



# Between *Home And World*: Re-Imagining Woman In The Selected Novels Of Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri And Kiran Desai

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## **Abstract:**

Displacement from home causes a crisis of identity, but also creates opportunities for a new hybridized identity which often questions received notions of nationality and culture. In case of women, there is a further inflection of identity by gender. Diaspora helps Indian woman to come to terms with herself, a process which could not be affected within the Indian socio-cultural setting. In my paper focused on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, I wish to look at the implications of crossover by female protagonists and characters and how it impacts cultural identity. The women novelists have fashion female autonomy in their female characters by giving them a new vision of Indian women, pleasing to Western mind and feelings and yet reflecting their Indian-ness and have allowed each heroine to assume beyond the adequate performance of the Indian expected feminine roles. They fight against the role-model mind set and the cultural identity of the archetype of traditional Indian women. The paper will seek to study the tension and conflict between being rooted and being in perpetual motion in relation to the governing issue of being a woman caught between patriarchy and a liberalized world order and how they negotiate between the question of "home" and "world".

**Keywords: (Diaspora, Identity, Gender, Belonging, Cultural Hybridity)**

## **Introduction**

The literary imagination of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has underscored women's complex negotiation of identity within the constrictive architectures of home and world. In postcolonial literature, these negotiations articulate broader sociocultural and political transformations. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) represent pivotal texts through which we can observe how women characters traverse the boundaries between private and public spheres. Through varied spatial and cultural contexts- caste and patriarchy in Kerala, diaspora and hybridity in America, and globalization in the Himalayan foothills- these novels how women articulate agency, resistance and redefinition of self. This article examines the interplay of home and world in these narratives and argues that the female protagonists' journeys reflect both personal and collective re-imaginings of womanhood in a globalized postcolonial moment.

## Framework: Home, World, and Postcolonial Womanhood

The binary of *home* and *world* can be traced to feminist spatial theory, where *home* is traditionally associated with domesticity, intimacy, and emotional labour, while *world* signifies mobility, public engagement, and socio-political freedom. Feminist theorists like Gaston Bachelard and Helene Cixous propose that literature of space reveal the psychological and material conditions that shape women's subjectivities. Postcolonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty extend this analysis to consider how historical contexts of imperialism, nationalism, and migration inform women's lived experiences. Thus, understanding how women characters inhabit, resist, or transform *home* and *world* requires attention to intersecting axes of gender, class, caste, race, and nation.

Across the three novels under study, home does not merely function as a physical locale; it becomes an ideological site where memory, belonging, constraint, and resistance intersect. Conversely, world is not merely the external public space, but a terrain shaped by global flows- of capital, culture, and identity- that women must engage with to re-imagine their roles beyond prescribed domestic orders.

### I. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: Home as Site of Memory and Constraint

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* presents Kerala's socio-cultural landscape with acute attention to caste, patriarchy, and historical trauma. Roy's women characters – especially Ammu and Baby Kochamma- embody the tensions between personal desire and rigid familial obligations.

Ammu's life is defined by the limited scope of female autonomy within the domestic sphere. Married into a patriarchal household, she suffers physical and emotional violence, and her eventual return to her maternal home does not offer liberation; instead, it exposes her to social ostracism. The home in Roy's narrative is a site of both refuse and confinement. Ammu's brief intimacy with Velutha, a lower- caste man, signifies her transgression of caste and gender boundaries. Yet this act does not lead to freedom, but brutal punishment- a stark reminder that crossing the sacred boundaries of home and world invites social sanction. The tragic trajectory of Ammu foregrounds how socio-cultural structures limits women's mobility between private desires and public acceptance.

Baby Kochamma's misanthropy and retreat into Catholic convent life illustrate another dimension of women's spatial negotiation. Her aspiration for worldly acceptance- represented by unrequited love for Father Mulligan- becomes entangled with her desire for institutional security. The convent, ostensibly a world outside the domestic sphere, only reinforces her entrapment within rigid hierarchies. Her bitterness and complicity in the community's condemnation of Ammu and Velutha reveal how internalized patriarchal norms can shape women's responses to their own confinement.

Roy's novel thus destabilizes romanticized notions of home as sanctuary. Instead, home becomes a contested site where memory, caste, and gender converge. The tragic fate of Ammu underscores the failure of both home and world to provide spaces of true agency for women within a caste-inflected patriarchy.

### II. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: Diasporic Women between Tradition and Self-Realization

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* captures the experiences of a Bengali family straddling two worlds: their heritage in Calcutta and their migration to the United States. Within this diasporic context, women characters such as Ashima Ganguli undergo profound transformations as they negotiate the boundaries of home and world.

Ashima's early years in America are marked by dislocation and homesickness. Lahiri's depiction of Ashima emphasizes how home becomes a portable yet fragile construct, sustained through rituals, food, and collective memory. In the absence of extended kinship networks, Ashima attempts to reproduce elements of Indian domestic life within her American environment. This act of cultural preservation reveals both resistance and constraint: while affirming identity, it also binds her to a past that can no longer fully contain her.

Ashima's eventual decision to split her time between the United States and India following her husband's death illustrates a reconfiguration of home and world. Rather than perceiving home as fixed and singular, she embraces a transnational belonging that accommodates multiple spaces. Lahiri's

narrative suggests that women in diasporic contexts must negotiate hybrid identities, wherein world is not an escape from home, but a continuation of evolving selfhood across borders.

Lahiri further contrasts Ashima's experience with that of her daughter, Sonia, whose identity formation is shaped by American cultural norms. Sonia's sense of world is less encumbered by traditional expectations, reflecting generational shifts and the renegotiation of gender roles. Through these distinct trajectories, *The Namesake* illuminates how migration complicates the binaries of tradition vs. modernity and home vs. world. Women's identities are anchored in familial memory, yet continually reshaped through engagement with diverse social spaces.

### III. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*: Women at the Intersection of Global Capital and Cultural Dislocation

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai explores the effects of globalization, nationalism, and postcolonial aspiration in the Northern Indian context. Women characters such as Biju's unnamed mother, the cook's wife, and Sai, operate at the margins of multiple power structures that shape their mobility between home and world.

The novel's title itself gestures toward various forms of inheritance - cultural, emotional, and material. For women, these inheritances often emerge as burdens: poverty, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal expectations restrict their choices. Biju's mother, left behind in India while her son navigates a precarious existence in New York, embodies the emotional cost of migration. Her home is one of survival rather than choice, where economic necessity outweighs personal agency.

Sai, the protagonist, initially embodies aspirations for upward mobility through education and cross-cultural engagement. Her life in Kalimpong, marked by exposure to English education and global sensibilities, suggests a world that promises possibility. Yet she remains constrained by social expectations of female propriety and familial duty. Her brief romantic inclination toward Gyan - within postcolonial nationalist currents - exposes how political discourses shape women's negotiation of desire and belonging. Sai's ultimate navigation of home and world is marked by recognition that neither domain offers uncomplicated freedom. Instead, she constructs a transgressive subjectivity informed by global and local sensibilities.

Desai's portrayal of Biju's journey to America further complicates the connection between women and global mobility. While Biju's struggle for legitimacy in a foreign land mirrors larger migratory anxieties, women connected to him (mother, lover, kin) remain rooted in Cartography of expectation. Their worlds are shaped by indirect effects of globalization - economic precarity, reconfigured family structures, and shifting cultural norms - highlighting that global flows do not uniformly expand women's agency but often reproduce inequalities.

### IV. Re-Imagining Woman: Comparative Insights

Across these novels, the negotiation between *home* and *world* is central to how women mobilize identity in response to cultural and political structures.

#### 1. Home as Constraint and Possibility

In *The God of Small Things*, home functions as a punitive site where deviation from social norms provokes violent exclusion. For Ammu, home is not only a physical locale but a symbolic space enforcing caste and patriarchal boundaries. By contrast, Ashima's home in *The Namesake* is an emotional construct that offers stability and continuity in dislocation. Lahiri's text thus foregrounds home as both a source of past attachment and a site of cultural negotiation. Desai's narrative further illustrates home as a space marked by economic hardship and inherited hierarchies, especially for women entangled in migratory webs.

#### 2. World as Site of Desire and Disillusionment

The *world* in these novels often signifies promise - of love, mobility, identity transformation. Yet this external sphere is mediated by forces that can thwart self-actualization. Ammu's transgression into the world of forbidden love results in punitive reassertion of social boundaries. Ashima's engagement with the American world enriches her sense of belonging, but also underscores the incompleteness of cultural assimilation. Sai's global sensibility expands her intellectual horizons but also confronts her with persistent gendered constraints.

### 3. Gendered Mobility and Resistance

The women in these novels navigate structural limitations through acts of resistance - subtle or overt. Ammu's choice to love outside caste boundaries, though tragic, represents an assertion of personal agency. Ashima's cultivation of a hybrid identity foregrounds adaptability and resilience. Sai's cosmopolitan aspirations and refusal to be wholly defined by tradition reflect a re-interpretation of female subjectivity in a globalized context.

Collectively, these texts suggest that between *home* and *world* lies a dynamic space where women reimagine their identities not as fixed absolutes but as ongoing projects shaped by cultural encounter, memory, and socio-political constraint.

#### Conclusion

Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Kiran Desai craft narratives that interrogate entrenched binaries of home and world through the lived experiences of their women characters. These novels articulate how women's identities are forged in the crucible of domestic constraints, diasporic dislocations, and global circulations. Rather than offering prescriptive models of liberation, the texts complicate the very notion of freedom by showing that agency is often negotiated through compromise, memory, resilience, and reconfiguration of spatial and cultural boundaries.

By situating these narratives in conversation with feminist and postcolonial frameworks, this article has elucidated the manifold ways in which women re-imagine themselves in a world that constantly reshapes the meanings of home. Through personal trajectories that challenge and transcend social norms, the novels underscore the evolving landscape of womanhood in the contemporary world. Ultimately, between *home* and *world* is not a fixed divide, but a transformative space where women continually redefine their place in the world.

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