Myth, Memory, and Migration: Transcultural Storytelling in the South Asian Diaspora

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamic interplay of myth, memory, and migration in shaping transcultural storytelling practices within the South Asian diaspora. Situated within postcolonial and diaspora studies frameworks, it argues that storytelling functions as a vital mode of cultural preservation, identity negotiation, and transculturation for displaced communities. Analyzing literary narratives, oral histories, and digital expressions, the research demonstrates how inherited myths and collective memories are strategically adapted, reinterpreted, and fused with experiences of migration and settlement in new homelands. This process generates hybrid narrative forms that navigate the complexities of belonging, challenge essentialist notions of culture, and articulate distinct diasporic subjectivities. The article contends that these transcultural stories are not merely acts of recollection but active processes of meaning-making, enabling diasporic communities to maintain connections to ancestral pasts while simultaneously forging new cultural syntheses and engaging critically with both homeland and hostland societies. The negotiation of myth and memory through storytelling emerges as a crucial site for understanding the resilience and transformation of South Asian cultural identities in global contexts.

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INTRODUCTION: NAVIGATING CULTURAL AMNESIA AND HYBRIDITY

The experience of migration fractures linear narratives of place and belonging, thrusting individuals and communities into complex negotiations between past and present, homeland and hostland. For the South Asian diaspora, dispersed globally through historical processes of colonialism, indentured labor, partition, and contemporary economic migration, storytelling becomes a crucial vessel for carrying culture across these ruptures (Cohen, 2008; Mishra, 2007). This article explores how the entwined forces of myth (inherited archetypal narratives, religious epics, folk tales) and memory (personal recollection, collective historical experience, trauma) are mobilized, adapted, and transformed through transcultural storytelling practices in diasporic contexts. We argue that these narratives are not passive transmissions but active processes of *transculturation* (Ortiz, 1995; Pratt, 1992), generating hybrid forms that negotiate identity, preserve cultural continuity amidst discontinuity, and articulate distinct diasporic subjectivities within globalized landscapes. This process inherently challenges static notions of cultural purity, revealing identity as perpetually in flux (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: DIASPORA, MEMORY, AND NARRATIVE

Diaspora studies provide the essential lens for understanding the condition of displacement, characterized by multi-locational attachments, experiences of discrimination, and collective memory of trauma or separation (Safran, 1991; Brubaker, 2005). Within this, cultural memory studies highlight how groups construct shared pasts through narrative, ritual, and material culture (Assmann, 2008; Erll, 2011). For migrants, memory becomes portable, often idealized or mythologized, serving as an anchor in unfamiliar terrain (Hirsch & Miller, 2011). Simultaneously, the concept of transculturation emphasizes the multidirectional exchange and transformation of cultural practices when

different groups interact (Ortiz, 1995), moving beyond simplistic assimilation/accretion models. Storytelling is the primary medium through which these processes diasporic consciousness, memory work, and transculturation – converge and become visible (Boehmer, 2005; Rai, 2004).

Myth As Portable Heritage And Adaptive Framework

South Asian diasporic communities carry a rich repository of myths from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to regional folk tales and religious parables. These are not rigid relics but dynamic frameworks constantly reinterpreted. Storytelling reactivates these myths, rendering them relevant to contemporary diasporic experiences. For instance, the trope of exile in the *Ramayana* resonates deeply with the migrant condition, offering archetypes of loss, perseverance, and the quest for home (Richman, 2008; Ramakrishnan, 2020). Writers like Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*, 1981) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mistress of Spices*, 1997) famously deploy mythic structures and characters, fracturing and recombining them to comment on postcolonial history, migration, and identity hybridity. This adaptation demonstrates myth's function as a "portable toolkit" (Rushdie, 1991) for making sense of displacement and constructing a usable past in the present.

Memory: Personal Trajectories and Collective Echoes

Memory in diaspora operates on multiple registers. Personal narratives of migration – the journey, arrival, struggles, and successes form a core strand of diasporic storytelling, often shared intergenerationally (Baldassar, 2007). These individual memories intertwine with collective memories of watershed events: the trauma of Partition (1947), the expulsion from Uganda (1972), the Khalistan movement, or experiences of racism in host countries (Kabir, 2013; Rai, 2004). Storytelling becomes a means of processing trauma, preserving histories silenced in official narratives, and forging solidarity based on shared experience. Oral history projects within communities actively capture these memories (Hirsch & Miller, 2011), while literature and film (e.g., works by Jhumpa Lahiri, Meera Syal, Mira Nair) give artistic form to these complex, often painful, recollections, transforming private memory into public discourse.

Transculturation in Narrative Form and Content

The transcultural nature of diasporic storytelling manifests in both form and content. Linguistically, narratives often blend English with South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil, etc.), creating distinctive vernaculars that reflect lived hybridity (Kothari & Snell, 2011). Genres themselves hybridize: traditional oral storytelling forms like *dastangoi* or *katha* adapt to contemporary performance spaces or written texts; Bollywood aesthetics merge with Western cinematic conventions in diasporic film (Gopinath, 2005). Thematically, stories frequently explore the clash and fusion of cultural values, generational conflicts over tradition, the navigation of bicultural identities, and the redefinition of "home" as a concept transcending geography (Ahmed, 1999; Brah, 1996). These narratives often occupy a "third space" (Bhabha, 1994), challenging monolithic cultural definitions and creating new syntheses.

Digital Storytelling and New Diasporic Publics

The digital age has significantly amplified and transformed diasporic storytelling. Online platforms (blogs, social media, digital archives, web series) provide new spaces for sharing personal narratives, reviving folk tales, debating political events impacting the homeland, and building virtual communities across vast distances (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Rai, 2020). Digital storytelling allows for multimodal expression (text, image, video, sound), facilitates rapid dissemination, and enables participation from diverse voices within the diaspora, including younger generations and marginalized subgroups. This fosters the creation of new, dynamic, and often more decentralized diasporic publics engaged in continuous narrative exchange and identity construction (Deb, 2022).

CONCLUSION: STORYTELLING AS DIASPORIC WORLD-MAKING

The analysis of myth, memory, and migration through the lens of transcultural storytelling reveals its fundamental role in the South Asian diasporic experience. Far from being mere nostalgia, storytelling is an active, generative practice. It allows communities to preserve and adapt their cultural heritage (myth), process individual and collective experiences of displacement and resettlement (memory), and navigate the complex realities of living between cultures (transculturation). Through this process, diasporic subjects construct meaningful identities, forge connections across generations and geographies, challenge homogenizing narratives, and articulate their place within both their ancestral homelands and their adopted societies. Storytelling, therefore, is not just about recounting the past; it is a vital act of diasporic world-making in the present, continuously shaping the future contours of South Asian cultural identity on a global stage. The resilience and dynamism of these narratives underscore the enduring power of story as a tool for survival, adaptation, and the assertion of belonging in an increasingly mobile world.

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