

# Diaspora, Memory, and Identity: The Act of Remembering and Forgetting in Mitali Perkins' *You Bring the Distant Near*

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## **Abstract**

Memories connect our present with the collective consciousness of our past (our origin, heritage, and history). Thus, “what we call the past is merely a function and production of a continuous present in its discourses.”<sup>1</sup> In this light, the writing of the South Asian diaspora reproduces the memories, identities, and experiences of the diasporic communities living in voluntary or involuntary exile. Every individual, including children, in a new cultural setting struggles with the past that is both forgotten and remembered. This recurrent scuffle between remembering and forgetting lies at the centre of the formation of a new cultural identity, which is constantly adopted and appropriated with the intention of surviving in the new environment. Mitali Perkins' novel *You Bring the Distant Near* traces the memory, genealogy, and cultural exchange of three generations of women from an Indian-American family who migrated from Bengal to Ghana to London to New York. The five women from three generations perform the act of remembering and forgetting, acculturation and integration in the process of new identity formation in the ‘host country’. The novel disentangles the trans-generational inheritance of diasporic consciousness and further reflects on the struggle for a unified cultural identity in the host land. Moreover, it emphasises how vulnerable the second and third generations immigrants are as they strive to navigate between the homeland and the hostland, the past and the future. This article explores the dialectics of remembering, forgetting, adjustment and acculturation in hostland(s) through five female characters named Raneer, Tara, Sonia, Anna, and Chantal, and further analyses how gaps in the intergenerational narratives help readers comprehend the varying experiences of each generation in the host country.

**Keywords:** memory, intergenerational narratives, displacement, cultural identity, children, transnationalism

## **Introduction**

Diaspora and memory studies are dynamic discourses that enable the migrants to claim their world and help them make a sense of their disrupted lives in their hostland. Diaspora was originally used to refer to the exiles and migration of Jewish people; however, in modern parlance it illustrates shared aspects of Jewish, Irish, African, Asian, and colonial history, and can likewise be applied to numerous migrant groups transcending the boundary of spatiality

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,” *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2002), pp. 1–19.

and temporality. Diaspora as a distinct genre of cultural studies has been developed as a discourse by scholars like William Safran, Robin Cohen,<sup>2</sup> Vijay Mishra, Rey Chow,<sup>3</sup> and Avtar Brah,<sup>4</sup> among others. A related discipline, memory studies, combines the intellectual strands of anthropology, history, philosophy, literature and psychology. French scholars Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Paul Ricoeur inspired the emergence of memory studies as a distinctive field of study;<sup>5</sup> albeit one entangled with diaspora studies.<sup>6</sup>

Diasporic communities are understood to be “any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or because of the political self-interest of a racialised nation-state, as a group that lives in displacement.”<sup>7</sup> Diaspora, as a discourse, enables us to understand the political and cultural expression of people living in the hostland, through obscuring and revealing the various kinds of migration. Moreover, it also addresses the issues of race, nationality and the politics of identity formation which is an “ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in the moments of historical transformation.”<sup>8</sup> The kind of culture the diaspora communities produce remains multicultural because of their connections, interactions and communication with their communities of the common origin. In other words, it is “useful when the connections assume a multipolar rather than a unilinear form.”<sup>9</sup> Diaspora is a “whole new epistemic situation”<sup>10</sup> in the current era of transnationalism, where identity has become fluid because of the convergence of multiculturalism and the hybridisation of social codes. However, depending solely upon the elitist narrative may weaken the authenticity of this discourse as historically, the majority of migrants “were poor and barely literate, and the written evidence that has survived about them was produced for the most part by elites. Attributing a sense of diaspora to entire groups of people based on this sort of evidence has obvious pitfall.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, each text of diaspora delineates various kinds of experiences and arguments distinctively, resulting in accepting the heterogeneity of identity, ethnicity and cultural diversity. Despite common origin, diaspora can be “contrasted by their destinations and class backgrounds, attitude to the mother country, economic status, language of creative expression, market access and so on.”<sup>12</sup>

In diasporic settlements, the migrants are not always welcomed by the local population. It can be argued that the hostland becomes multicultural and multigenerational

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<sup>2</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1991), pp. 83-99; Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, third edition (London: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2007); Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1925]); Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory*, Volume 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); and Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Vijay Agnew (ed.), *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Vijay Mishra, “The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora,” *Textual Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1996), pp. 421-447; James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1994), pp. 302-338.

<sup>8</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Sudesh Mishra, *Diaspora Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> Kenny, *Diaspora*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Makarand Paranjape (ed.), *In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2001), p. 8.

through the settlement of people of different countries and ethnicities, “but they remain outsiders in the eyes of the indigenes, who reserve the inalienable right to assert their primary and exclusive proprietary claim to the homeland, should they so desire.”<sup>13</sup> Generally, cultural pluralism in the hostland motivates people from developing world countries to voluntarily migrate from the motherland both for better opportunities and fulfilment of aspirations of the future. However, Ruth M. Lijtmaer considers voluntary immigration “as a traumatic event, too, because of its links to acculturation losses, and struggle for adaptation ... Immigrants mourn parents, siblings, and sometimes even children. They also mourn friends and the broader network of relations that have been a stabilising factor to maintain their identities.”<sup>14</sup> In this situation, the migrants try to return to their homeland either in reality or in imagination. But “neither homeland states nor multi-homeland states provide healthy environments for diasporas”<sup>15</sup> as the diasporic subject is not recognised in the prior form. Thus, home does not remain “just a physical structure or a geographical location; it is always an emotional space” that exists even if the people are not able to return to their homeland.<sup>16</sup> The diasporic subjects, including women, accept that they cannot return to their homeland; thus, the longing for the lost home continues in their collective memory. In this scenario, it becomes essential to disentangle the relationship between homeland and hostland through the perspective of women who play crucial roles in both public and private life in the hostland. They perform the duty of upholding their homeland’s traditions and customs rather than renouncing them. Considering the particular case of South Asian women’s diaspora, they “act as conduit to carry and retain the cultural and traditional baggage of the ancestral land. Necessarily, immigrant women are considered to be the transmitters of homeland culture among the posterior generation.”<sup>17</sup>

Mitali Perkins, a South Asian diasporic female voice, like other Indian diasporic writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Uma Parameswaran, Meera Syal, Sujata Massey, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Anjana Apakna, Indira Ganesan, and Shani Mootoo, has encapsulated the role of women in the diaspora, particularly in relation to their initiatives to preserve the culture of the homeland and transfer the collective consciousness of the homeland to subsequent generations. In her novel *You Bring the Distant Near*, Perkins has delineated the consciousness of diasporic women by incorporating the issues of race, gender, culture, language and identity. In this novel, the layered story of three generations presents the narratives of five female protagonists, each of whom perceives the world in her own distinctive way. The text explores the complexities of cultural identity, children’s settlement, and the inheritance of diasporic consciousness in different generations. Tara, one of the female characters, underlines this complexity when she says, “I’m not sure I’d answer that question with just one word, like my sister. Where are we

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<sup>13</sup> Walker Conner, “The Impact of Homelands Upon Diasporas,” in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, ed. G. Sheffer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 16–45.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth M. Lijtmaer, “Social Trauma, Nostalgia and Mourning in the Immigration Experience,” *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 82, no. 2 (2022), pp. 305–319.

<sup>15</sup> Conner, “The Impact of Homelands,” p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Roberta Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Deepali Karche and Sandip Mane, “Women and their Roles in Diaspora: A Study,” *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2022), pp. 31–36.

from? It's complicated."<sup>18</sup> The novel further examines issues like racism, feminism, cross-cultural interactions, and assimilation difficulties. It illustrates the spatial and temporal dislocation and relocation in the hostland by presenting "a spiritual home with strong maternal associations, located in a liminal space where past and future converge."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is also a story of the "multigenerational adaptation to a diverse America and of the familial and romantic love that nourishes their new roots."<sup>20</sup>

This article examines how the diaspora is linked with cultural identity and collective memory, as well as the individual memory, in the hostland where past and present converge and intersect in the process of settlement and adjustment. Moreover, Perkins' *You Bring the Distant Near* presents the tussle between remembering and forgetting past memories and the urge to retain the culture and rituals of the homeland in the new nation-state. The children's struggle for adjustment both at social and linguistic levels, as represented in the novel, further problematises the relocation after displacement. Therefore, to comprehend the author's narrative of fragmentation, alienation, reunion, and ambitions in the journey of three countries, the relationship between homeland and hostland must be disentangled, by analysing the portrayal of double consciousness in diasporic settings.

### **Transgenerational Inheritance of Female Diasporic Consciousness**

The psychic transmission of diasporic consciousness from one generation to the next remains complicated due to the differences in how people experience moving to a new country. The first generation may place more emphasis on settlement in the host country, while succeeding generations are more aware of their identity and assimilation, reflecting that the past and the present are still inextricably linked. Perkins, through her five female characters, demonstrates the experience of diaspora and displacement and how they are transferred from one generation to another. She outlines the first, second, and third generations' experiences in the host country as the text tells the story from each generation's viewpoint. She creates a space for the depiction of the female experience of longing and belonging in the hostland by placing emphasis on the female characters. Roberta Rubenstein questions the intention of the author by asking, "Why, despite cultural and ethnic differences, despite different stages in the life course of the authors themselves as well as the characters they create, do notions of longing and belonging retain such significance within female experience?"<sup>21</sup> The answer lies in the experiences that Perkins had in various geographical displacements in different cultures and nations. For her, only female experiences of the tension between private and public life in the hostland can justify the vicissitudes in the life of the people, especially women and children, who have migrated.

Thus, the novel delineates the difficulties of the female characters, both as children and as adults, that they face in the new land, where the acquisition of a new language or the adaptation of a new identity remains the most challenging task. The novel, set in the United States and India, explicitly complicates the question of identity by bringing characters back to

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<sup>18</sup> Mitali Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2017), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth A. Bush, "You Bring the Distant Near by Mitali Perkins," *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, vol. 71, no. 1 (2017), pp. 31–32.

<sup>21</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging*, p. 3.

India from the hostland. Tara, the elder sister, who grew up in the United Kingdom and the United States, becomes a Bollywood star in India, but her younger sister, Sonia, settles in America and becomes an activist. When the narrative jumps from the 1970s to the 1990s, Tara has become a successful Bollywood actress while Sonia is a successful activist in the US, each living a life of fulfilled ambitions. However, the narrative includes two more narratives, those of Anna, the daughter of Tara, and Chantal, the daughter of Sonia, who are studying at the same school. They try to craft their own identities and continue their search for the 'self' in the hostland, similarly to how their mothers searched for their identities and 'selves'. Both Chantal and Anna, belonging to the third generation, confront different challenges as they navigate their teenage years, consider their cultural heritage, and seek acceptance and success in their respective fields. Sonia's daughter desires to be a true American and has her own dreams, while Tara's daughter Anna aspires to preserve her Bengali identity and culture in the new land.

In order to present alternative understandings of diaspora and homeland, Perkins converges India and America through these characters of the third generation. In other words, the third generation in the novel unites "the disparate branches of their extended families and coming to terms with their interracial and cultural identities."<sup>22</sup> Further, the novel also reflects the symbolic transfer of consciousness through Raneer and Baba's interference in their daughters' lives first and then in their grandchildren's lives. Raneer makes an effort to instill the social values she brought with her from the homeland, whether they pertain to language, culture, or even clothing. She constantly tries to pass on the symbols of her motherland to the new generation's children while also making an effort to practise the rituals and cultural values in the host country. As Marianne Hirsch argues, "national/political and cultural/archival memory" are not "inter- but trans-generational; they are no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the symbols become an important tool not only to create a new identity but also to inscribe cultural memory of the homeland in the psyche of the children of the subsequent generations. In the novel, Baba's loss of lands due to partition and his displacement from Bangladesh (East Bengal) to the current Indian state of Bengal demonstrates the pain, suffering and trauma of partition (a national phenomenon in Indian history), which was subsequently transferred to the next generation(s). When Anna learned about this, she desired to visit India and see and reflect upon the loss of land, culture and language that her grandparents once owned. This reflects the role of post memory, which "examines the role of the family as a space of transmission and the function of gender as an idiom of remembrance."<sup>24</sup>

### **Children, Dislocation and New Homeland**

It is argued that "the child is nothing but the product of adult discourse."<sup>25</sup> Yet understanding the child's settlement in the hostland as a distinct phenomenon is necessary to fill the gap between adult and adolescent narratives of diaspora. The focus of diaspora studies is always

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<sup>22</sup> Bush, "You Bring the Distant Near," p. 32.

<sup>23</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2008), pp. 103–128.

<sup>24</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," p. 103.

<sup>25</sup> David Rudd, "Theorising and Theories: How does Children's Literature Exist?," in *Understanding Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 15-29.

on the adult's struggle in the host country, whether that struggle is for identity, language, or culture. However, not as much thought is given to the effects of migration on the adolescent psyche. The difficult task of adjusting and adapting to the new social and cultural norms of the host country further burdens the second and third generation children. In the American setting, "the different roles that adolescent boys and girls are expected to play in American society, we can also anticipate significant gender effects on various dimensions of psychosocial adaptation, including self-esteem."<sup>26</sup> Since a major part of Perkins' novel is set in the US, the importance of understanding immigrant children's survival in a foreign land becomes crucial. In contrast with the adulthood narrative of equilibrium and aspirational fulfilment in the hostland, Perkins' depiction of young children in the host nation emphasises the fundamental nature of the struggle for an identity that has become ambiguous.

Evidently, the children of the Das family, who can assimilate into the hostland culture more quickly than their parents, adapt to the new cultural codes by learning the language, interacting with students, and watching the visual media depicting America. For instance, Tara, in her childhood, thinks that in order to blend in at her new school, she needs to behave, present herself, and, to the best of her ability, look like a person whom other students would want to get to know. Delineating the problem of adjustment with a new identity in a new place, she says, "School starts in a week. I wonder if I can muster up the energy to acquire another persona."<sup>27</sup> This illustrates the ongoing struggles of children like Tara, who gathers courage to make sure that she has a new persona to exhibit, one that is superimposed on her original self. It is interesting that in the process of assimilation or acculturation, second or third generation immigrants often try to superimpose a new identity, which is highly influenced by the popular culture of the hostland. Similarly, in the case of Tara, she picks the television character Marcia Brady in New York and fashion model Twiggy in London as her role models, which further reflects the children's (un)conscious attempts to adapt to the new cultural settings.

Apart from addressing the question of children's identity, the novel also explores the relationship between children and parents in the hostland. In fact, the intersectionality of parents and children's relationship in the hostland makes us realise the tussle between past and present in a narrative of intergenerational nature. In the novel, the interference of parents in every aspect of their children's lives makes them realise the complex phenomenon of recreating old cultural values in a hostland where the value systems are totally different. Since the children are dependent on parents and must live with parents at home, their understanding of both past and present problematises the consciousness of diaspora. Lijtmaer says, "Children in any migration are like exiles because they have no say in the migration experience. The choice has been made for them, without their consent, sometimes thoughtfully, sometimes impulsively, by their parents. In some cases, it is a not matter of choice at all because desperate circumstances have forced the parents to move."<sup>28</sup> In Perkins' novel, Tara, Sonia, Anna and Chantal face the same kind of intervention from their respective parents in their childhood. The children have no choice but to accept the decisions made by their parents. It is argued that too much intervention by parents in the lives of children can cause social traumas and alienation

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<sup>26</sup> Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> Lijtmaer, "Social Trauma, Nostalgia and Mourning," p. 307.

too. For instance, Ranees always stops Sonia from going outside alone. She recalls that her grandparents cried at her birth because she was not a boy. In her case, her mother's constant interference made her go through mental traumas and "psychological fragmentation."<sup>29</sup>

In the next generation, Anna, Tara's daughter, does not want to study abroad, but her mother compels her to stay in America to study there. Here, she is unhappy at school, where classmates make fun of her for her short height and dress. She is called 'tiny' and 'peanut' by her schoolmates. It delineates how the children of the diaspora are constantly subject to humiliation and moments of self-doubt, which leaves a traumatic impact on their psyches. They are constantly forced to reflect on their hyphenated identity and fragmented selves. Thus, for the children of the diaspora, the home of childhood always remains in the imagination as the adult can return to the homeland, but children cannot or sometimes, they do not. The nostalgia that children might have signifies "not simply the loss of one's childhood home but the loss of childhood itself."<sup>30</sup> This loss can only be "recoverable through narrative."<sup>31</sup> We may argue that when parents move from one country to another for economic opportunity, the children of that family have to experience transience because of this displacement.

### Remembering and Forgetting the Past

The understanding of home and nostalgia has changed in the postmodern fragmented world where displacement due to wars, civil wars, genocide, and other conflicts has increased. Thus, because of dislocation and displacement from the homeland, the person 'feels severed or exiled', whether they have migrated 'voluntarily or involuntarily', and this leads to mourning for previous cultural identity. Thus, it becomes important to understand whether the past remains or erases with time. In fact the "relationship between the past and present is complex and dynamic, with meanings and interpretations that shift with time, place, and social context."<sup>32</sup> In Perkins' novel, the delineation of Ranees Das's character reflects this complexity; as she wants to preserve not only the cultural identity of her homeland but also the lifeways, whether dress code or other social behaviours of home. The past remains in her, and she desires to transfer it to the next generation through behavioural training. In Perkins' novel, Ranees mourns for the loss of and separation from the homeland, language, cultural practices, and community. She is worried that her children will lose their Indian culture. Tara and Sonia are constantly reminded by her father and mother not to forget the language of their homeland. Sonia is sent to learn harmonium to practice Ravindra Sangeet. They are always reminded not to forget the beautiful language, which is *Bangla*. About their father's instructions to his daughters in a new space, Ghosal says, "Baba insists that both of his daughters should strike a balance between the cultures of their homeland and hostland, and the insistence of their father

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<sup>29</sup> Sumaira Yashmeen and Nargis Salee, "A Rhizomatic and Anti-foundational Analysis of Mitali Perkins' *You Bring the Distant Near*," *Critical Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2021), pp. 77-82.

<sup>30</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging*, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Vijay Agnew (ed.), *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 3.

on issues like food, dress and manners reminds the daughters of their original homeland.”<sup>33</sup> This supports the argument that “settling abroad, however, did not mean forgetting the lands from whence migrants came and to which they dreamed they might one day return.”<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the alienation from the homeland may result in ‘a catastrophic sense of loss’ in the minds of both adults and children who strive to seek a new identity in continuous contact with the new culture, resulting in the internalisation of new cultural and social codes. Elmo Raj argues that diasporic subjects “preserve a collective memory romanticising their homeland and are entrusted to revitalise their homeland and connect their homeland with the host homeland.”<sup>35</sup> The novel carries the past through the characters’ consistent return to the tradition and rituals of the homeland. Moreover, the novel’s title is taken from Rabindranath Tagore’s sonnet “Thou Hast Made Me Known,” reflecting the connection between past and present. The novel also refers to Rabindra Sangeet, which is sung by Ranees to get peace in a distant land. It shows the return to the homeland to embark upon the art and aesthetics to get peace and pleasure in the host land. Further, performing ‘*shradha* ceremony’ of Rajeev Das in the US, following the Indian rituals and traditions, illustrates the family’s return to the culture of their homeland. However, in the ceremony, the priest is not wearing a *dhoti*; instead, he is in ‘blue jeans’ and ‘kurta,’ denoting hybridisation of the dress code, which is an important part of the individual identity in diasporic settings.

In the host country, the past is not only revered and romanticised, but it is also often deliberately forgotten to avoid painful memories. The question of how far this is even possible is debatable, but diasporic subjects have always made an effort to forget some aspect of the past. It is crucial to understand that “forgetting is an act, a creative invention, a performance, a selective loss” in a diasporic setting.<sup>36</sup> This is reflected in Ranees and Rajeev Das choosing not to discuss the suffering they endured as a result of partition. They transmit the traditions and customs of India to the next generation, but they do not pass on the events that led to their departure from their home country. For instance, Anna, belonging to the third generation, says:

I am thinking of that, but it doesn’t go in the plus column for America. My life in Mumbai worked beautifully. Sunset strolls on Jehu Beach. First class train rides. Servants to press my school uniforms and cook to make any snack I want. My friends and family are all there - apart from Aunt Sonia, Uncle Lou, Golden Girl and Didu, of course, who for some reason hates visiting India.<sup>37</sup>

This quotation from the text reflects on the possible reasons why they hate visiting India. Most of the characters in the story do not want to return to India because of their troubled pasts, and as a result, they prefer to remain in the host country while carrying their homeland in their hearts. Furthermore, Ranees Das, who embodies her mother country’s cultural values, also

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<sup>33</sup> Abhisek Ghosal, “Mapping Contemporary South Asian Children’s Fiction: Contentions and Contestations in Mitali Perkins’ *You Bring the Distant Near* and Sowmya Rajendran’s *The Lesson*,” *SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2028), p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> P. Prayer Elmo Raj, “The Concept of Home in Diaspora,” *LLILS*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2014), pp. 87-94.

<sup>36</sup> Anh Hua, “Diaspora and Cultural Memory,” in *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 191-208.

<sup>37</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 209.



refuses to return. Sonia says, “I don’t blame Ma not wanting to return to India. She doesn’t like much about her girlhood in the village.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, it can be inferred that they try to erase some aspects of their past by performing the act of forgetting. It may be argued that remembering and forgetting are both present in Perkins’ novel, demonstrating the necessity of both aspects to survive in the hostland. But it is certain that “the homeland slips into perpetual deferral.”<sup>39</sup>

### Language and Multicultural Identity in Hostland

The preconceived notion of language and identity is ultimately challenged by the “demographic and linguistic factors that contribute to the cultural accommodation or estrangement of diasporas in the host country or, conversely, to their continuing ethno-linguistic identification with a home territory.”<sup>40</sup> In the process of acculturation, immigrants try to learn the language of the hostland. Language has a deep association with the identity and culture of any land and thus, the acquisition of language becomes the first step towards internalising the new world around which the newly settled populace must conceptualise and categorise. In the novel, the Das family endeavours to adopt American English to adapt to American culture and society. Baba says in the novel, “You’ll be able to walk here from our flat, I mean *apartment*. And that lorry is a *truck* here. The suitcases are in the *trunk*, not the boot. You’ll have to learn how to speak American.”<sup>41</sup> This demonstrates the essential aspect of language acquisition for assimilation into the social and cultural paradigm of the hostland. Further, Tara and Amit, when they met in Bengal, communicated in a foreign tongue because Tara was living in America. She says, “The two of us speak English to each other, even though we both grew up in homes where our parents spoke Bangla.”<sup>42</sup> This demonstrates the acquisition of language and its relation with diaspora and immigrants in a foreign country where people of the homeland also communicate in a foreign language if he/she can speak it. Homi K. Bhabha compares migration with translation: “a translated text which bears the traces of both languages in which the text is originally written and the language to which it is translated, a migrant becomes a translated individual who shows the traces of both locations and languages. Thus, he affirms the importance of language in the identity formation of a migrant.”<sup>43</sup>

As far as the multicultural aspect of the hostland is concerned, Perkins’ own adaptation of multicultural identity through different generations in the hostland reflects when she says, reflecting upon the autobiographical elements of this novel:

It’s very much based on my own family, and three generations are called “strangers. The first generation, my parents, who come here mid-life and they don’t know much about the culture. They have to learn from scratch what it means to be an American. The middle generation, was based on my life, are called “travelers” in the book. We are the ones that can switch back and forth from culture to culture. The third generation,

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<sup>38</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Ghosal, “Mapping Contemporary South Asian Children’s Fiction,” p. 79.

<sup>40</sup> Mishra, *Diaspora Criticism*, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> Jenni Ramone, *Postcolonial Theories* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 115.

the generation of my kids is in the book called “settlers,” and they’re the ones that are trying to figure out who is American, what does it mean to be American<sup>44</sup>

However, in the multicultural romanticisation of the hostland, problems cannot be ignored. Generally, the “hostland features as a synonym for the modern nation-state and is rendered in juridical or secular liberal terms, whereas the homeland is viewed viscerally as a terrain (which may or may not be a nation-state) charged with surplus signification and encumbered with unfathomable affects.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, the relationship between homeland and hostland becomes a site of contestation. The current novel also throws light on this aspect of duality and contested cultural norms through the characters of Ranee, Tara, and her daughter, Anna. In illustrating American society’s multiculturalism and openness, Anna says by citing Didu, “Why are Americans so stupid? So trusting? They let anybody in this country! Even people who hate them.”<sup>46</sup> But at the same time, the Somalian friend of Anna was harassed by a middle-aged man when walking. Anna asks, “Those are Americans, too, right?”<sup>47</sup> This delineates the kind of silence about discrimination in so-called multicultural American society. But she is not silent about the issues of her homeland. She says, “We’re not in Bengal anymore. There’s no caste system in America. The Declaration of Independence made it clear: ‘All men are created equal.’ And we’ll be changing ‘men’ to ‘people’ soon.”<sup>48</sup> Perkins’ portrayal of both the homeland and the hostland incorporates historical and current issues into the diaspora narrative.

## Conclusion

Memory, forgetting and remembering in diasporic consciousness illustrate the complexity caused by the displacement in the psyche of people who migrate from their homeland. The motive behind migration might be aspirations (in the case of voluntary migration) for a better future and opportunities, but cultural loss remains a significant aspect of their subconscious psyche, and it remains a part of their new identity. Thus, by illuminating a dialectic between loss and longing, Perkins presents a cultural hybridisation of India and America through the delineation of diasporic consciousness. She shows how displacement and relocation contribute to the formation of a complex identity in the hostland both through adopting and negating the new and old cultural and social values. Moreover, Perkins has interwoven the three generations’ narratives through the five female characters, which enables readers to better understand the experiences of women migrants and their children. Ranee Das, Sonia, Tara, and her daughter Anna collectively represent the tussle between past, present and future. Perkins presents characters with differing attitudes in order to demonstrate the double consciousness of diaspora and the impacts of relocation in the hostland. The novel also reimagines Perkins’ own life. She brings distant India near through the delineation of diasporic sensibilities embedded in the five women and their lives in India and the US/UK. Thus, Perkins creates a rich tapestry of the interplay of different perspectives and timelines in the female migrant experiences.

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<sup>44</sup> Mitali Perkins, “Meet the Author Recording with Mitali Perkins,” *Teaching Books*, February (2019). At: [www.teachingbooks.net/book\\_reading.cgi?a=1&id=15944](http://www.teachingbooks.net/book_reading.cgi?a=1&id=15944).

<sup>45</sup> Mishra, *Diaspora Criticism*, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 264.

<sup>47</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 264.

<sup>48</sup> Perkins, *You Bring the Distant Near*, p. 229.