



# The Migrant Experience in Indian and Italian Literature: A Comparative Study of Identity, Language, and Belonging

Research Areas - Comparative Literature, University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Applicant - Asim Khan

## 1. Research Rationale and Objectives

Migration—both voluntary and forced—has shaped human history, but in the 20th and 21st centuries, it has taken on a particularly complex cultural dimension. Literature emerging from migrant experiences often negotiates intricate questions of identity, language, and belonging. This proposed research aims to undertake a comparative study of Indian and Italian literary narratives that grapple with the migrant experience, focusing particularly on how displacement and border-crossing shape the subjectivity of characters and authors alike.

The core objective is to examine the literary strategies deployed by Indian and Italian writers to articulate identity in the liminal spaces between nations, cultures, and languages. This project will focus on how migration destabilizes fixed notions of self and home, while also offering new forms of belonging and hybridity.

## 2. Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following questions:

- A) How do Indian and Italian writers represent the emotional and psychological complexities of migration?
- B) What role does language—particularly bilingualism or linguistic displacement—play in shaping migrant identity?
- C) In what ways do these literatures depict the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation?
- D) How does gender, race, or class intersect with migration narratives in Indian and Italian contexts?

### 3. Corpus of Study

The comparative approach will center on selected works by:

#### **Indian and Indian-Diaspora Writers:**

Jhumpa Lahiri – *The Namesake*, *In Other Words*, *Whereabouts*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni – *The Mistress of Spices*

#### **Italian and Italian-Diaspora Writers:**

Igiaba Scego – *Adua*, *Beyond Babylon*

Amara Lakhous – *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*

Claudia Durastanti – *La Straniera* (*The Stranger*)

These authors are particularly relevant for their direct engagement with questions of cultural displacement, linguistic negotiation, and transnational identity formation.

### 4. Theoretical Framework

The research will draw upon a range of interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, including:

**Postcolonial Theory** (Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity and "third space"; Edward Said's exile and cultural memory)

**Diaspora Studies** (Stuart Hall, Vijay Mishra)

**Transnational and Migration Studies** (Robin Cohen, Paul Gilroy)

**Linguistic Identity Theory** (Eva Hoffman, Yoko Tawada)

The interplay between language and self-perception will be a central axis of analysis, particularly through the lens of Lahiri's transition from English to Italian.

### 5. Methodology

**Comparative literary analysis** of primary texts with close reading of thematic and stylistic elements.

**Philological and linguistic** attention to multilingualism and self-translation.

**Cultural-historical contextualization** to frame the political and societal circumstances surrounding migration in India and Italy.

The methodology will be both textual and contextual, linking literature with real-world histories of diaspora and displacement.

### 6. Relevance to the PhD Programme at L'Orientale

This research fits squarely within the "**Comparative Literature**" track of the PhD in Literary, Linguistic, and Comparative Studies at the **University of Naples "L'Orientale."** The project reflects the programme's emphasis on global cultural interchange, linguistic plurality, and the reconstruction of cultural genealogies.

Moreover, it resonates with the university's strong tradition of East-West dialogue and engagement with postcolonial and migration narratives.

## 7. Expected Contributions

This research aims to contribute to the growing field of comparative migration literature by offering a focused, bilingual perspective on Indian and Italian literary intersections. It will also highlight lesser-studied transnational links between South Asian and Southern European literary traditions, while reflecting on broader global questions of identity, translation, and diaspora.

