his later phase of life, Subhash married Elise, an American school teacher. All these life events hint towards an apparent integration of Subhash with the American people.

In stark contrast, Biju's narrative in *The Inheritance of Loss* exposes the exclusionary part that the "model minority" discourse systematically obscures. As an undocumented worker, Biju navigates the exploitative labour conditions and ultimately occupies a space of invisibility in the context of the "Model Minority" success story of Indian immigrants. Biju overstayed his tourist visa and started to work in New York restaurants as an illegal migrant. Before the routine check of documents of the restaurant workers, Frank, the Manager, did not assist him; instead, he politely stated: "Just disappear quietly is my advice..." (Desai, 2006, p.16). The wife of an Italian restaurant owner deterred him only because "he smells" for his use of scented hair oil (p. 48). Hoping for a green card through a marital relationship, he approaches random American girls, but "they barely looked at him" (p. 123). Thus, his experiences testify to the material realities of unskilled migrants who are ignored, in spite of the positive stereotyping of the Indian Diaspora who gain success with sheer hard work and cultural discipline. Subhash's conditional inclusion and Biju's outright exclusion both act as myth-busters, exposing the discursive regime of "Model Minority" that selectively recognizes certain subjects while excluding others from the same community.

Racial Categorization and Diasporic Subjectivity

Critics interpret the "model minority" discourse as a "racial project" of categorizing the Asian and the African minority population that co-exist with dominant whites (Saran, 2016). The hype aligns with "interest convergence" of the whites that allows limited minority success that does not threaten power structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 9). CRT frameworks also insist that racism and power are inseparable, as both are embedded in the systemic structures. In the context of the Indian-American Diaspora, minority inclusion is permitted only when it aligns

with dominant interests (Bell, 1980). Thus, skilled migrants may be welcomed for their offering of in-demand labour and technical expertise, yet they continue to be marked as “other.” Similarly, the unskilled and the economically precarious migrants remain “unwelcome” due to their non-productive manual services and, of course, for racial/cultural differences.

In *The Lowland*, Subhash’s racial identity continues to mark him as “other” within the American social structure. His Indian upbringing is a matter of curiosity for the white American associates. Richard, the fellow university student, asked about the Indian way of life amid the evils of poverty and caste oppression. Holly, the “unexpected” American girlfriend of Subhash, wants to know about his origin due to his visible “other” racial features. Lahiri narrates the curiosity of Holly about Subhash:

She never tired of asking him about his upbringing. The most ordinary details of his life, which would have made no impression on a girl from Calcutta, were what made him distinctive to her. (Lahiri, 2013, p. 90)

She further asked if he liked his stay in “pretty different” America. Subhash acknowledges the gulf of differences between the two separate lands. He became more aware of his racial and cultural “otherness” as he advances in his relationship with Holly. He was amazed by the individual freedom Holly enjoys as an American. In India, it could have been impossible to lead a smoother life than Holly did in America.

Both Richard and Holly get connected to Subhash for his privileged status as a university student with a scholarship, but both acknowledge one fact that Subhash’s stay in America is short-lived. As soon as his studies are over, he is expected to depart for his own home. Their conceptions reveal a persistence of racial hierarchy and temporary belonging of the immigrants. Apparently, both the American “friends” accept him in different contexts, yet both of them reduce his existence to a racial entity. Subhash’s success as a skilled professional conforms to the normative expectations of the dominant whites that put him in the category of “needed.” However, this utilitarian approach does not seamlessly translate into full cultural or social belonging. Holly ultimately rejects Subhash as a life partner when her husband, Keith, returns to her. Richard shows his utter surprise when he accidentally meets Subhash, still living in America. Subhash’s experience exemplifies how race continues to structure diasporic life even in the absence of explicit discrimination. As a graduate student and later as a lab researcher, Subhash is institutionally accommodated. However, the institutional inclusion remains limited to his

functional roles, as he is unable to integrate into American life beyond his professional settings socially. Although in the later phase of his life, Elise gives him companionship, it was possible only when she was left alone by American kith and kin.

Race is conceptualized as a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in institutional systems by the dominant whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). The white-centric racism becomes particularly evident in Biju's diasporic life as an undocumented migrant in the United States. His experiences are not incidental misfortunes but outcomes of a systemic racial discrimination that exploits the precarious minority. Biju heard about the better life conditions of the Indians in America, which motivated him to pay for his official migration to the land of equal opportunity. But soon, he realized the void of the big American dream. He has to accept the exploitative low-wage work in the backrooms of restaurants. The unhealthy conditions and racial discrimination meted out to Biju reveal the systemic invisibility of the precarious section within the Indian model minority community. His presence in the United States is tolerated only as he serves the economic needs. But as a migrant Indian worker, he is denied any social and legal protection. Moreover, His constant movement between exploitative workplaces and his fear of detection reveal the psychological effects of being a racialized, albeit "illegal" migrant. Desai (2006) narrates Biju's feelings:

Clumsy in America, a giant-sized midget, a bigfat-sized helping of small Shouldn't he return to a life where he might slice his own importance, to where he might relinquish this overrated control over his own destiny and perhaps be subtracted from its determination altogether? He might even experience that greatest luxury of not noticing himself at all. (p. 268)

He comprehended his uneasiness of existence in America and the importance of being "invisible" among his own people, rather than being negatively visible in America for his racial, cultural, and economic marginal positions. His experiences reveal the intra-diasporic hierarchies hidden by model minority stereotyping. While the highly skilled migrants are positioned closer to social inclusion, as Subhash gets married to Elise in the later phase of his life to finally settle down, the working-class individuals like Biju remain excluded from both representation and opportunity in America and are mostly forced to "return", as Biju did.

Conditional Inclusion and the Politics of Being "Needed"

In both novels, the migrant subjects are pitted against conditional inclusion based on economic and institutional structures, but they remain socially and culturally excluded on racial grounds. Lahiri's protagonist finds institutional acceptance, but a sense of social approximation is missing due to his migrant and Indian status. His entry into academia or his service as a skilled professional both signal a conditional inclusion. Subhash inhabits solitary routines throughout his life, devoid of an affective inclusion in the lives of white Americans. He has always been a person or a professional who is "needed" for his capacity to contribute or stabilize. As a person, he assisted Richard, as a roommate with chores, and extended emotional support to Holly, who was living with her nine-year-old kid, being "separated" from her husband. Further, his wedlock to Elise in her old age can be interpreted as a companionship to a deserted old American lady. As a professional, he is included for his ability to contribute to academic excellence and to advance the existing scientific knowledge in "marine chemistry." Subhash speaks to his long-lost friend, Richard, about his professional life and his feeling of "different" loneliness:

A wife from whom he was estranged, a daughter who had grown up and moved away. A job at the same coastal research lab he'd been with nearly thirty years. Some consulting work on oil spills from time to time, or for the town's Department of Public Works. He was without a family, just as he'd been when he'd known Richard. (Lahiri, 2013, p. 293)

In contrast, Biju's trajectory in *The Inheritance of Loss* exposes the logic of being "needed" in its most raw format. His menial labour in the restaurants of New York illustrates how migrants' cheap labour becomes essential to profit-making, yet no one is ready to take up civic inclusion by providing him opportunities for health care or social well-being. He lived in the rat-infested basement of Gandhi Cafe in New York. When he broke his knee in the kitchen, the owner denied the "responsibility" to take him to a hospital. Rather, the owner, Harish-Harry, blames Biju for not cleaning the floor and living like animals. Biju retaliates:

"Without us living like pigs, said Biju, "what business would you have? This is how you make your money, paying us nothing because you know we can't do anything, making us work day and night because we are illegal. Why don't you sponsor us for our green cards?" (Desai, 2006, p. 188).

In fact, Biju's menial service is indispensable to the system of capitalistic consumption. His value as a "need" is purely economic, without ensuring him any civic rights or recognition. His repeated experiences of underpayment, job switch, poor living conditions, or the fear of

deportation highlight his profound precarious status as an illegal Indian migrant. Thus, both texts reveal the conditional inclusion of the Indian Diaspora who equally face affective and social exclusion for being a racial minority. Both migrant subjects are incorporated into the American society, but not as full participants, rather as functional contributors.

Conclusion

This paper highlights that diasporic subjectivity is not a unified condition across all members of a community. The internal stratification complicates the narrative of collective success circulated by “model minority” discourse. This paper has argued that the “model minority” is not a neutral sociological label; it is a discourse produced within regimes of power to regulate and discipline the racial minorities, especially the non-white immigrants. In consolidating this argument, the paper has drawn on theoretical frameworks of power and discourse by Michel Foucault, diaspora identity and belonging as illustrated by eminent scholars such as Hall and Bhabha, along with the basic tenets of critical race theory. The analytical approach offers a nuanced understanding of diasporic subjectivity within the racialized history of the United States. The study has demonstrated that the apparent success of the Indian Diaspora in the United States is the only condition to get incorporated into the American neoliberal economy. But a mere incorporation into the economic framework does not guarantee a full social and cultural belonging. The analysis has been limited to the experiences of the immigrant Indians represented in Lahiri’s *The Lowland* and Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* to demonstrate the disjunction between outward “success” and the persistent internal experience of alienation and precarity. These two novels provide only a segmented representation of privileged and precarious migrant experiences, leaving aside the diversity and heterogeneity of the broader South Asian Diaspora. The study may not entirely capture the experiences of undocumented migrants, religious minorities, gendered labour, or second-generation diasporic subjects. Other contemporary Indian-American diasporic texts may complicate the argument presented in this article by entangling multiple axes in the discussion of diaspora belonging and visibility. Further studies can expand the inquiry by including other South Asian diasporic narratives to examine diasporic subjectivity across Asian-American communities.

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