



The Crisis of Identity in Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street*: Diasporic Study

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Abstract in English

Paper Info

Abstract:

Moving to a new environment can cause an identity crisis. The collection short stories *Out on Main Street* discusses the obstacles immigrants face in new cultural environments. As a result of this migration, ethnic and religious conflicts arise, which causes an identity crisis. *Out on Main Street* collection, written by Irish writer Shani Mootoo, which emphasizes the complexities of immigrant identity, focusing on integration and past heritage, shedding light on the challenges of integration amid cultural hybridity. This study discusses the environmental and ethnic issues through the complexities of diasporic identity in light of the suffering of the main characters in their struggle for past cultural heritage. The study focuses on four stories: 'Sushila's Bhakti', 'A Garden of Her Own', 'Out on Main Street', and 'The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds', which illustrate the theme of diaspora within the complex framework of the human self and the quest for identity.

Keywords

identity, diaspora, immigrants and past heritage

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1.1 Introduction:

In order to explore and analyze the internal structure of the short stories *Out on Main Street*. Through this collection, Mootoo explores the social issues of that period. One of the most important themes discussed is the identity crisis, through the period of diaspora for the main characters in the short stories. Perhaps the most critical aspects that contribute to the identity crisis, which placed the characters on the horizon of diaspora. The ideological, cultural, and religious fragmentation, contribute to this crisis. The most crucial factor that affected identity was the attempt to adapt to a new

environment that differed from the individual's culture and heritage, can't be abandon. These two factors, are the primary causes of individual diaspora.

Mootoo discussed the identity crisis from the perspective of diaspora. Mootoo epremented the individual's transition from one society to another. The writer is capturing the cultural and intellectual dispersion from the experience of main characters in their quest for realization of their identity. This results in a crisis in achieving what they desire. The characters' attempts to integrate into the new environment lead to abandoning traditions, leads the individual to loss. The author, Shani Mootoo, accurately explained the conflicts experienced by individuals, including intellectual and cultural conflicts, the struggle to pursue identity, and the diaspora they were exposed to achieve identity, leaving behind the cultural heritage and traditions within which they lived. This resulted in a separation of customs and traditions, placing the individual in a conflict that resulted in diaspora. In addition, the means promoted for migration and new lives were the reason for many people to migrate to other countries. Professor Myria Georgiou says in the abstract of her book, "Media consumption and communication technologies' appropriation become increasingly important in the formation of shared identities for populations spread across the globe." (Georgiou, 2006).

Canadian writer, novelist, and visual artist Shani Mootoo, most of her works were autobiographical, due to her Indian heritage. Her parents moved to Trinidad, an island nation located west of India, a year after her birth. Trinidad has had a significant and clear influence on Mootoo's life, evident in her novels and visual arts, including her use of bright colors, colorful flowers. Trinidadian Indian touch in most of her artwork, which creates an atmosphere of Hindu rituals that restore the soul to the body. Her use of bright colors and artistic lines embodies island life. Her father, is a politician and doctor, the supporters who helps her travel to many countries and eventually settle in Canada.

Mootoo has focused on revealing the fundamental factors behind migration from poor countries and how to live and adapt to a new environment. Her works deal with individual identity and the diaspora, a crisis many people experience. She has exhibited many of her works in international exhibitions, such as those in the United States and Britain, where these exhibitions discussed migration, identity, and diaspora. Mootoo created art and gained experiences during her studies in Trinidad and living on the island, reflecting these creative arts in Canada. She has excelled at all festivals, offering a diverse mix of art, drawing, photography, sculpture, and other visual arts, adding a creative Indian Hindu touch to her color mixing and painting flowers in various and wonderful colors. Mootoo has transferred the island life that she experienced in Trinidad to her art in Canada. Mootoo is one of the most prominent modern writers who discussed the topic of migration, one of the most essential human topics, and the side effects that individuals experience due to the qualitative change in culture, religion, and language, which are considered essential factors for individual identity. Through these factors, Mootoo discussed the diaspora the individual is exposed to and the force they are forced to shed their cultural heritage and integrate into a new environment. (oLekSijCzuk, 03)

Out on Main Street is one of the most important works in which Mootoo discussed the identity crisis and the diaspora that the individual experiences within society.

1.2 Diasporic Perspective on Culture Identity:

There are many new forms and manifestations of diaspora that individuals in society are exposed to. The development of societies, the spread of fashion and goods, and globalization have led to a wide gap between cultural customs and traditions and the ability to adapt to these new globalization methods. These factors have led to cultural diaspora, particularly among individuals who migrate for work or trade. Identity has become adaptable and changeable to the new environment due to other cultural influences and the need for a culture that suits the society to which the individual moves, whether for work or residence, to keep pace with globalization and development. This has had a direct impact on identity diaspora due to societal influences. "Identity is formed by various cultural formations and definitions of place and community" (Chiang 31). Society, in particular, was a broad aspect of the impact on the fluctuations individuals experience due to migration and the new environment they must integrate into. Murugesapillai Maheswaran says: 'As a result of these human travels, the notion of Diaspora was born, which refers to human settlements outside of their original homeland.' (Maheswaran, 40)

Many writers and theorists in diaspora literature believe that migrants' relationship with their past heritage is almost forgotten and unappreciated, as place and homeland no longer hold value for them. "the issue of identity is significant due to the oppression and exclusion they have undergone" (Obaid, 168). Glorious slogans about belonging and race, in particular, are no longer relevant; all that matters to them is adapting to the new cultural environment. These factors led to displacement, marginalization, and ethnic and racial conflicts among the migrants themselves, through which they sought to achieve identity. The changes that affected migrants placed them in a major predicament, where older people could no longer integrate into this environment, and solitude became their only refuge, as they lacked the sufficient capacity to integrate into their new environment. They also see folks of the older generation who are lonely because everyone in the house is busy from morning to evening through this literature (Maheswaran 41).

The twentieth century marked the beginning of extensive trade between countries and societies and the enormous wealth of capital, which led to a shortage in the form and content of identity. Trade partnerships, the exchange of goods between countries and societies, and the frequent movement of individuals have led to the removal of cultural barriers between these individuals. In other words, it led to a break from customs and traditions to adapt to the work and commercial environment (Chiang, 30).

Diaspora cannot be defined in a fixed perspective, as it has multiple aspects. Trade, mobility between countries and societies, employment and work in different environments, and integration with other cultures are among the most critical factors that create dispersion that affects the individual and his behavior. Commercial activities, resources, and businesses, in general, have encouraged migration and movement. This has led to many causes, including the advantages of work and trade and, on the other hand, the disadvantages of diaspora and migration that many members of society have been exposed to. On the other hand, the wars that individuals have been exposed to have led them to migrate for the sake of work. Among the reasons that individuals are exposed to, which include the loss of identity and dispersion due to the livelihood crisis or another reason is war, which is the direct cause that forces the individual to move from one place to another or from one society to another, leading him to migrate to other countries for the sake of work and livelihood. The livelihood crisis has led to an identity crisis because when an individual moves to another society,

he is exposed to numerous pressures and conflicts, such as the conflict for religion, culture, and language, which are considered the individual's identity in society. This conflict has led to an identity crisis and caused conflicts between members of society, which have had dire consequences. These consequences have become common among immigrants because each immigrant is trying to obtain his identity or seeks to gain his identity in a new society and culture, resulting in the loss of his past heritage (Elo and Minto-Coy).

The identity crisis remained, and still remains be a problem faced by many residents of immigrant-inhabited areas. Indian writer Sucheta M. Choudhuri says, 'Finding roots in unaccustomed earth is the essence of diasporic experience' (Choudhuri, 72). Belonging to one's homeland and environment has become a significant obstacle to life. A prime example is the Caribbean, which has become devoid of cultural and religious heritage, customs, and traditions. This is due to the influx of other cultures resulting from a mixture of culturally and religiously diverse peoples. The resource-rich Caribbean needed workers. Initially, they brought in various African tribes. After the war and liberation, many workers migrated to the Caribbean, working under contracts with European landowners. Although the Caribbean gained independence, it remained subject to the colonial government represented by the European landowners who controlled the region. In short, the Caribbean has become a region that brings together many cultures, religions, and ethnicities distinct from others. "Some cultures are addressed as prominent while others are considered to be inferior"(Obaid, 172). This multicultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual community was forced to remain in this region due to the crises they faced in their countries, including slavery, violence, and forced persecution. The Caribbean River region became an example of multiple identities, religions, and ethnicities. These problems and consequences created an identity crisis, as everyone struggled to find their identity. This resulted in cultural and religious conflicts and the emergence of ethnic groups, which led to conflicts among the various segments of Caribbean society (Hassan 173- 174).

1.3 Indo-Caribbean Identity:

Literary history depicts the processes of diaspora and the search for identity throughout the literary ages. These literary texts reveal the periods during which people experienced ethnic and religious conflicts, particularly cultural conflicts, which were considered the most significant challenges faced by immigrants as they sought to integrate into this new cultural environment. Literature continues to provide us with a special insight into the poignant experiences of those societies that suffered from alienation, which resulted from a deep social and cultural gap that led them to abandon their sense of belonging and past heritage. It is worth noting that Caribbean society suffered from this feeling of abandonment and alienation due to the new environment into which they attempted to integrate. This profoundly affected their social identity, forcing them to struggle to achieve identity and restructure their individuality and cultural heritage, which is essential in establishing and achieving their psychological purpose. Literary texts have shown us, through writers who sought to uncover those societies influenced by alien cultures, which led to constant cultural, religious, and ethnic conflict in the pursuit of identity, self-discovery, and development. The Caribbean region is a prime example of this. Caribbean literature is considered one of the most essential features of self-discovery and the pursuit of identity (Onwuka and Eyisi, 28-29).

Mootoo discusse societal issues and focused on the issue of immigrants. The most prominent of these issues is the loss of identity and diaspora. In 2004, a conference was held in the southernmost part of the Caribbean, specifically in Trinidad, where Mootoo and many other immigrant writers lived. The conference focused on the identity and belonging related to Indian immigrants and how they realized their Indian identity. Another conference, titled 'Caribbean Immigration,' was held a year later and discussed Indian identity in Canada. The question raised was: What does the Indo-Caribbean mean?' It discussed the multiple migrations from India to Canada and their use of certain areas as their home (Roopnarine, 02).

Trinidad is the best example of this. These many questions about immigrants and their new environment had ethnic and religious implications. Most of the conflicts between immigrants were religious and ethnic, and these conflicts escalated until they became forces composed of groups. Those who sought to establish an identity separate from others. The best example is the East Indians, who became more attached to their past heritage. At the same time, other ethnic groups began to view the new Indian community in the Caribbean as more backward and nomadic. In addition, many nationalities moved to Canada, specifically Tirinda, which came to be called the Caribbean community, a mixture of races and ethnicities. Perhaps most immigrants were East Indians, so they came to be called Indo-Caribbeans. What distinguished them that their ethnic identity that unique from other nationalities and communities. This attachment was not constant and intense, as many East Indians split off and separated from their Indian identity and became ethnically transgender. This is well known in such societies; individuals seek to establish their identity in various ways. Some use their past heritage to prove their identity, while others try to find an identity that suits the new environment to which they have moved. This is where the identity crisis appears (Ibid).

The main reasons for the migration of East Indians to the Caribbean were industrial and commercial expansion and the need for labor during the 19th and 20th centuries. This witnessed a large-scale migration from India to the Caribbean region. Colonial capitalism demanded low wages for labor compared to the hard work they performed, which forced workers to seek other jobs and blend into this new environment. Perhaps the main reason for this large-scale migration of East Indians was the policy of the colonial capitalist governments at that time, which was the policy of granting lands in the Caribbean region to East Indians to encourage them to remain in this region for two seasons of cultivation. This forced them to remain and not think about returning to their homeland. This policy prompted Indians to settle in the Caribbean region. In 1917, colonial governments began migrating from India to the Caribbean for work. The wage was a plot of residential land for the migrants. This work was a golden opportunity for Indians due to the poor living conditions in India at the time. The East Indians attempted to transfer their ancestral customs and traditions to the Caribbean environment, and not only did they adopt these customs and traditions themselves. Perhaps the most important of these was the social caste system. At birth, children were registered according to their parents' social class. This was the work of the ancestors, according to Hindu traditions. These traditions and customs were no longer important after societal change, the call to Christianity, the teaching of English and Christianity in schools, and the racial mixing among immigrants from other countries. Another reason for the shortage of Indian women in the Caribbean region was that most of the immigrants were men, and the small size of the Caribbean region compared to the

number of immigrants. Because of these factors, the class system changed and was no longer important in this new environment of a mixed ethnic group (Ibid, 03-04).

1.4 Data Analysis:

Moving, displacing, and living in an environment different from the one in which one was born is a difficult human experience. Individuals are more mentally displaced than physically, and thus dispersed. History has chronicled the crises that humans have experienced as a result of migration, displacement, and living in different environments, which has led to conflicts between these migrants in these different environments. This study focuses on the crisis of identity and diaspora in the collection short stories *Out on Main Street* by Shani Mootoo, and the crises faced by migrants to the Caribbean River region. Shani Mootoo is perhaps one of the Indo-Caribbean authors who has embodied these conflicts and crises through her writing. I will study and analyze four of them, including 'Sushila's Bhakti', 'A Garden of Her Own', 'Out on Main Street', and 'The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds'.

1.4.1 Sushila's Bhakti:

Through her collection short stories *Out on Main Street*, Shani Mootoo conveys her experience as an immigrant of Indian descent, whose move to Canada reinforced her sense of diaspora and separation from her origins. Shani Mootoo explored the idea of belonging to the homeland by referencing the customs and traditions prevalent in Indian society, as well as the use of decorative arts, multi-colored patterns, flowers, and henna as a traditional Indian art. These techniques represented a connection to one's homeland and a return to one's roots and origins. Shani Mootoo achieved remarkable success in adapting the past heritage in her writing and depicting the suffering of the main characters in her collection of stories. For example, in the story "Sushila's Bhakti," one of the most difficult struggles the narrator portrayed in the characters was the duality of displacement and the past cultural heritage, which was that of an Indian immigrant, a Caribbean settler, and a Canadian in the country to which she immigrated. Such duality led to social and internal conflict in the quest for identity. Therefore, the author uses Indian customs and traditions in this story. Mootoo used henna and motifs as a traditional Indian art to highlight Indian cultural identity. Mootoo recreates these scenes in her story through the main character, Sushila, through the physical definition of her identity in the past and what she must prove and achieve in the present. Moreover, it is difficult for a person to find their roots in a new and unfamiliar environment, which results from what is called diaspora. This often accompanies an individual throughout their life. Because the identity of belonging is imprinted on a person by the nature of their geological origins, it is difficult to change or alter that identity. If an individual wants to belong to a new environment, they must first redefine themselves, and then choose to that environment. Moving to a new environment does not weaken the individual, but rather motivates them to develop memories of their past heritage and reinforce their sense of belonging to their homeland (Choudhuri 72).

1.4.2 A Garden of Her Own:

In the story "A Garden of Her Own," the contrast between the dull, cold, and uncomfortable urban life and the garden where the protagonist Vijai lives represents her original home, a place she belonged to and a memory. The garden was full of colours, flowers, and the sounds of birds that brought her to life. Shani Mootoo, on the other hand, represented the heroine's dwelling, which was more like a prison, as even the sunlight was blocked from her apartment window. The window was too small for air to enter freely, and the surrounding apartments were full of harmful insects and foul

odours. Furthermore, the heroine remained in the apartment waiting for her husband, who was exhausted from work and who repeatedly ignored her. This image represents the main character as a prisoner of exile in a country where she did not even speak the language and had become a clear diaspora. It wasn't just her prison-like dwelling that was the subject of fear, anxiety, cold weather, and noise, but the danger that terrified Vijai's family because of the violence was inflicted on women, such as rape, beating, and humiliation. In these brutal scenes for the immigrants, Vijai compares her life with her past, giving beautiful images of her homeland, the nature that surrounded her, the birds whose songs were like morning melodies, and the tall, lush trees outside her large house's window that exuded life and activity. Vijay depicts her new life, filled with fear and anxiety, as she has become dispersed and lost. Shani Mootoo portrays the main character, an immigrant who is lost and disoriented amid the city's atmosphere devoid of joy and happiness, resulting from the dispersion and displacement she portrays in the character of Vijai, who gives a clear symbolism of the garden as a place of home, identity, and belonging (Escudero-Alías, 60, 61).

1.4.3 Out on Main Street and The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds

Shani Mootoo writes vividly in her short story collection, *Out on Main Street*, about the experiences of Trinidadian immigrants of Indian descent in Canada, conveying the struggles and dangers they face in their new cultural environment. Perhaps the stories "Out on Main Street" and "The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds" illustrate the situations faced by the protagonists in these stories, demonstrating how Canada was a country that reconciled diaspora and past heritage, much like India and Trinidad. Mootoo sought to highlight these differences through characters and protagonists in her stories, who tried to prove their ability to adapt to the new environment with their own fixed steps and assumptions. Stephanie Oliver stated this difference in her thesis: "In particular, explore Canadian multiculturalism's reductive approach to difference" (Oliver, 77). Criticism among immigrants was sharpened by the lack of an authentic Indian identity and the lack of an Indian identity. The lack or loss of Indian identity determined the balance. In both stories, Shani Mootoo addresses issues of race, nationality, and belonging, which are defined by language and skin color. In 'Out on Main Street', Shani Mootoo begins with the suffering of the Trinidadian narrator of Indian descent, who cannot go down Vancouver's main street, which is lined with Indian shops. Due to cultural differences and her lack of knowledge of the Indian language and culture, she cannot go down the street. In "The Upside-downness," Mootoo shifts the settings but maintains the same theme, which attempts to highlight the severe lack of Indian identity. Shani Mootoo begins the story with the protagonist, Meghan, a white Canadian who loves India and its culture. She begins a conversation with the narrator, a stranger to Canada, in an art and music store and may very well be from India. With repeated encounters, many questions and dialogues arise between the storytellers about India and its culture, where Indian identity is the norm for immigrants from India and Trinidad (Chakraborty, 66).

Shani Mootoo's collection of short stories explores the idea of belonging and the pursuit of identity through the relationship between Indian immigrants to Canada and their homeland. Shani Mootoo highlights the past and how it is preserved by reviving it in religious festivals and events, particularly Hindu rituals, and by preserving traditional Indian cultural heritage such as Indian food, fashion, and the ancient art of henna. All of these practices are an attempt to assert Indian identity. Through the two storytellers, Shani Mootoo emphasizes the quest to assert identity and to think of new ways of living

in Canada. These practices have undoubtedly led to the Indian diaspora, as they are not connected to Indian traditions. Shani Mootoo explores these reasons through the characters in both stories. In "Out on Main Street," the narrator practices the names of sweets and cannot enter a store without first reading them, lest she be embarrassed by asking them. In "The Upside-downness," the narrator practices cooking Indian food and preparing traditional Indian meals despite her dislike of the food. In both stories, Shani Mootoo displays anxiety, discomfort, and determination to assert her Indian identity while the characters struggle throughout the story. The narrators of both stories are shown to have sought to establish their identity and discover new ways of being in Canada, demonstrating that members of the diaspora do not all belong to their countries in the same way (Ibd, 67, 68).

1.5 Conclusion:

The pursuit and realization of identity is one of the most important aspects of human satisfaction. Without identity and belonging, a person remains scattered. Humanity, by its very nature, gravitates toward the environment that belonging it, which constitutes its identity. Religion, culture, and language constitute a person's identity. When an individual moves to another environment with a different culture and language, they feel a loss of their identity and continue striving to achieve this lost identity in this new cultural context. This loss of identity leads to dispersion.

Mootoo's short stories 'Out on Main Street' focus on identity and intellectual and cultural fragmentation in pursuing identity, placing them on the dispersion horizon. The new environment into which the main characters in Mootoo's short stories attempt to integrate creates a sense of disappointment for these characters. The significant discrepancy between their compatibility with this new environment and their past cultural heritage leads to suffering and diaspora.

Mootoo focuses on Indian immigrants to Europe through the collection of short stories "Out on Main Street," which highlights their struggles as they transition to an environment with different customs and traditions. Because Indian society is known for its adherence to its customs and traditions, which it considers sacred and a legacy of the past, these factors led to the main characters being diaspora. In this situation, the immigrant lives in an atmosphere of confusion and instability, suspended between the new cultural environment and the legacy of the past. The immigrants in Mootoo's stories experienced these crises, which led to intellectual and cultural conflicts even among themselves. The characters' attempts to integrate into this environment led them to a psychological conflict between their old customs and traditions and the new culture. These factors led to an identity crisis for European Indian immigrants, leading them into a state of diaspora.

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Abstract in Arabic

الخلاصة:

قد يُسبب الانتقال إلى بيئة جديدة أزمة في الهوية. تتناقش مجموعة القصص القصيرة "في الشارع الرئيسي" العقبات التي يواجهها المهاجرون في البيئات الثقافية الجديدة. ونتيجة لهذه الهجرة، تنشأ صراعات عرقية ودينية، مما يُسبب أزمة الهوية. تُركز القصص "في الشارع الرئيسي" للكاتبة الأيرلندية شاني موتو على تعقيدات هوية المهاجرين، مُركزة على الاندماج والتراث الماضي، مُسلطة الضوء على تحديات الاندماج في ظلّ التهجين الثقافي. تُناقش هذه الدراسة القضايا البيئية والعرقية من خلال تعقيدات هوية الشتات في ضوء معاناة الشخصيات الرئيسية في صراعها على التراث الثقافي الماضي. تُركز الدراسة على أربع قصص: "بهاكتي سوشيل"،

و"حديقة خاصة بها"، و"في الشارع الرئيسي"، و"انقلاب العالم كما يتكشف"، والتي تُوضّح موضوع الشتات في الإطار المُعَدّ للذات البشرية والسعي وراء الهوية.
