



NEGOTIATING DIASPORIC IDENTITY BEYOND ASSIMILATION: BELONGING, MEMORY AND RETURN IN MANSI SHAH'S *THE TASTE OF GINGER*

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Abstract

Diasporic identity is a central concern in contemporary postcolonial and diaspora studies, reflecting the complex ways in which migration reshapes belonging, memory, family relationships, and cultural affiliation. Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger* (2022) has received limited critical attention despite the growing body of scholarship on South Asian diasporic fiction, particularly through an integrated application of Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space. To address this gap, this article examines how the chosen novel represents diasporic identity as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process instead of a fixed cultural condition. This study employs a qualitative methodology that is based on close textual analysis. This close-reading technique helps explore the experiences of Preeti Desai, a second-generation Indian American, as she negotiates belonging, memory, return, family relationships, and racial difference, thereby investigating how diasporic identity is constructed and transformed. Furthermore, it is guided by Hall's understanding of cultural identity as an ongoing process of becoming and Brah's conceptualization of diaspora space. The analysis demonstrates that *The Taste of Ginger* challenges binary oppositions such as India and America, homeland and hostland, tradition and modernity, and assimilation and cultural preservation through Preeti Desai's experiences. The narrative does not attempt to resolve these tensions by privileging one culture over the other. Rather, it presents belonging and diasporic identity as relational, fluid, and continually reconstructed through memory, family relationships, racial difference, and everyday lived experience. Further, the article argues that *The Taste of Ginger* reconceptualizes belonging beyond assimilation by demonstrating that lasting belonging emerges not from choosing between India and America but from negotiating the cultural, familial, and emotional ties that connect both. In doing so, it contributes to contemporary scholarship on Indian American diasporic fiction as it demonstrates how the complementary theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah offer a nuanced framework for understanding the complexities of diasporic identity in contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction.

Keywords: *Belonging, Memory, Diaspora Space, Diasporic Identity, Return, South Asian Diasporic Fiction, The Taste of Ginger.*

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1. Introduction

Migration has transformed not only patterns of human mobility but also contemporary understandings of identity, belonging, and cultural affiliation. Within postcolonial and diaspora studies, scholarly attention has increasingly shifted from viewing migration as a movement across geographical borders towards examining the ways through which individuals negotiate multiple cultural worlds and construct meaning across diverse social and historical contexts (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Brah, 1996; Hall, 1990). Consequently, questions of home, memory, displacement, and belonging have become central to contemporary diaspora scholarship. Instead of treating diasporic identities as fixed cultural inheritances, contemporary theorists emphasize that they are continuously shaped through lived experience, social interaction, and changing historical circumstances (Hall, 1990; Brah, 1996). Similarly, Safran (1991) and Clifford (1994) demonstrate that diaspora extends beyond physical dispersal across the globe to encompass evolving forms of belonging, multiple attachments, and the continual reconstruction of selfhood across different cultural and social locations.

These developments have significantly influenced literary studies, where diasporic fiction has emerged as an important site for examining the human consequences of migration. Diasporic narratives do not simply portray migration as movement between nations rather, they explore its emotional, cultural, and social implications by depicting individuals negotiating multiple cultural worlds simultaneously (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Brah, 1996). Such narratives frequently examine belonging, family relationships, cultural memory, racial difference, and displacement that demonstrates that selfhood is continually reconstructed through everyday experiences and also by social interactions rather than determined by geographical origin alone (Hall, 1990; Brah, 1996). Among these literary traditions, contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction is particularly significant because it explores the tensions between inherited cultural traditions and the realities of life within multicultural societies, offering valuable insights into the ongoing negotiation of identity across cultures.

Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger* (2022) engages closely with these concerns through its portrayal of Preeti Desai, a second-generation Indian American whose experiences reveal the complexities of diasporic identity. As Preeti Desai negotiates racial

difference, family expectations, professional responsibilities, and her relationship with both India and the United States, she confronts the complexities of diasporic identity as a second-generation Indian American. The novel examines through her experiences that how migration shapes not only geographical belonging but also memory, cultural inheritance, interpersonal relationships, and self-understanding (Shah, 2022). Rather than presenting identity as a choice between homeland and hostland, Shah portrays it as an evolving negotiation that is constantly shaped by the interaction of personal experience, family history, cultural memory, and everyday social realities. In doing so, the novel offers a nuanced exploration of how belonging is continually constructed, questioned, and redefined within diasporic life.

Although diasporic identity has been widely examined within postcolonial and diaspora studies, existing scholarship has primarily concentrated on migration, cultural adaptation, hybridity, and transnational belonging. Studies by Sen (2009), Farahmandian et al. (2015), Ameen et al. (2022), and Allen and Gopinath (2024) have significantly advanced understanding of South Asian diasporic fiction, yet they largely emphasize transnationalism, hybridity, language, or immigrant experience. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how belonging, memory, return, family relationships, and everyday cultural negotiations collectively shape diasporic identity within Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger*. Hall's concept of cultural identity and Brah's notion of diaspora space have both been widely employed in diaspora studies. However, their complementary potential has received relatively little attention in studies of Shah's *The Taste of Ginger*. The present study develops a more comprehensive understanding of diasporic identity by bringing these perspectives together because it examines both the continual cultural reconstruction of identity and the social, familial, and historical contexts within which belonging is negotiated.

To bridge this gap, this article examines how *The Taste of Ginger* represents diasporic identity as an ongoing process through the interconnected experiences of migration, belonging, family relationships, memory, and return. By employing a qualitative methodology based on close textual analysis, the study draws upon Stuart Hall's understanding of cultural identity as an ongoing process of becoming and Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space to investigate how the novel constructs selfhood across multiple cultural and social locations. Accordingly, the article addresses the following research question: How does *The Taste of Ginger* represent diasporic identity through belonging, memory, family relationships, and return, and how do Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space illuminate this representation? This article argues that Shah reconceptualizes diasporic identity not as a fixed consequence of migration or cultural inheritance but as an evolving process that is shaped by the continuous interaction of race, family, memory, belonging, and everyday social

experience. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that belonging, like diasporic identity, is continually reconstructed through lived experience. It is neither secured through assimilation nor recovered through attachment to a single homeland. This understanding contributes to contemporary scholarship on South Asian diasporic fiction and diaspora studies.

2. Literature Review

Contemporary diaspora scholarship has increasingly moved beyond understanding migration as a process of physical dispersal to examining the ways in which migration reshapes identity, belonging, and cultural affiliation. Early formulations of diaspora emphasized homeland, dispersal, and the expectation of return (Safran, 1991), while later scholars broadened the concept to encompass transnational mobility, multiple belongings, and the continuous reconstruction of identity across social and cultural spaces (Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994). Within this evolving body of scholarship, cultural identity is no longer understood as a stable inheritance rooted in a single origin but as a dynamic and relational phenomenon produced through historical experience, cultural interaction, and social negotiation (Hall, 1990). Likewise, Gilroy (1993) challenges exclusive notions of national identity by arguing that diasporic identities emerge through movement, cultural exchange, and transnational connections rather than through fixed ethnic or territorial boundaries. Collectively, these developments have reshaped contemporary understandings of diaspora as an ongoing negotiation of identity, belonging, and cultural difference rather than a simple consequence of migration.

These theoretical developments have significantly influenced the study of South Asian diasporic fiction. Rather than portraying migration as a completed journey from homeland to hostland, contemporary scholarship increasingly examines literary texts as representations of the emotional, cultural, and social negotiations that accompany diasporic life. Recent studies demonstrate that identities within South Asian diasporic narratives are continuously reconstructed through interactions among migration, family relationships, memory, race, gender, and everyday cultural practices (Hall, 1990; Brah, 1996; Vertovec, 1999). Similarly, Allen and Gopinath (2024) argue that cultural hybridity in diasporic literature extends beyond the blending of two cultures to involve the interaction of multiple cultural influences, resulting in identities that remain fluid, dynamic, and continually evolving.

A growing number of studies have explored these concerns through individual South Asian literary texts. Ameen et al. (2022), for example, examine Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space. Their analysis demonstrates that migration does not necessarily produce stable belonging but instead generates continuing experiences of displacement, alienation, and fragmented identity

within unequal postcolonial power structures. Similarly, Allen and Gopinath (2024) argue that identity in diasporic literature remains fluid and continuously reconstructed through migration, cultural interaction, and the search for belonging. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that diasporic identity is produced through ongoing cultural negotiation rather than seamless assimilation. However, their primary emphasis remains on hybridity and transnationalism, offering comparatively limited attention to the interconnected roles of family relationships, memory, return, and everyday experiences of belonging in shaping diasporic identity.

Indian-American diasporic fiction has generated a substantial body of scholarship examining identity negotiation across generations and cultural contexts. Sen (2009) argues that South Asian American women's fiction should be interpreted through a transnational framework that acknowledges the continuing influence of colonial history, migration, and cross-border cultural relationships on diasporic identity. Likewise, Farahmandian et al. (2015), in their study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, demonstrate that identity is continuously negotiated through language, naming, family traditions, and the interaction between Indian cultural heritage and American social realities. Despite differences in emphasis, both studies illustrate that identity formation extends beyond assimilation and is deeply influenced by family relationships, memory, and cultural continuity. Nevertheless, their analyses remain centred on established writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, leaving more recent Indian-American fiction comparatively underexplored.

Scholarship examining gender and belonging within the Indian diaspora further enriches this discussion. Hiralal (2010), drawing upon the experiences of Gujarati Hindu women in South Africa, demonstrates that migration reshapes notions of home, belonging, and women's agency without severing emotional ties to cultural heritage. The study challenges representations of migrant women as passive custodians of tradition by showing how they actively renegotiate family roles and cultural identities within changing social environments. Although Hiralal's work focuses on first-generation Gujarati women rather than literary representation, it highlights the importance of family, belonging, gender, and cultural memory in understanding diasporic identity, themes that remain equally relevant to contemporary Indian-American fiction.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on South Asian and Indian-American diasporic literature, critical work on *The Taste of Ginger* remains limited. Existing scholarship, including Shah's (2022) interview and the relatively small body of criticism on the novel, has primarily focused on cultural identity, immigrant experience, and generational conflict, while offering comparatively little sustained analysis of how belonging, memory, family relationships, return, race, and everyday cultural negotiation collectively shape diasporic identity. In her interview, Shah (2022) identifies identity,

belonging, family expectations, caste, class, and the emotional consequences of assimilation as central concerns of the novel. She also explains her decision to retain Gujarati expressions without translation as part of her commitment to representing immigrant experience authentically. While these authorial reflections provide valuable insight into the novel's cultural context, they do not constitute a sustained theoretical analysis of diasporic identity.

The existing scholarship demonstrates that contemporary diaspora studies have established identity as fluid, relational, and continuously negotiated, while studies of South Asian and Indian-American fiction have explored important dimensions of migration, hybridity, transnationalism, language, gender, and belonging. However, existing scholarship has rarely examined belonging beyond assimilation by exploring how migration, memory, family relationships, return, and everyday cultural negotiations interact to construct diasporic identity in Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger*. However, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining how migration, family relationships, memory, return, race, and everyday cultural experiences operate together in shaping diasporic identity in *The Taste of Ginger*. Moreover, the novel has not been examined through the complementary perspectives of Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space. Building upon this gap, the present study investigates how Shah's novel constructs diasporic identity as a dynamic and evolving negotiation of multiple cultural affiliations, demonstrating that belonging emerges not through assimilation or the recovery of a singular homeland but through the continuous interaction of memory, family, culture, and lived experience.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study examines Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger* through the complementary theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah. Hall's understanding of cultural identity provides a framework for analysing identity as a historically and culturally constructed phenomenon. While Brah's concept of diaspora space extends this perspective by emphasizing belonging, home, and the multiple social relations through which diasporic identities are negotiated. As a whole, these complementary perspectives provide the conceptual framework for examining diasporic identity not as a fixed inheritance but as a dynamic process shaped by migration, memory, family relationships, culture, and lived experience.

Stuart Hall's essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study. It rejects essentialist understandings of identity while arguing that cultural identity is a historical and cultural construction rather than an immutable essence. His observation that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall, 1990, p. 225) is particularly relevant to *The Taste of Ginger*, where Preeti Desai's identity develops through the interaction of inherited Gujarati traditions and

her American upbringing. While "being" acknowledges the continuing influence of ancestry, memory, and cultural inheritance, "becoming" emphasizes how identity is continually reshaped through changing experiences, social interactions, and historical circumstances. Together, these two dimensions show that identity is rooted in cultural inheritance while remaining open to transformation through new experiences.

Hall further emphasizes that identity is "constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990, p. 222), which highlights the significance of social perception and cultural discourse in identity formation. This perspective is especially useful for understanding Preeti's experiences, where her sense of self is shaped not only by her own cultural affiliations but also by the expectations of her family, racialized perceptions within American society, and competing understandings of belonging associated with India and the United States. Identity consequently develops through the continuous interaction between personal experience and the wider social and cultural frameworks within which individuals are represented and understood.

Hall's rejection of return as the recovery of an authentic origin is equally significant for the present study. He argues that the past "is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return" (1990, p. 226). This perspective is particularly relevant to *The Taste of Ginger*, where Preeti's return to India does not restore a stable homeland identity but instead intensifies her awareness that neither India nor America alone can fully define her sense of self. Return therefore functions not as a recovery of an original identity but as another stage in the continuing negotiation of belonging. Hall's theoretical perspective consequently provides an effective framework for understanding identity in the novel as an evolving process shaped through memory, difference, cultural encounter, and lived experience.

While Hall explains how identities are continuously formed and transformed, Avtar Brah shifts attention towards the social and cultural spaces within which these negotiations occur. In *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996), Brah introduces the concept of diaspora space, defining it as "the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them', are contested" (Brah, 1996, p. 208). This concept provides a valuable framework for analysing *The Taste of Ginger*, where Preeti's identity is negotiated across multiple and often overlapping social spaces, including her Gujarati community, family relationships, professional environment, and her return to India. Within each of these spaces, belonging remains unstable and is continually reshaped through cultural expectations, race, gender, family relationships, and social experience.

Brah further reconceptualizes home as an emotional and relational experience rather than a fixed geographical location. She argues that "'Home' is a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it. It is a sense of 'feeling at home'" (Brah, 1996, p. 192). This understanding is especially relevant to Preeti's

relationship with both India and America. America represents the society in which she has built her adult life, yet racial exclusion repeatedly undermines her sense of belonging. India, while connected to childhood memory and cultural inheritance, simultaneously becomes a place of emotional and cultural distance upon her return. Brah's concept therefore explains why home in the novel cannot be understood solely as a geographical location but instead emerges through shifting relationships among memory, attachment, estrangement, and belonging.

Brah's framework also highlights the intersection of multiple social positions in shaping diasporic identity. Preeti's experiences cannot be understood solely through migration or ethnicity; they are equally influenced by her position as a Gujarati American woman negotiating family expectations, professional responsibilities, and racial difference within American society. Brah's intersectional perspective therefore enables a more comprehensive understanding of how belonging is constructed through the interaction of gender, culture, race, family, and migration rather than through any single dimension of identity.

Taken together, Hall and Brah provide a coherent and complementary theoretical framework for examining diasporic identity in *The Taste of Ginger*. Hall explains identity as an ongoing process of becoming shaped by history, representation, and cultural experience, while Brah demonstrates how this process unfolds within diaspora space through the continuous negotiation of home, belonging, family, race, gender, and social relationships. Read in combination, these perspectives enable a nuanced understanding of Shah's novel by demonstrating that diasporic identity is neither fixed nor complete but remains relational, fluid, and continually reconstructed across multiple cultural worlds.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis to examine the representation of diasporic identity in *The Taste of Ginger* (2022) by Mansi Shah. Close textual analysis is particularly suited to literary research because it facilitates an in-depth interpretation of narrative, characterization, dialogue, and symbolism that enables the exploration of how literary texts construct and negotiate complex cultural identities.

The analysis focuses on selected episodes, character interactions, and narrative representations that illuminate key dimensions of diasporic identity, including belonging, memory, cultural inheritance, family expectations, and identity negotiation. Particular attention is given to the experiences of Preeti Desai, whose personal journey reflects the ongoing negotiation between inherited cultural traditions and the social realities of contemporary American society.

The interpretation is informed by the theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah. Hall's conceptualization of cultural identity as a fluid and continuously

evolving process provides the foundation for examining identity formation, while Brah's notion of diaspora space offers a framework for understanding the intersections of culture, belonging, memory, and social relationships. By integrating these complementary perspectives, the study investigates how *The Taste of Ginger* portrays diasporic identity as a dynamic process shaped by historical, cultural, and interpersonal experiences rather than as a fixed or stable condition.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger* examines diasporic identity through the experiences of Preeti Desai, a second-generation Indian American who struggles to reconcile her inherited Gujarati heritage with her life in the United States. The novel demonstrates that Preeti's sense of self is continually shaped by racial exclusion, family expectations, cultural memory, and her return to India rather than by migration alone. Although she insists, "I was seven when we left India. Of course it's not home for me" (Shah, 2022, p. 15), her claim to an American identity remains unsettled because she also recognizes that "Even though I felt American and wanted to be seen that way, with my brown skin and dark hair, I knew I didn't look the part" (p. 15). Her experiences reveal that neither American citizenship nor Indian ancestry can provide an unquestioned sense of belonging. This tension becomes even more apparent when a stranger tells her to "go back to your country" (p. 15), exposing the limits of legal citizenship and cultural assimilation. At the same time, her return to India fails to restore a stable homeland identity, as she feels "exposed, like an imposter who would be caught at any moment" (p. 7). Shah demonstrates through these experiences that diasporic identity is negotiated not by choosing between India and the United States but through the continuous interaction of memory, family relationships, racial difference, and lived experience.

Preeti's identity negotiation begins long before she consciously questions her cultural belonging. She migrates from India to the United States at the age of seven and grows up considering America her home and resists the expectation that India should remain the primary source of her identity. She therefore insists, "I was seven when we left India. Of course it's not home for me" (Shah, 2022, p. 15). Her assertion reflects an understanding of identity grounded in lived experience rather than birthplace. Yet the novel immediately complicates this self-definition by demonstrating that identity is never determined solely by personal choice. Although Preeti emotionally identifies herself with America, the society around her continues to perceive her through racial and ethnic difference. She admits, "Even though I felt American and wanted to be seen that way, with my brown skin and dark hair, I knew I didn't look the part. Everywhere I went, my Indian culture and appearance followed me" (p. 15). The contrast between how Preeti understands herself and how she is perceived by others illustrates that identity is produced through an interaction between self-identification and social recognition rather than either dimension

alone. This corresponds closely with Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as a dynamic process continuously constructed through representation instead of an essential or fixed condition.

The tension between personal identification and public perception becomes increasingly visible during Preeti's school years. Instead of functioning as a neutral educational space, the school repeatedly marks her as culturally different. She recalls that she and her brother were "teased and harassed about our accents, our clothing" because they failed to conform to dominant cultural expectations (Shah, 2022, p. 28). These experiences extend beyond isolated incidents of prejudice; they become everyday mechanisms through which social belonging is regulated. As she further reflects, she was constantly reminded that they "did not belong" and that "being foreign was the worst thing you could be in America" (p. 28). The novel therefore suggests that assimilation is not simply a voluntary adaptation to a new culture but a response to persistent social pressures that encourage migrants to minimize visible signs of cultural difference. Shah thus exposes the unequal conditions under which diasporic identities are negotiated, where acceptance often depends upon conformity to dominant cultural norms rather than genuine inclusion.

This pressure to assimilate ultimately reveals its own limitations. Believing that American citizenship would finally confirm her place within the nation, Preeti instead encounters a stranger who tells her to "go back to your country" (Shah, 2022, p. 15). The incident prompts her to acknowledge that "my passport had changed nothing of who I was" (p. 15). Shah thereby distinguishes between legal membership and social belonging, demonstrating that official citizenship cannot erase racialised perceptions of foreignness. Preeti remains positioned as an outsider despite fulfilling every formal marker of belonging in the United States. Having moved there at the age of seven, she speaks fluent English, is thoroughly familiar with American culture, and builds a successful career as a lawyer in a firm where she is the only Indian employee. Her education, professional success, and cultural familiarity demonstrate that she has adapted to American society in every practical sense. Yet these achievements do not prevent others from seeing her as a foreigner. When she is told to "go back to your country" (Shah, 2022, p. 15), the novel exposes the limits of assimilation by showing that racial identity continues to outweigh cultural integration in determining who is accepted as truly American.

Her experience reinforces Hall's argument that identity is shaped through cultural representation and social discourse rather than through legal or biological categories alone. It is not citizenship that determines how she is recognized but the meanings attached to her race, appearance, and cultural background.

The novel further demonstrates that diasporic identity cannot be understood solely through the relationship between migrants and the host society. The various cultural spaces in the novel are equally significant because they bring different histories, memories, and

communities into contact. Preeti's life unfolds across several such spaces, each shaping her understanding of identity and belonging in different ways. At home, her parents preserve Gujarati traditions and expect her to remain connected to her cultural heritage. At work, she is the only Indian lawyer in a predominantly American firm, where professional success does not protect her from being viewed as different. Devon Avenue, described as "Chicago's own very little India" (Shah, 2022, p. 2), reconnects Preeti with the Indian community and cultural traditions she once tried to distance herself from. Likewise, her return to Ahmedabad confronts her with childhood memories and the realization that she no longer fully belongs there either. Together, these spaces demonstrate that Preeti's identity is shaped not within a single culture but through the continuous interaction of her Indian heritage and American life.

These overlapping social worlds reflect Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space, where belonging is negotiated through the intersection of cultural, historical, and social relationships rather than through geographical location alone. Preeti's realization that "I had to accept that I would never fully belong to India or America. Being adrift was the plight of any immigrant" (Shah, 2022, p. 303) captures the emotional complexity of living between two cultural worlds. Instead of locating belonging in either the homeland or the hostland, the novel presents identity as emerging through the continuous interaction of family, culture, memory, and lived experience. This realization becomes possible when Preeti acknowledges that she "had been searching for my identity and sense of belonging everywhere other than the one place I had needed to" and recognizes that "My family and culture were the backbone of my identity" (Shah, 2022, pp. 302–303). Consequently, her identity is shaped not by choosing between India and America but by inhabiting the social and cultural space created through their continuous interaction. The novel therefore presents diaspora as an ongoing process of negotiating multiple cultural affiliations rather than a condition defined solely by geographical location.

Preeti's identity is negotiated between two powerful influences. Outside the home, American society repeatedly marks her as an outsider because of her race. Within the home, her parents encourage her to uphold the traditions, values, and expectations of their Indian heritage. Throughout the novel, her parents encourage her to remain connected to Gujarati traditions, while Preeti often questions expectations surrounding marriage, career, and cultural identity. Her decision to pursue a demanding legal career, her reluctance to embrace Indian customs during her younger years, and her emotional distance from her cultural heritage repeatedly create tension between her individual aspirations and her family's expectations. However, her return to India gradually transforms this relationship. Reflecting on her mother's influence, Preeti realizes that "I had been searching for my identity and sense of belonging everywhere other than the one place I had needed to" (Shah, 2022, p. 302). She ultimately acknowledges that "My family and culture were the

backbone of my identity" (Shah, 2022, pp. 302–303). Shah demonstrates that diasporic identity is negotiated not only through encounters with the dominant culture but also through everyday interactions within the migrant family, where different generations attach different meanings to tradition, belonging, and success. This conflict is evident when Preeti decides to marry Alex, a White American man, believing that love is more important than cultural boundaries. Her mother strongly disapproves of the relationship, insisting, "You need someone who shares your culture and values" (Shah, 2022, p. 16). The disagreement illustrates the contrasting understandings of identity held by the two generations: while Preeti prioritizes personal choice, her mother views marriage as a means of preserving cultural continuity within the diaspora. This intersection of family, culture, and everyday experience reflects Brah's conception of diaspora space, where identities are continually shaped through the interaction of multiple social and cultural relationships rather than through geographical movement alone.

Preeti's relationship with her parents reflects the tension between the inherited values and individual aspirations. While she increasingly embraces the independence and self-determination associated with American society, her parents remain committed to preserving Gujarati traditions, communal identity, and family honor. These contrasting worldviews repeatedly place Preeti in situations where personal autonomy appears incompatible with cultural obligation. Her frustration becomes evident when she reflects that her mother's insistence on maintaining close ties with the Gujarati community "undid all the hard work we had put into fitting in" (Shah, 2022, p. 29). Yet despite her disagreement, she acknowledges that she never openly challenged her mother because she had been raised to respect parental authority (p. 29). Therefore, Shah portrays identity negotiation as an internal and emotional process rather than an open generational conflict. Preeti neither fully rejects her family's values nor unquestioningly accepts them.

Shah demonstrates that diasporic identity is negotiated not only through encounters with the dominant culture but also through everyday interactions within the migrant family, where different generations attach different meanings to tradition, belonging, and success. This conflict is evident when Preeti decides to marry Alex, a White American man, believing that love should take precedence over cultural boundaries. Her mother strongly opposes the relationship, insisting, "You need someone who shares your culture and values" (Shah, 2022, p. 16). The disagreement reflects the contrasting understandings of identity held by the two generations: while Preeti prioritizes personal choice, her mother views marriage as a means of preserving cultural continuity within the diaspora. However, Preeti's perspective gradually changes during her visit to India. When her family prepares to return to Chicago, she chooses to remain behind, explaining, "I want to stay in India longer. I have been gone for so long and I really need to understand this part of me again" (Shah, 2022, p. 301). Her decision does not represent a rejection of America but a desire

to reconnect with the cultural identity she had long neglected. This evolution demonstrates that belonging is achieved not by choosing one culture over another but by acknowledging the significance of both. The intersection of family relationships, cultural memory, and personal experience therefore reflects Brah's conception of diaspora space, where identities are continually shaped through the interaction of multiple social and cultural relationships rather than through geographical movement alone.

This negotiation is equally evident in the novel's treatment of clothing, where everyday appearance becomes a visible expression of competing understandings of belonging. For Preeti's mother, traditional Indian dress symbolises cultural continuity, respectability, and loyalty to community traditions. For Preeti, however, clothing acquires a different social function within the American context. She explains that American clothes became "the armor that helped me hide among my classmates at school" (Shah, 2022, p. 28). The metaphor of armour reveals that assimilation is motivated less by cultural rejection than by the desire for protection from exclusion and discrimination. Dress therefore becomes a practical strategy for navigating racialized social spaces rather than a simple rejection of Indian identity. Shah uses this everyday experience to demonstrate that cultural practices are constantly reinterpreted according to changing social circumstances. The same object such as clothing carries different meanings depending upon the cultural environment in which it is worn, reinforcing Brah's argument that belonging is produced through the interaction of culture, race, and everyday social relations.

The divergence between generations becomes even more apparent in their contrasting definitions of adulthood and success. Preeti's parents continue to evaluate fulfilment through marriage, family responsibility, and the preservation of cultural traditions, whereas Preeti increasingly associates success with education, professional achievement, and financial independence. Reflecting on the future imagined for her through her Janamakshar, she recognises that she deliberately chose "clean paychecks" over the conventional expectation of marriage and motherhood (Shah, 2022, p. 7). Her decision does not represent a complete rejection of Indian values but rather an attempt to redefine success within the realities of her own social environment. Similarly, when her mother insists that she needs "someone who shares your culture and values" (p. 16), the novel exposes competing understandings of intimate relationships. For the older generation, cultural continuity safeguards family identity, whereas for Preeti emotional compatibility carries greater significance than shared ethnicity alone. Rather than privileging one perspective over the other, Shah illustrates how migration produces multiple, equally meaningful ways of understanding love, responsibility, and belonging.

Professional life introduces another dimension to Preeti's identity negotiation by placing the values of career ambition and family obligation into direct conflict. Having established herself as a successful lawyer, she internalizes the professional culture that

equates commitment with constant availability and individual achievement. Consequently, when Dipti's accident compels her to return to India, she struggles to reconcile workplace expectations with familial responsibility. Looking back on her professional life, she admits that she had consistently demonstrated "my family and personal life fell second to this job" (Shah, 2022, p. 20). Her hesitation reveals that identity is shaped not only through national or cultural affiliations but also through the competing moral expectations of different social institutions. The workplace rewards individual productivity, while family relationships demand emotional presence and collective responsibility. Shah suggests that diasporic subjects frequently negotiate between these overlapping value systems, none of which can be fully abandoned without personal loss.

Perhaps the most complex site of cultural negotiation is the emotionally restrained relationship between Preeti and her mother. Their differences rarely erupt into direct confrontation, instead, they are expressed through prolonged silences, unspoken disappointments, and mutual misunderstandings. Preeti observes that "My mother and I got along much better with thousands of miles separating us" (Shah, 2022, p. 18). She acknowledges that geographical distance temporarily eases tensions without resolving their underlying causes. Shah uses this emotional distance to illustrate that belonging within migrant families is often sustained through affection and obligation even when genuine understanding remains incomplete. The novel also demonstrates that many family conflicts remain unspoken rather than openly confronted. Preeti often suppresses her frustrations because she knows that her parents' expectations regarding marriage, family, and cultural traditions differ fundamentally from her own. Her mother's belief that a partner should share the same "culture and values" (Shah, 2022, p. 16) reflects a broader concern with preserving cultural continuity rather than simply approving or rejecting Preeti's personal choices. Likewise, Preeti's eventual recognition of her family's importance as the "backbone" of her identity (Shah, 2022, pp. 302–303) suggests that reconciliation comes not through abandoning one culture for another but through re-evaluating the significance of her cultural roots. These experiences show that diasporic identity is shaped not only by life in the wider society but also by everyday family relationships. Love, sacrifice, expectations, and disappointments all influence how Preeti understands herself and her place between India and America.

However, as the novel progresses Preeti begins to question the beliefs she had held for many years. While reflecting on her relationship with Alex, she realizes, "On a subconscious level, I believed Alex was the final step in my assimilation into America. Being with him made me think that I had made it, that I had transcended all of the disadvantage that came with being Indian if I ended up with someone like him" (Shah, 2022, p. 296). This realization marks a turning point in her understanding of identity. She gradually recognizes that becoming American does not require rejecting her Indian

heritage. Instead, her return to India and her renewed relationship with her family help her understand why her parents tried to preserve their culture and traditions after migration. Their expectations no longer seem merely restrictive but become understandable responses to the challenges of living in a foreign country. By the end of the novel, Preeti realizes that both her Indian heritage and her American experiences have shaped who she is. Accepting that she no longer belongs completely to either country, she reflects, "I had to accept that I would never fully belong to India or America. Being adrift was the plight of any immigrant" (Shah, 2022, p. 303). This realization marks the culmination of her journey from seeking acceptance through assimilation to embracing a more complex and fluid sense of identity. Shah therefore suggests that diasporic identity develops not by choosing one culture over another but by accepting that belonging can exist across both.

The novel reaches its most significant exploration of diasporic identity through Preeti's return to India, where her understanding of home and belonging is fundamentally transformed. At the beginning of the novel, she firmly rejects the idea that India remains her home. When her mother reminds her, "India is still your country," Preeti replies, "It's not. I have a passport to prove it" (Shah, 2022, p. 15). At this stage, she equates belonging with citizenship and believes that America has completely replaced India as her home. However, her return gradually unsettles this certainty. As she reconnects with her extended family, childhood memories, and the cultural environment she had distanced herself from, she begins to recognize a part of herself that cannot be explained by her American identity alone. Yet her return does not restore a simple sense of belonging. Instead, she admits that she feels "like an imposter" (Shah, 2022, p. 7), revealing her emotional distance from the place she once considered unfamiliar. Through these experiences, Shah demonstrates that home cannot be reduced to either legal citizenship or geographical origin. Rather, belonging develops through the continuous interaction of memory, family relationships, and lived experience across both India and the United States.

Even before her arrival, Preeti recognises that India no longer occupies the same position in her life that it once did. Having spent most of her childhood and adulthood in the United States, she approaches Ahmedabad with uncertainty rather than nostalgic certainty. More revealingly, she anticipates judgement from those whom she physically resembles, describing India as "a sea of brown people who all seem to be judging me for not being brown enough" (Shah, 2022, p. 14). The irony is striking. Throughout her life in America, Preeti's appearance marks her as different despite her cultural familiarity and legal citizenship. However, her return to India does not provide the unquestioned sense of belonging she expects. Instead, she is "pegged immediately as an NRI" (Shah, 2022, p. 192), showing that she is perceived as an American rather than as someone who fully belongs in India. Shah thereby demonstrates that shared ethnicity and common ancestry alone cannot guarantee belonging. Instead, belonging is shaped by lived experience, social

perception, and the cultural spaces individuals inhabit. Ethnicity alone cannot guarantee belonging as demonstrated through Preeti. This inversion of Preeti's earlier experiences exposes the instability of cultural categories and reinforces Hall's argument that identity is continuously produced through changing historical and social contexts rather than secured by origin alone.

When her family plans to travel to India to attend her British cousin's wedding, they encourage Preeti to accompany them. However, she refuses because the thought of returning to India fills her with anxiety and uncertainty. It is only after learning about her sister-in-law's accident that she is compelled to make the journey. On her arrival, the anxieties she had long associated with India are immediately confirmed. Although she is surrounded by people who share her ethnic background, familiarity does not produce emotional comfort. Instead, she feels "exposed, like an imposter who would be caught at any moment" (Shah, 2022, p. 7). Shah deliberately overturns the conventional expectation that homeland naturally restores belonging. Physical resemblance proves insufficient because migration has transformed Preeti's habits, assumptions, and cultural orientation. Preeti discovers that the confidence and independence she has developed in America are not interpreted in the same way in India. Rather than being admired, these qualities are often seen as signs of excessive freedom and resistance to traditional family expectations. The homeland she remembers continues to exist largely through memory, while the India she encounters belongs to the present rather than to her childhood recollections. Her experience illustrates Avtar Brah's observation that belonging is produced through lived social relationships rather than geographical origin alone. Home therefore becomes relational and experiential instead of territorial.

Language further illustrates the subtle ways in which migration reshapes identity. Soon after arriving, Preeti admits, "It took me a second to process my first language, the one I had once known better than English" (Shah, 2022, p. 7). This hesitation is not presented as evidence of cultural loss but as an indication of cultural transformation. English has gradually become the language through which she organises everyday experience, while Gujarati survives as the language of family memory and childhood. Rather than replacing one language with another, migration has reordered their significance within her life. Shah therefore portrays linguistic identity as similarly fluid, reflecting broader transformations in cultural belonging. Hall's understanding of identity as an ongoing process of becoming is equally applicable to language, which evolves alongside the individual's changing social and cultural experiences.

Her return to India not only exposes the emotional distance created by migration but also rekindles her connection with her family, cultural roots, and childhood memories. Revisiting her childhood home, she unexpectedly acknowledges, "I thought I hadn't missed India at all, but the nostalgia of being in this house again washed over me, and for a second

it felt like home again" (Shah, 2022, p. 45). The significance of this moment lies not in suggesting that India simply becomes home once more, but in revealing that memory continues to shape identity despite prolonged geographical separation. Home survives through emotional attachments, family relationships, sensory experience, and remembered histories that remain embedded within the self. Brah's concept of diaspora space helps explain this coexistence of multiple attachments, where homeland and hostland are experienced not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as interconnected dimensions of diasporic life.

This gradual reassessment ultimately transforms Preeti's understanding of belonging itself. Earlier in the narrative, she had believed that successful assimilation into American society required distancing herself from her Indian heritage. Towards the end of the novel, however, she recognises the impossibility of replacing one culture with another, concluding, "You can't trade in your culture for another" (Shah, 2022, p. 299). Her later reflection that she wished to "balance the Eastern and Western cultures" in which she had been raised rather than choosing one over the other (p. 303) represents the culmination of this transformation. Her experiences in both India and the United States ultimately lead Preeti to realize that identity is no longer about choosing between two cultures. Instead, it is shaped by accepting the influence of both. Through Preeti's journey, Shah suggests that diasporic identity is shaped not by complete assimilation or cultural purity but by the continuous negotiation of multiple cultural influences.

Taken together, Preeti's experiences demonstrate that *The Taste of Ginger* reconceptualises diaspora beyond migration alone. The novel portrays identity as an evolving process shaped through the continuous interaction of race, family, memory, culture, and everyday experience. Hall's understanding of identity as a process of becoming and Brah's notion of diaspora space together illuminate how belonging is produced through relationships rather than territories and through ongoing negotiation rather than fixed cultural origins. By refusing to privilege either homeland or hostland as the sole source of identity, Shah ultimately presents diasporic subjectivity as dynamic, relational, and permanently open to transformation. In doing so, *The Taste of Ginger* contributes to contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction by challenging essentialist notions of identity and foregrounding the creative possibilities that emerge from living across cultures.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined how Mansi Shah's *The Taste of Ginger* represents diasporic identity as a dynamic and continually evolving condition rather than a fixed cultural inheritance. Through a close textual analysis informed by Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity (Hall, 1990) and Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space (Brah, 1996), the study demonstrates that the novel challenges essentialist understandings of selfhood

by presenting belonging as an evolving experience that is shaped by migration, race, family relationships, cultural memory, and everyday social interactions. Migration is not presented as a simple journey from India to America. Instead, Shah shows that Preeti's identity develops through the continuous interaction of her Indian heritage, American life, family relationships, and personal experiences.

The findings demonstrate that neither complete assimilation into the host society nor an idealized return to the homeland offers a definitive resolution to diasporic belonging. Preeti's experiences show that both migration and her return to India change the way she understands identity and belonging. Living in America does not make her feel completely American, while returning to India does not make her feel fully Indian. Instead, she gradually realizes that both countries, along with their people, memories, and experiences, have shaped who she is. Shah therefore suggests that belonging is not found by choosing India or America but by accepting the influence of both.

Drawing upon the complementary insights of Hall (1990) and Brah (1996), this study argues that *The Taste of Ginger* redefines belonging as relational rather than territorial and cultural identity as negotiated rather than inherited. The novel demonstrates that cultural affiliations are not abandoned or replaced through migration but are continually reconstructed through memory, family, community, and everyday experience. More importantly, the analysis shows that belonging itself, like identity, is never geographically fixed or culturally predetermined. Instead, it remains an evolving condition shaped by personal history, social relationships, and cultural interaction. In doing so, Shah contributes to contemporary South Asian diasporic fiction by moving beyond simplified narratives of assimilation or return and foregrounding the emotional, cultural, and interpersonal complexities of diasporic life.

This article contributes to diaspora studies by demonstrating how Stuart Hall's (1990) concept of cultural identity and Avtar Brah's (1996) notion of diaspora space complement one another in explaining diasporic identity. Hall's concept of cultural identity explains how identity is continuously shaped and reshaped through lived experience, whereas Brah's concept of diaspora space highlights the social and cultural contexts in which belonging is negotiated. Together, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive understanding of how migration, family relationships, memory, race, and return shape diasporic identity in contemporary South Asian fiction. The study also demonstrates that literary narratives offer valuable insights into the emotional and everyday experiences of migration that are often overlooked in broader discussions of diaspora.

Future research may build upon this study by examining how recent Indian-American and other contemporary diasporic novels represent belonging across different cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts. Further attention may also be given to the

intersections of gender, generation, language, race, and class in shaping diasporic subjectivities, as well as to the continuing relevance of Hall's and Brah's theoretical perspectives in interpreting emerging literary representations of migration. Such inquiries would deepen scholarly understanding of how contemporary diasporic fiction continues to reimagine belonging, cultural affiliation, and selfhood within an increasingly interconnected world.

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