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Performing and Resisting Motherhood: Intersectional Feminist Readings of Cultural Identity in Diasporic South Asian Novels

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Abstract

The paper examines the transformative potential of narrative in reconstructing cultural representations of motherhood within the South Asian diaspora through an analysis of two diasporic texts: Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine and Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake. Drawing on a hybrid feminist theory that integrates gender performativity and intersectionality, this paper demonstrates how diasporic texts portray women's roles within social norms through episodes centred on significant events in the protagonists' lives. The comparative analysis identifies instances in these texts where gender is enacted, rejected, and reimagined as powerful sites of feminist struggle. Findings illustrate how Jasmine depicts identity beyond culturally predetermined scripts, while The Namesake explores the expectations placed on a migrant mother within traditional Indian motherhood. The performative negotiations of these characters reveal how cultural, racial, and migratory identities intersect to shape their sense of self and empowerment. The findings highlight how these narratives nuance experiences of compliance and resistance, embodying the protagonists' self-interpretations and reshaping them through multiple, inflected identities. This study contributes to feminist literary studies by demonstrating how literature articulates gender through identity and complexity across transnational (globalized) borders. In this way, the research emphasizes literature's role as a vital tool for socio-cultural analysis, illuminating diasporic narratives as not only representations of existing cultural models but also as agents that transform norms related to womanhood and motherhood.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Diasporic Literature, Feminist Resistance, Gender Performativity, Intersectionality

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of Representations of Motherhood in Postcolonial Writing

Postcolonial literature often positions motherhood as intricately linked to national identity, as reflected in the term "motherland" and the idea of a sacred vessel (Knor, 2022, p. 3). These depictions highlight the deep connection between femininity and national narrative. Over the years, maternal representations have aligned with nationalist interests by confining motherhood to domestic and reproductive spaces (Karmakar, 2018). This limitation has reinforced the notion of women as symbols of nationhood rather than as contributors to national discourse. However, in recent works, maternal subjectivity has emerged as a significant theme that transcends idealized archetypes, demonstrating how the maternal body serves as a discursive site where tradition and modern subjectivities intersect (Karmakar, 2018; Knor, 2022).

1.2 Depictions and Themes of Motherhood in South Asian Diasporic Writing Specifically

A significant body of South Asian diasporic fiction often explores the experience of motherhood from a migrant woman's perspective, where women navigate maternal roles across linguistic, social, and cultural borders (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024, p. 1). In these diasporic narratives, motherhood serves as a primary site for articulating cultural affiliations as the female characters strive to retain their traditions and customs while negotiating transnational settings (Knor, 2022).

This navigation is what Sara Ahmed (2006) describes as a process of "orientation," in which the migrant body must labour to find its place in a new space. Recent studies highlight the reclamation of maternal voice to challenge narratives that portray South Asian migrant mothers as docile and oppressed victims of a patriarchal system (Bouallegue, 2022), emphasizing self-reclaimed agency through processes of belonging and (un)belonging. This negotiation aligns with Collins's (1994) concept of "motherwork," which reframes caregiving by marginalized women. It encompasses not just domestic labour but also political resistance. In diasporic spaces, migrant women utilize "motherwork" to resist being viewed solely as victims of patriarchy. By examining motherhood through this lens, the migrant mother's domestic actions become a means of "homing," a repetitive turning toward cultural objects and practices to create a sense of place (Ahmed, 2006).

1.3 Rationale and Significance: Connecting Motherhood, Migration, and Cultural Identity

The need to explore the gendering of migration is crucial, as traditional diaspora studies often treat male experiences as the normative template (Ahmed, 2005). Due to this omission, our understanding of the various ways women experience migration (including maternal experiences) is limited. Centring maternal experience addresses what Ahmed (2006) identifies as the disorientation of migration, wherein the loss of familiar social coordinates necessitates physical and emotional realignment. This study fills the gap by demonstrating how

motherhood can serve as a catalyst for creating new identities and fostering empathy (Sharma, 2023). This study adopts what Benito and Manzanas (2002) describe as a "borderlands approach," viewing the cultural identities of Ashima and Jasmine not as finished, self-contained projects, but as fluid constructs that "evolve and unfold relative to each other" (pp. 2-3) through the daily practice of mothering. Employing Collins's (1994) mandate to "shift the centre" of feminist theorizing, this study attends to the complex identities of South Asian mothers by illustrating how minoritized maternal labour is integral to community survival and identity creation in transnational contexts.

Highlighting the emotional and social dimensions of maternal roles reveals how these experiences shape both personal and collective identities in transnational settings. Recognizing motherhood as an agential 'doing' provides a specific model for how women reorient themselves and their families within the diaspora (Ahmed, 2006). By exploring the fluid identities of migrant mothers from South Asian backgrounds, this study challenges reductionist views by acknowledging maternal experiences as agential, empowered, and essential to understanding how identity is reconstructed in a globalized world (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024; Sharma, 2023). This affirmation of agency repositions migrant mothers not as passive consumers of cultural change but as active participants in their communities and the broader diaspora.

2 Background

2.1 Theoretical Framework I: Gender Performativity as a Feminist Site

Knor (2022) exemplifies Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity, stating that "motherhood is not a natural biological essence, but rather it is expressed through performance—in the proper sense of this word—a chain of reiterated acts and discursive meanings" (p. 3). At the core of this theory lies Butler's (1990) claim in *Gender Trouble* that "gender turns out to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it apparently describes" (p. 34). This suggests that the maternal subject is not inherent; rather, as Sadjadi and Hozhabri (2019, p. 11) stress, gender is always a doing: it is through that deed that subjectivity comes into being. Consequently, the subjects of this study do not enter the diaspora with an inherently maternal identity; these identities are constructed through what Craver and Chambers (2008, p. 43) define as "the acts, gestures, and... stereotypical recitations of sex and gender."

Following this Butlerian conceptual framework, Indrani Karmakar (2019) takes Chandler (1998) basic argument that "mother" should be understood as a verb, an identity not predicated on essence, but "something one does" (p.3). However, Chandler (1998) furthers this logic of Butler to suggest that mothering is a "practice which creates one's identity as intertwined" and through performance which is "multifaceted and ever-changing yet painfully repetitive, so that it has ruled motherhood for centuries" (p. 4). This theorization is the key to this study; it provides an analytical connection needed to situate Ashima and Jasmine's domestic actions—the "concoction" (Lahiri, 2003, p.1) of flavors or names shed—not merely as further household labors but rather as the literal production of motherhood itself. Through an iterative verbal form of "mothering," this study argues that the protagonists do not just perform as

"mothers," but, instead, mother themselves into being in the alienating space of the diaspora. For the diaspora, this translates into a "cultural borderland" wherein we create our performative act. These spaces are "defined by interaction and dialogue" (Benito & Manzanas, 2002, p. 2). As a result, the mother's performance of those words is not simply an act of repeating tradition but rather a revision that bends to its new cultural influences or context.

In the specific context of the South Asian diaspora, Knor (2022) suggests that these "narrative performances" allow women to either comply with traditional cultural scripts or actively resist them, thereby reinventing their identities through their maternal practices. Because gender is a "cultural and social construct" (Ahmadi et al., p. 142), the actions of a migrant mother determine and shape her sense of self within a new environment. These actions are often influenced by "social conventions about dress and behaviour," which Smith-Laing (2017, p. 11) argues give the appearance of gender a "natural basis." For the characters in *Jasmine* and *The Namesake*, motherhood becomes a site of tension, where the performance of various roles, such as the "sacralised vessel for cultural preservation" (Karmakar, 2018), becomes a repetitive process under the pressure of social norms.

By framing motherhood as performative, it becomes a "feminist site" of both struggle and potential. Butler (1990, p. 526) notes that the act one performs "is an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene," implying that South Asian women must navigate pre-existing scripts of "subjugation" and "rules assigned to them" (Vyas, 2020, p. 6). However, because performativity (Ahmadi, 2019) is not a single act but a "repetitious" one, it provides the "transformative potential" mentioned in this paper's abstract. By viewing motherhood as a performance rather than an essence, we can identify moments where the protagonists navigate the "constant conflict of self and social identity" (Vyas, 2020, p. 2) to either maintain cultural integrity or engage in a radical rejection of culturally predetermined scripts. In this context, the "performance" of motherhood is not just a recitation of gender scripts but a physical effort to make the "alien" space of the host country feel habitable through the repetitive labour of care (Ahmed, 2006).

Moreover, as set out in *Matricentric Feminism* (O'Reilly, 2016), motherhood is a form of identity with its own theoretical location that should not simply be addressed as an aspect of gendered performance. O'Reilly (2016) states that mothering is an active, agential practice, distinguishing it from passive, patriarchal motherhood. Combining Butler's (1990) concept of performativity with O'Reilly's (2016) maternity agency lens clarifies how Jasmine and Ashima harness their maternal roles to navigate tensions within postcolonial practice.

However, to prevent a performative reading from obscuring the material realities of race and displacement, Butler needs to be read alongside Collins's (1994) definition of "motherwork." If performativity draws out the ever-reiterative design of gendered subjectivity, Collins delves into the context by which this "doing" becomes imperative to survival for an idealized feminine history, i.e., a migrant mother's conduct through cultural performances is directly related to ensuring that her nation continues to exist.

Finally, this ability to perform or resist these scripts is not determined by gender alone; these performative negotiations are profoundly complicated by the specific socio-political locations – what we would refer to as the peripheries, both symbolic and political – that the women

inhabit. If we want to unpack the nuance of these maternal moments, a singular focus on gender performativity is insufficient; these acts are multifaceted and intertwined with not only race and class but also the pressures of novel migrant identities. Thus, this study incorporated intersectionality to provide a nuanced hybrid analytical framework.

2.2 Theoretical Framework II: Intersectionality and the Layers of Identity

While gender performativity can illuminate the "doing" of motherhood, Ahmed (2005) offers an intersectional perspective on how identities such as race, class, and migration status intersect to create the specific conditions that enable certain maternal performances. Identity has been a key theme in postcolonial theory since this field emerged in the 1980s, with Lazarus (2004, p. 2) arguing that the "quest for identity" is one of the most significant issues articulated within contemporary literature. This identity is seldom a single loop for South Asian women but an ever-changing journey in which the protagonist of any complex character evolves, shaped by a multitude of overlapping determinants: colour and race, gender, language and ethnicity, and cultural expectations embedded in categories.

The intersections of these forms constitute the key to decoupling and understanding the "double alienation" that South Asian migrant women face (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthering this intersectional perspective, Collins (1994) shows how the intersections of race, class, and legal status reshape the parameters of the maternal home. Such alienation is exacerbated when the migrant mother's body is "stopped" by the social structures that compel her to question whether her presence holds significance. The home is not safe from the state, as it introduces a porous space for burdens that force the subaltern or migrant woman to transform everyday acts of labour into strategies of resistance. Ahmed (2006) suggests that intersectionality is experienced through these "stoppages"; race and migration status act as barriers that compel the mother to constantly reorient her performance to survive within the host culture's "lines" of expectation.

Here, Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional framework guides the analysis, demonstrating that a woman of colour cannot be understood solely through the lenses of gender or race, as either may oppress and resist in unique ways when considered together. This study illustrates how a combination of migration status and ethnic background serves as a "script" that governs a mother's performance.

Additionally, O'Reilly's (2016) ideas suggest that, for the migrant woman, intersectionality is matricentric, indicating that the figure of the mother becomes a primary tension point between competing pressures surrounding race, class, and legal status. Focusing on the mother's own experience (O'Reilly, 2016) prioritizes the protagonists as active agents rather than static cultural icons.

These layers then generate a perpetual struggle between "self and social identity" as perceived in a diasporic context. Karmakar (2018), for instance, notes how South Asian women often find themselves in a desperate position between so-called "ethnic integrity" and the demands of traditional female roles, compounded by the marginalization imposed by the host society. Building on Ahmed's (2005) work, different feminities are established, not as stable but as produced by contesting understandings of gender in both the home and the diaspora. It is also a

dual alienation for women living as mostly involuntary migrants in this country; they are both displaced from their home culture and unassimilated into the host country.

This study thus synthesizes these two frameworks, performativity and intersectionality, to create an analytical lens for examining the primary texts. Instead of conceptualizing the experiences of protagonists in a static manner, this dual approach allows for an intensive close reading of moments and narrative episodes where mothering roles are performed, negotiated, or refused. This paper examines case studies of motherhood through the analysis of diasporic texts, *Jasmine* and *The Namesake*, as a site for feminist work, asserting that "mothering on the move" serves both as a tool for cultural preservation and as a more radical form of self-creation.

2.3 Gaps in Literature

While maternal figures are abundant in South Asian fiction, scholarship has not adequately theorized motherhood as a dynamic and performative site of identity reconstruction within diasporic texts. This is precisely one of the points that Karmakar (2018) notes about stories of mothers in postcolonial and migrant literature; they are often relegated to the domestic or genetic realm, where their representation as agents is reduced to non-differentiated subjects, becoming mythic ideals whose effect stems from preservation. Thus, O'Reilly (2016) asserts that the voices of mothers, their differences, and their agency are routinely occluded in feminist theory.

As a result, even though more recent scholarship has turned to transnational agency in general, Kačkutė and Heffernan (2024) argue that this continues the discourse without considering and clarifying how external factors are complexly gendered, despite efforts to reclaim the maternal voice from the reductionist perspective of migrant mothers as passive victims of patriarchy. Surprisingly, however, "mothering on the move" has not yet appeared in research (especially in diasporic narratives) as a form of mobility in which the maternal body is shaped into a contested discursive site of tradition and modern subjectivity (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024; Karmakar 2018).

Furthermore, while the concept of the "motherland" is a staple of postcolonial theory, the specific performative nature of mothering as a daily practice within the South Asian diaspora remains underexplored. Knor (2022) identifies motherhood as a central site for performing cultural identity; yet few studies have utilized Judith Butler's framework to analyse how these roles are "acted out" or "resisted" through repetitive cultural scripts in a migratory context. In diasporic narratives, the maternal domestic is often viewed as a static space of tradition (Tsolidis, 2011). However, there is a gap in understanding how this domesticity becomes a political and performative strategy for survival in a host country.

By failing to integrate Collins's (1994) insights on motherwork, existing comparative literary analyses often overlook how the diasporic home is transformed into a dynamic political arena where marginalized women actively subvert structural vulnerabilities. As Sharma (2023) suggests, motherhood should be viewed as agential and essential to identity reconstruction in a globalized world; however, comparative literary analyses rarely demonstrate how this is achieved, particularly through contrasting styles of radical reinvention and subtle negotiation. While much of the existing scholarship still treats the diasporic home as an isolated project of

cultural preservation, this paper utilizes Benito and Manzanas' (2002) framework to bridge the gap between "fixed" cultural scripts and the actual "interactional" reality of migrant motherhood.

This study specifically addresses what Indrani Karmakar (2019) has described as a major gap in scholarship, where biological motherhood is theorised but "the issue of non-biological mothering" receives "little or no critical attention in literary studies" (p. 1). By thinking of maternal subjectivities as an agential practice that is not always biologically gestated, as in Jasmine's non-biological relationship with Du and Ashima's sharing of a "collective" maternal space, this paper provides a "timely intervention" (Karmakar, 2019, p. 15) into South Asian diasporic fictions. By transcending the "mythic ideals" of Mother India, it opens the possibility for an expansive, non-essentialist performance of survival through motherhood.

Finally, while diasporic texts such as *Jasmine* and *The Namesake* are frequently studied for their themes of cultural clash and assimilation, they are seldom analysed through a hybrid lens that prioritizes motherhood as the primary performative site of the migrant experience. Most existing research treats the protagonists' maternal status as a secondary consequence of their migration rather than the central vehicle through which they navigate (un)belonging (Bouallegue, 2022). Moreover, existing scholarship often overlooks how the domestic sphere serves as a "phenomenological" site where the world is remade. There is a critical need to link Ahmed's (2006) theory of orientation to the specific daily practices of South Asian mothers, moving beyond the "motherland" as a static concept to motherhood as an active, orienting force in the diaspora. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) formulation of the intersectional nature of social locations, this study addresses this gap by demonstrating that, for the South Asian woman, home is not merely a location but a spatial site of "transnational" encounter.

Many previous studies on Lahiri and Mukherjee have focused on topics such as multiculturalism, "the clash of civilizations," or the psychological trauma of displacement. While offering valuable insights into the migrant experience, this still centres motherhood as more of a backdrop to the wider story of identity. Additionally, existing scholarship on South Asian diasporic mothering mostly oscillates between a purely sociological analysis of structural oppression and a heavy focus on the symbolic "Mother India" archetype. This paper proposes a hybrid lens that combines Crenshaw's intersectionality and Butler's gender performativity to address these gaps. One difference from previous thematic readings is that this approach allows for a breakdown of motherhood as a strategic, daily "doing" that simultaneously serves as both a performance of gender and a materialization of the simultaneous resistance/failure in negotiating racial and migrant precarity. This tension between identity as a discursive act and an evolutionary right that provides survival in the face of competition gets to the heart of Ashima and Jasmine's agency — an aspect often overlooked in traditional readings.

By framing motherhood as a site of struggle (Karmakar, 2018), this study responds to these gaps by examining how motherhood operates through the intersections of gender, race, and migration status. This research seeks to demonstrate the re-examination of diasporic novels as a form of performance in which the female protagonists transition from passive conformist adherents to active architects of identity reconstruction (Sharma, 2023). In other words, the

significance of my study is to recontextualize maternal experience as a site where exerted agency and cultural inheritance intersect within a broader diasporic framework.

3 Research Aim and Questions

Building on these frameworks, the primary aim of this paper is to analyze how the protagonists in *Jasmine* (Mukherjee, 1989) and *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003) navigate their identities. This study asks:

- RQ1: How do these women perform or challenge culturally prescribed maternal scripts within a transnational context?
- RQ2: In what ways does the intersection of migration and gender empower or restrict their agency as mothers?

4 Methods

This study employs a comparative literary analysis to examine the portrayals of motherhood in two novels featuring migrant female characters. This approach enhances our understanding of how different narratives address shared social and cultural themes by highlighting the nuances in their expression across various literary contexts (Nünning et al., 2020). It facilitates a clearer recognition of the "orderly and systematic procedures" (Nünning et al., 2020, p. 2) that writers use to construct maternal identities by placing these texts in dialogue with one another.

4.1 Selection of Texts

The two novels selected for this study, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, were chosen because they depict motherhood in profoundly complex and contrasting ways. *Jasmine* (Mukherjee, 1989) demonstrates the role of motherhood as a potential engine for both self-empowerment and radical reinvention, while *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003) highlights the maternal figure in constant tension between ethnocultural legacy and individual evolution in a foreign land. These diasporic narratives illustrate that mothering in the diaspora is often an arena of ongoing negotiation and change.

Jasmine (Mukherjee, 1989) recounts the journey of an Indian woman who, following a series of personal tragedies, migrates to the United States and undergoes multiple identity shifts. *Jasmine's* story showcases a delicate balance between old and new societal norms, customs, and traditions as her identity transitions between being both a mother and an individual, navigating the line between cultural traditions and newfound empowerment.

In contrast, *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003) follows the life of Ashima, a Bengali woman who migrates to the U.S. with her husband. Ashima's story centres on her attempts to cling to cultural customs and conventions while raising children in a culture so different from her own. Her lived experience elucidates the natural struggle of maintaining a cohesive cultural identity while raising first-generation children on foreign soil.

4.2 Theoretical Framework

This study synthesizes two prominent feminist perspectives – gender performativity and intersectionality – into a hybrid theoretical framework for analysing the primary texts. This integrated approach provides a nuanced examination of maternal identity within the South Asian diaspora.

4.2.1 Gender Performativity

Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performativity, our hybrid framework posits that gender and maternal identity are "performed" through repetitive actions and discursive practices rather than being innate or fixed biological traits (Butler, 1990). Butler's influential work, *Gender Trouble*, challenges traditional views of gender, suggesting that it is continuously constructed through performance. In line with this theory, the current study analyses how motherhood is "enacted" in relation to societal expectations within the texts. For example, performativity enables individuals to navigate and sometimes subvert traditional gender norms, offering valuable insights into the maternal negotiations depicted in the narratives.

4.2.2 Intersectionality

An intersectional lens, rooted in Kimberlé Crenshaw's foundational work (1989), clarifies the complexities of gender performances. Intersectionality emphasizes how overlapping social categories, such as gender, race, culture, and class, uniquely shape the protagonists' maternal experiences. Ahmed (2005) highlights the importance of this approach in capturing the lived realities of women in the South Asian diaspora, revealing the intersections of identity that inform personal narratives of motherhood. Additionally, Brah and Phoenix (2004) stress the necessity of revisiting intersectionality to fully understand how identities influence experiences of gender and motherhood. Through this combined lens, the study explores how these intersections affect characters' agency and identity formation.

4.2.3 Application of Theoretical Framework

The novelty of the hybrid lens applied in this study lies in its ability to move beyond the binary of "compliance" versus "resistance" that characterizes much of the current literature on *Jasmine* and *The Namesake*. This hybrid framework, integrating performativity and intersectionality, serves as a more sophisticated tool for tracing the multilayered possibilities through which various aspects have constructed the protagonists as mothers. This study's method bridges theory and application. It views the migrant home not as a fixed fortress of tradition, but as a dynamic "contact zone." Mary Louise Pratt (1992) describes contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (1992, p. 4). In this space, motherhood becomes a central site of cultural and political negotiation within "highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (p. 8). Evidence based on the structure of forms can better document the South Asian migrant mother and her intersecting inconsistencies, using more layered and accurate language to express them.

Within this framework, specific textual analyses focused on performative acts of motherhood as they intersect with societal structures. The study highlights dialogues and narrative passages where protagonists negotiate cultural, traditional, and modern influences, uncovering the pressures and opportunities experienced by women in the diaspora. This dual lens provided a

rich foundation for understanding complex maternal identities by illustrating the intricate balance between maintaining cultural heritage and adapting to new cultural contexts (Ahmed, 2005) while challenging reductive views of womanhood and cultural belonging.

4.3 Analytical approach

The analysis followed a systematic, three-stage process:

a) **Close Reading for Performativity**: Using a structured textual analysis approach, the novels were closely examined to identify scenes, quotes, and internal dialogues in which protagonists either embrace or reject their maternal roles (Nünning et al., 2020). This involved tracking linguistic markers and behavioral patterns that indicated either adherence to or resistance against cultural scripts.

To identify resistance and compliance, the textual analysis focused on specific linguistic patterns:

- **Naming conventions**: In addition to following the protagonists' journey from passive identification to active roles (specifically, Jyoti's transition to Jane), we also examined shifts in personal naming conventions.
- **Metaphoric weight**: We analysed metaphors that depicted migration as a physical weight or burden, such as Lahiri's concept of "foreignness" being a "life-long pregnancy" (2003, p. 49).
- **Temporal shifting**: We contrasted past voices with present voices (intentions for the future) – a method used to reject culturally imposed scripts.

This process enabled us to purposefully select scenes from both novels that represented key maternal moments. These scenes included:

- **Threshold moments**: Narrative episodes that physically or culturally breach borders involving protagonists engaged in caregiving roles (e.g., Ashima giving birth to her first child in the U.S. or Jasmine arriving in Florida).
- **Ritualistic performances**: Domestic scenes involving food preparation, naming ceremonies, or language use as repeated cultural scripts.
- **Identity ruptures**: Moments when the maternal role is contested or radically reconstructed (e.g., Jasmine choosing to embrace Du or her ultimate departure from Bud).

b) **Intersectional Mapping**: This analysis mapped, for each instance of maternal performance, how variables such as character migration status, socio-economic class, and ethnic background influenced their agency and choices (Mauer & Venecek, 2022). This approach allowed the analysis to extend beyond a gender-only perspective.

c) **Comparative Synthesis**: Finally, a comparative synthesis examined how Mukherjee and Lahiri utilize these performances of motherhood to convey distinct frameworks of diasporic identity. In this phase, thematic foundational materials (Mauer & Venecek, 2022) were identified in both texts to extrapolate broader conclusions about the reconstruction of motherhood.

4.4 Scope and Limitations

As this is a qualitative literary study, the findings provide a contextual and subjective analysis of specific creative works rather than a data-driven sociological report; therefore, the conclusions cannot be generalized to the entire South Asian migrant population (Nünning et al., 2020). The research is limited to two specific Anglophone texts and is inherently influenced by the researcher's interpretive lens (Mauer & Venecek, 2022). Nevertheless, these interpretations offer valuable insights into the fluid nature of maternal identity in literature.

5 Findings

5.1 Gender performativity and motherhood: Compliance and Resistance (RQ1)

The analysis of *Jasmine* (Mukherjee, 1989) and *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003) revealed that both protagonists engaged in mothering as a performative act that oscillated between traditional compliance and active resistance. Jasmine initially presents as a traditional embodiment of motherhood and wifehood, but her journey is characterized by a profound rejection of these imposed roles. Such deliberate acts highlight her resistance when leaving her homeland and shedding old identities. The fluid construction of self is reflected in Jasmine's urban realization that she "shuttled between identities" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 77).

Jasmine's constant renaming – from Jyoti to Jasmine and finally Jane – is an example of the instability of her identity. She explicitly distances herself from her past by describing her persona as an array of temporary masks: "I know what I do not want to be" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 5). Her choice to adopt Du only strengthens this transition, trading "monstrous ideas of biology" (p. 170) for a contemporary, chosen maternal identity that operates outside of her original cultural milieu. Jasmine acquires Du, not to obliterate her past, but to reorder mothering as a site of agency and cultural displacement. This study suggests that this merely non-biological bond was intentional, and while this is not liberation, it is the ways her maternal praxis operates in and as it is mediated through the changing of her everyday diasporic sphere yet using these borders to also contain it.

In *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003), Ashima Ganguli performs motherhood through a subtle resistance characterized by negotiation. Although she appears to embrace her duties as a Bengali mother, her performance is more nuanced in the American context. She recalls her own experience of pregnancy as one in which she felt utterly alone, made even more miraculous because it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unseen by those she loved (Lahiri, 2003). This distinctly illustrates the clash between her cultural legacy and her current reality: the event may be "miraculous," but she is "too horrified to raise a child in a country where she is unconnected to anyone, where she knows so little, and where life seems so tenuous and meager" (p. 6).

While Jasmine exhibits a more visible kind of defiance, Ashima finds her rebellion in her stubbornness, clinging to Bengali rituals like the naming ceremony even as her son, Gogol, moves away from them. Regarding the performance of maternal scripts, Ashima's meticulous preparation of the "concoction" (p. 1) of Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts serves as a

physical act of orientation. We see this performative labour early (and comically) when, with limited American ingredients, she tries to replicate home flavours – a scene in which "she is combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion... it is the only thing that she craves" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 1). Ashima's meticulous preparation of the "concoction" of Rice Krispies and peanuts serves as a physical act of orientation; she uses familiar flavours to connect her current domestic space with the distant memories of Calcutta (Ahmed, 2006).

Her resistance lies in this phenomenological refusal to be "disoriented" by the American suburbs*,* instead using the maternal role to extend the "reach" of her heritage into her children's lives. Ashima's tireless cooking of Bengali food until it becomes less banal and more agentic, where strict adherence to Bengali culinary ritual turns from a mundane domestic task to an act of cultural preservation (Collins 1994), is political through the activity of motherwork. In this sense, it involves the type of work Ruddick (1989) refers to as "maternal thinking."

Ashima does not cling stubbornly to these rituals as a mode of nostalgia but rather uses them as a cognitive shield in the face of an adopted land she herself finds "tenuous and meager" (p. 6), believing this is what must be done to ensure her children's survival within the cultural landscape forged by that host country. Consequently, she positions her mothering as a "politics of peace"—a radical yet serene and passive struggle to create a stable cultural refuge for her family amid the disorienting migratory forces that surround them. Thus, Ashima, in a sense, thinks of mothering as a form of retaining, within her child, the culture she has been forced to abandon by the host land (Knor, 2022).

5.2 Intersectionality and motherhood: Race, Class, and Migration (RQ2)

The experiences of the two women are profoundly shaped by their identities as South Asian women, migrants, and mothers. For Jasmine (Mukherjee, 1989), her journey is influenced not only by her identity as a woman but also by her suffering in India and her precarious legal status in the United States. These intersecting layers compel a negotiable identity, with her ethnic and migrant status forcing her to respond not as someone tied to domesticity but simply as a being in survival mode (Ahmed, 2005). To navigate these various layers of oppression, Jasmine realizes that "we murder who we were so we can rebirth the strangers we are now" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 25), suggesting that maternal agency for the undocumented migrant necessitates a violent and constant reconstruction of the self. Jasmine's character illustrates the most extreme adaptations required for survival, highlighting the raw, unfiltered reality of motherwork without its comforting bourgeois trappings (Collins, 1994).

Her maternal agency must operate exclusively on the margins, as she is compelled to navigate racialized and classed objectification in the host society to secure whatever residual resources she needs to exist physically and legally. Jasmine's journey exemplifies Ahmed's (2006) observation that some bodies are "stopped" by certain spaces while others flow through them; her intersectional identity as an undocumented widow requires a constant reorientation as she confronts the "walls" of race and legal status. Each of Jasmine's transformations is a tactical response to being "off-line" from the expected trajectory of a migrant woman, demonstrating that her agency consists of forced yet creative reorientations (Ahmed, 2006).

When confronted by an older student or professor (p. 33) in a university clinic, the racialized and classed expectations assigned to Jasmine's body add abuse to her base-level burdens of

intersectionality. This person, while fascinated with Jasmine's "differences," on the same page categorizes her with the "knife-wielding undocumenteds hiding in basements" (p. 33). This experience echoes the position of migrant women subject to an exoticizing or, in a sense, at times an "exempted" idea of humanity through tone and "educated" curiosity. Moreover, Jasmine's motherhood is qualified by what could be called a clinical, near-mechanical objectification. This is especially true when she describes her artificial insemination – which she admits "wasn't very natural" (p.35). Bud further subordinates her agency by referring to the procedure as something he has "watched the inseminators do their job a thousand times" (p. 35), thus further reducing Jasmine's reproductive capacity through livestock metaphors. This comparison highlights intersectional restrictions on agency, as the host culture casts the migrant body as a biological vessel. However, to avoid overextending this biological narrative, one must look to Jasmine's non-biological mothering of Du. By choosing to adopt and mentor Du, Jasmine moves beyond being a "biological vessel" and instead constructs a maternal identity based on shared displacement and "chosen" kinship.

The shift emphasises what Indrani Karmakar (2019) describes as "affective carework," whereby non-biological motherhood is legitimised through the work "one performs for a dependent child which one has not physically produced" (p. 2). Jasmine's working through her relationship with Du prioritizes this affective carework over biological gestation, so that the relationship between them becomes a far more radical expression of Jasmine exercising agency in (and as) not-motherhood — leading us to envision motherhood as an identity reclamation site primarily borne out of labor and intent over reproductive biology.

This legitimacy is anchored in the "embodied experience" that, as Margaret Homans (2002) proves, accompanies each type of motherhood whether crystallizing by birth or not. Homans claims that through the physical work of "bathing, feeding, [and] singing lullabies", an embodied relationship is established in which her body literally "goes into one's bones" (p. 6). The materiality of care here is partly due to the protagonist's interaction with Du in *Jasmine,* where agency manifests not only as a "play of language"/strategic choice but also as a "tactile" reality (Karmakar, 2019). Although feeding Du and sharing the material world with him make her a "life force" of motherhood, validating her new identity. This is in line with Homans's argument that non-biological mothering occupies a bordering physical space, as "natural" as gestation: her reproductive body, which has been hoisted into recognition through and against the clinical, mechanical gaze of the host order (pp. 265-266).

In contrast, Ashima in *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003) grapples with the intersection of ethnic boundaries in middle-class America. Her experience of motherhood, as a Bengali immigrant woman, becomes a process of resilience and moments of (un)belonging (Kackutė & Heffernan, 2024). This intersectional burden is effectively articulated by Lahiri (2003), who likens her status as a migrant to a physical weight, stating that "being a foreigner...is sort of like being pregnant. A perpetual wait, a constant burden — the feeling you must be out of sorts in some way" (p. 49). This metaphor, which responds to the previous description of agency as limited, frames the migrant status not as an eventual or ephemeral one but as a permanent, unbearable weight that weighs down every aspect of her maternal life. It shows that motherhood is the most important axis of race & migration through which Ashima is articulated in her sense of self.

Moreover, in *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003), Ashima creates space for her children to reclaim their cultural roots through performance when she embodies her culture at home; this is expressed in kitchen rituals, language, and food (p. 208). This supports Knor (2022) in arguing that motherhood is "a key site for the performance or practice of cultural identity" in South Asian diasporic fiction, as everyday domestic rituals become strategic and agential acts of resistance. Consequently, motherhood itself becomes the primary means through which Ashima navigates the challenges of migration and transforms what can only be termed a situation of "seeming waiting" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 49) into cultural sustenance. For example, Karmakar (2018) presents the domestic sphere as a contested space in which Ashima actively negotiates ambivalence regarding both her and her children's cultural identities (using an intersectional lens).

Jasmine (Mukherjee, 1989) and *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2003) illustrate that motherhood in the South Asian diaspora is a space of performance, but rather than being continuously pliable, these performances are quite the opposite – a static biological position. Jasmine uses motherhood as a tool for radical reinvention, while Ashima embraces her identity as a means of preservation. The silent struggles highlighted here are intricately intertwined with intersectional pressures such as being an undocumented migrant in a foreign land—they evoke the baggage of the "perpetual outsider" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 49).

The two protagonists from both texts demonstrate that "mothering on the move" delineates a specific type of agency that transforms domesticity from a realm defined by unwavering, calm traditions into necessary spheres of self-interpretation and cultural persistence. The maternal practices in diasporic literature enable the re-making of "home" as a continuous, "translocal" geography, allowing women to "transform the colonizer's language in order to enable new kinds of representations through which they can speak" (Tyagi, 2014, p. 49). Through these new representations, migrant women effectively negotiate their own subjectivities against the pressures of displacement.

6 Discussion

6.1 Motherhood as a Space for Cultural Negotiation

The results indicate that motherhood among the South Asian diaspora should not be viewed as a fixed biological condition but rather as a "space of contention" where women actively renegotiate existing cultural beliefs (Karmakar, 2018). Both novels illustrate that mothering "on the move" is also a reinterpretation of norms (RQ1). As Chakraborty notes (2014), the journey across borders evokes "a woman's never-ending struggle to come to terms with herself" (p. 199). This permeation is especially apparent in Ashima, who becomes what Alfonso-Forero (2007) terms a "transnational figure," as she successfully asserts herself amid the cultural constraints of the Indian home and the unfamiliar world around her (p. 852).

Ashima's reconstruction of identity exemplifies what Gabriel (2004) describes as a "dialogic relationship" with her new land (p. 92). While the findings examined her culinary adaptations, the significance lies in their function: these rituals are strategic performances of cultural continuity rather than mere nostalgia (RQ1). As Salami and Pirayesh (2018) argue, this

ongoing negotiation fosters a "cultural hybridity" (p. 223) that allows the domestic sphere to transform from a site of isolation into the foundation of a new home. Salami and Pirayesh (2018) also describe this as a "complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities" (p. 223). Ashima eventually realizes (RQ2) that her home is no longer a single geographical location but rather the world she has created for her family, noting that "she knows that this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 280). Through this realization, Ashima embraces a broader definition of motherwork (Collins, 1994). The diasporic kitchen is a border-zone that looks to nostalgia, as revealed by Ashima's 'homing' (Ahmed, 2006). Tending to these cultural objects, she resists the migrant women as a "perpetual outsider" trope (Lahiri, 2003, p. 49) [RQ2].

It implies that the mode of life which determines whether South Asians in diaspora can survive culturally relies not on assimilation so much as on turning the domestic sphere into a dynamic space, an active site of "orientation" capable of carrying through (or generating) each coming generation. Ashima and Jasmine's domestic lives illustrate the "borderlands approach" in that a mother's labor is rarely "separate from other influences (Benito & Manzanas, 2002, p. 2). Their homes become dynamic sites where the 'Indian' and the 'American' engage in a creative dialogue, resulting in a hybrid identity that is constantly unfolding (RQ2).

This has significant implications in other settings, as migrant mothers in the real-world face gender-blind policies that overlook the complexities of negotiating caregiving roles (Alfonso-Forero, 2007, p. 851). As Queiroz (2011) argues, home is a place from which these women can reshape their gender relations through displacement (p. 149). Thus, literature can illustrate that the most effective way to support migrant mothers is to define mothering not as a hindrance to state-supremacist standards of assimilation but as the productive act of cultural mediation.

6.2 Redefining Agency through Diasporic Narratives

By utilizing Butler's theory of performativity (Gender Trouble, 1990), this study highlights that motherhood enables the creation of diverse identities that challenge the "victim" trope. Chakraborty (2014) argues that Mukherjee's protagonists are portrayed as the "New Woman," questioning accepted societal norms and undergoing processes that symbolize transformations from weakness to strength (p. 200). This "quiet but determined" agency is evident when Ashima decides to divide her time between two continents (RQ1), demonstrating that she is "true to the meaning of her name... without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 276).

The renaming in Jasmine marks a crucial point in the process of survival codes (Salami & Pirayesh, 2018, p. 225), a radical rejection of a unitary, "natural" identity. As feminist re-visions of the self, these shifts manage to preclude the old-fashioned self-sacrificing widow entirely. Jasmine's agency, as exemplified in Queiroz (2011) is, as stated by Moore et al. This is not just a name change; it is denying biological fate for one of agentic, performative identity. Fuller writes that Jasmine is the one who moves farthest outside the boundaries of tradition because it is in her nature to be "plainly disinterested in the preservation of cultures [or] the hallowing of traditions" (Hoppe, 1999). Her various roles, from Jyoti to Jane, become "vectors of intersection and intervention" (Salami & Pirayesh, 2018, p. 228). Indeed, when Jasmine

finally ends her relationship with Bud, she claims, "I am torn between the price of America and old-world duty" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 240), a performative decision that allows her to "rejigger the stars" (p. 240). The exercise of this autonomy highlights how the protagonists in both works resist being framed by feminist narrative tropes that position them as victims. Employing Collins (1994) as a framework for critique, we argue that their agency does not stem from renouncing their maternal or relationally positive identities (RQ1); rather, they reconceptualize these identities as agents of self-determination and border-protecting free choices. This strengthens our argument that empowerment for migrant women must respect the "agential and relational" ways in which women cross borders to be mothers (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024). Here, agency is redefined as the ability to turn in a new direction; that is, as Ahmed (2006) suggests, changing your "orientation" entails changing what is within reach. Thus, Jasmine is not merely making a choice, but actively reshaping her phenomenological trajectory as she rejects the "straight lines" of traditional maternal expectations (Ahmed, 2006), emphasizing her transformative journey as a mother (RQ1).

6.3 Challenging Universalist Norms of Motherhood

The intersectional approach of this study highlights the fluidity of women by demonstrating how personal choices and structural constraints shape their identities. While sociological studies of diaspora, such as Parreñas (2001) research on global care chains, provide insights into the commodification of care and the physical separation between families often obscured in sociological narratives, notably through its maternal imagery, this concern does not emerge in Lahiri's and Mukherjee's literary works. The struggle over the export of care to others is not between Ashima and Jasmine; rather, it centres on the intensive, performative labour of cultural continuity in a domestic space under constant surveillance from the host society.

This labour further disrupts what Park (2013) identifies as "monomaternalism" – the Eurocentric ideological assumption that a child can have only one "real" or biological mother (p. 13). By viewing the maternal body as a "queer paradigm" that disrupts traditional norms, Park's framework illuminates how the protagonists of both novels reject the isolation of the nuclear, biological maternal bond (RQ1). Ashima challenges monomaternalism by inviting her own mother and aunts in Calcutta into the "spaces" of motherhood; Gogol is not raised by a single individual in the American suburbs but by a transnational matrilineal "maternal web" through Ashima's conscientious performance of ritual (RQ1). Jasmine's relationship with Du is similarly the repudiation of monomaternalism. She asserts that maternal authority is earned through co-survival and affective carework (Karmakar, 2019), making a choice to accept an adoptive/kinship (non-biological) rather than the "monstrous" biological spatiality (RQ1).

This struggle for recognition is further complicated by what Amrita Nandy (2015) terms the societal fixation with the "normative quintessence" of motherhood – the concept that only biological birth constitutes "real" mothering (Nandy, 2015, p. 2). According to Nandy, anything that deviates from procreational or "traditional" mothering is often labelled as being inauthentic or aberrant. Within the host society, both Ashima and Jasmine are subjected to this "inauthentic" lens. Bud relegates Jasmine to a metamorphic, eugenic body—reduced to a biological vessel through agricultural analogies that limit her recognition to mere survival. Similarly, Ashima's initial status as a foreigner often overshadows her deep performative

labor; priority is given to her maternal identity over her personal fulfillment. This fulfillment fundamentally hinges on the immigrant experience and the acknowledgement of the "entire ecosystem" around her—an echoing image for generations that Lahiri describes as a "lifelong pregnancy" (2003, p. 49). Placing these un-natural (Nandy, 2015) maternal experiences at the center of their narratives, the novels contest the biological and domestic expectations imposed by eurocentrism and recast the migrant mother's role as an architect of a valid and empowering identity (RQ2).

This challenges the universalist norms of womanhood, which frequently perceive domestic roles as inherently restrictive (RQ2). However, as Alfonso-Forero (2007) notes, "it is through the role of wife and mother that a subjectivity that transcends any fixed national identity is achieved" (p. 851). Chakraborty complicates this further by reframing assimilation not as a straightforward "doing better" but as "one kind of cultural looting, a negotiation from which the immigrant has to pay for his or her own transformation" (Chakraborty, 2014, p. 202).

Jasmine's violent epiphany about the need to be a "stranger" (Mukherjee, 1989, p. 25) is the brutal price of this identity work. Developing from what Salami and Pirayesh (2018) identify as a "mosaic of selves" (p. 227), motherhood here becomes an instrument for configured globalized identity renovation rather than solely the vehicle of biological mapping (RQ1). Grounding such narratives within Collins's (1994) homeplace theory, which explains motherwork and the ideologies behind it, disrupts Eurocentric universalist interpretations that construe domesticity through a patriarchal lens. But by locating these texts within the frame of Collins's (1994) theory of "motherwork," this study challenges a universalizing and Eurocentric reading that women's writings equate maternal domesticity with patriarchy. While the traditional feminist school typically dismisses domesticity as a site of oppression to forget (or erase) the material pasts of colonialism, Ashima and Jasmine suggest it is at the core of cultural preservation and radical reinvention (RQ1). This study contends that maternal agency in the South Asian diaspora is not a "play of language" but a necessary response to socio-legal injunctions and racialized displacement—challenging the universalist norms that have historically occluded the voices and agency of mothers of color (RQ2).

This discussion, however, raises the question of romanticizing private agency in this mapping of agential potential domesticity. Yet as Chandra Mohanty (2003) rightly warns, to argue that domestic rituals are always sites of resistance can erase material oppression and the "violence of the everyday," that links women socio-economically into patriarchal order. Moreover, the use of Butler's (1990) Western-centric account of performativity in relation to the South Asian diaspora necessitates a more complex view of agency.

Agency, as Saba Mahmood (2005) argues, ought not to be understood as defined exclusively through "resistance" to norms, but in how women live and uphold those norms—indeed, their ethical and natal self-conduct. Thus, the performative labor of mothering embodied by the protagonists—Ashima in *The Namesake* and Jasmine in *Jasmine*—is neither an uncomplicated form of compliance nor subversion; rather, it is more accurately characterized as a negotiation where domesticity necessarily involves a tension between that which is culturally honored and that which constrains (RQ1).

Recognizing these tensions, Indrani Karmakar (2019) argues that those textual (non)mothers are in a "tension-ridden space of subversion and submission" (p. 14), as she recognizes these tensions. Although Ashima and Jasmine enact mothering for resistance (RQ1, RQ2), their labor tends to entail "assenting to traditional feminine roles" (p. 1) that require "selfless, scorning work" (pp. 1-14).

The exhausting labor of cultural preservation is for Ashima a problematic site — one where she risks being relegated within the domestic, even while it remains something she engages with as an agent. Likewise, Jasmine's more extreme reversals tend to trade one paradigm of domestic expectations for another as if resisting the system were not a complete act of emancipation but rather an ongoing quibbling with patriarchal texts. Hence, motherhood in such narratives becomes a not only a space of emancipation but also an arena for conflicting forces where self-creation is constantly being disadvantaged against the material and social burdening of "altruistic" domestic labour (Karmakar, 2019).

Moreover, cultural preservation narratives, such as Ashima's performance of Bengali rites, represent negotiable modes of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 2006) that could confine a migrant woman in space and time by imprisoning her within a rigid and static version of identity. Yet, *Jasmine* and *The Namesake* embody a depth of self-interpretation within these acts, as the protagonists do not merely enact traditions – they wield them to navigate their displacement. Recognizing these tensions allows us to move away from a uniform presentation of domesticity and instead view it as both an arena of struggle and survival (RQ1, RQ2). Applying Ahmed's (2006) theory challenges the universalist perspective of motherhood by highlighting how the "maternal" is experienced differently based on the "angle" from which one enters the host society. These narratives demonstrate that for the migrant mother, the "normal" domestic path is often a site of disorientation, requiring a unique and resilient form of labour to transform an alien space into a home.

Ultimately, viewing motherhood through border theorization positions the migrant mother as a "counterpublic" within that revisionist framework. She does not merely occupy space; she builds a culture through the "conversation" between her own legacy and her displacement, directly challenging the notion of motherhood as an isolated or self-sufficient institution (Benito & Manzanas, 2002). Given these insights, the stories of immigrant women complicate conventional narratives of motherhood and identity. This study not only challenges traditional portrayals of motherhood as static or liminal but also emphasizes the implications for feminist writing in recognizing that various identities intersect.

7 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Jasmine* (1989) by Bharati Mukherjee and *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri exemplifies how motherhood in the South Asian diaspora is a dynamic, performative space of identity rather than a static biological category. Karmakar (2018) suggests that maternal identity is both a construct of the self and a site of resistance, engaging with representations of motherhood where characters such as Jasmine and Ashima navigate the tensions of migration. As Ashima negotiates Bengali cultural traditions in a transnational context, Jasmine experiences a radical disengagement from culturally assigned gender roles;

for both women, mothering serves as an important site of self-realization and empowerment (Sharma, 2023). Although the results of this comparative study provide valuable insights into the performativity of mothering, it is prudent to limit these assertions to the fictional worlds created by Mukherjee and Lahiri. Both *Jasmine* (1989) and *The Namesake* (2003) are creative works that offer specific glimpses of the diasporic experience—not a universal social science model for South Asian migrant life.

These findings reveal the strength of diasporic narratives as mirrors of social criticism, showcasing models of mothering subjectivities that emerge from intersecting identities in race, migration status, and ethnicity, which collide to challenge the normative perspective on womanhood through a continuous refusal of gender blindness (Ahmed, 2005). Instead, they confidently broaden their scope and claim the domestic sphere as a site of empowerment, implying that motherhood in the diaspora is fluid and borderless—it bridges human desire with culture.

Ultimately, this study highlights a different approach, viewing motherhood as it is experienced in cultural negotiation and fluidity. In migrant communities, nuances like these can foster greater empathy and better-informed socio-political messaging, but only if they are acknowledged in a globalized world (Kačkutė & Heffernan, 2024). This shift from perceiving migrant mothers as passive victims of patriarchy and tradition to recognizing them as active agents of change contributes to a fuller and more equitable understanding of gender relations in the twenty-first century.

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