



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Cultural Hybridity in Nafisa Haji's Fiction '*The Writing On My Forehead*'

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the aspect of cultural hybridity and specifically how this impacts characters and the choices they make in the novel '*The Writing On My Forehead*' by Nafisa Haji. In the dynamics of cultural hybridity of the characters, the purpose of the work is to identify the background in the characters' choices and life experiences. In the novel, characters are presented as individuals with intricate self-images. Applying this analytical perspective shows the main character, Saira Qader, is an ideal candidate for understanding how cultural identity and personal agency interact. The idea of technology as representative of a dual identity destabilizes the show's unique narrative of a Pakistani woman, temporarily erasing the cultural complexities of the character's identity. To achieve this study, the use of a qualitative analysis method was deemed most appropriate regarding the narrative techniques used in the novel particularly the dialogue used in character development. Thus, it only could be identified that Saira's actions are informed by her multicultural background and the same applies to other characters. Culture is one of the most important aspects that can be considered both as the people's enemy and the basis for their development, affecting the characters' development and their relations. Consequently, further research should employ broader ranges of investigation to encompass comparative analysis with other works that touch on cultural mestizaje.

**KEYWORDS** Ambivalence, Hybridity, Migrants, Multiculturalism

## Introduction

The enhancement of the individuals no matter whether in social, cultural, or cognitive aspects, is seen in every diaspora composition. Sometimes people are forced to change their place of residence for some reason but the question is how they think about their ancestors and their roots. When people start to think about it brings a lot of trouble to them and helps them remember the past necessary to explain Imaginary Homeland started by Salman Rushdie. "There is an old photograph of two people set in a low-priced frame and hanged on the wall of the room where the narrator of the story writes." (RUSHDIE, n.d.)

When the expatriates are in any other country they just have to deal with the hostile attitude and then try as much as possible to follow in the footsteps of their superiors so that they can blend in that environment. And why are they treated as inferior because of their racial context as well as because the West wanted to consider it selves as superior, and more civilized since the colonization period?

Hybridity means the combination or integration of two or more things or people; therefore, cultural hybridity refers to the cultural mix of two or more cultures; this is the most dominant issue of most modern novels. Due to the reasons of different cultures of the

people of this generation, they faced the issues of their identity in the new land which has put them into the “in-between space” which is one of the main concepts of Bhabha, the theorist (Bhabha, 2012). The general idea of having one part of their heritage as white and the other as black is true for many writers and they portrayed this issue in their writing. Nafisa Haji is an American writer of Indo-Pakistani origin; similarly, like other writers of this era. He was born and raised primarily in Los Angeles but has also lived in Chicago, Karachi, Manila, and London as well (Haji, 2009). When the division of the Indian subcontinent was in progress her family shifted to the new capital of Pakistan, Karachi. Nafisa’s parents moved to the United States in the late 1960s and her birth followed shortly in the United States. When she was six years of age they decided to stick with their plan of “going back home” and thereby relocated to Karachi. After a few months, they found themselves a bit more American than they had initially thought they were and they flew back to Los Angeles. Therefore, our writer also has a mixed background and she has enlightened this autobiographical aspect into this fiction.

The novel is the portrayal of the American-born Indo/Pakistani family and their roots using Saira’s growing up in both cultural environments America and Pakistan and decisions regarding her future. She is an American woman who grew up in the United States, and therefore was aware of two cultures; the American culture which was more relaxed and encouraged an independent attitude, and the cultures of her family which were more family-oriented and Traditional. Thus the rebellious second-generation woman Saira found herself confined between lines that define women of her culture – marriage and raising children – and her desire to be an independent woman.

### Literature Review

Sarvat (Sarvat, 2014) examined the effects of cultural mixed-ness upon identity by using the theoretical notion of post-colonialism, in the context of different cultures namely Indian, Pakistani, English, and American. The novel that has been discussed in this research is surely the diasporic novel in which the protagonist is migrating from country to country for some reason but her roots are in Japan. It also depicts the hybrid environment in which many cultures compete to force their impression on the characters.

Shabbir, (2018) inspected the conflict of diasporic identity in the situation of American and Pakistani and British or Bangladeshi contexts. This research is based on the comparative study of two diasporic novels which revolves around the issues of settlement in the host country because of migration in the novel *Brick Lane* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The postcolonial world is mostly dealing with such issues in which people go to the West and try to settle there but face many issues because it is not easy to adjust to an unknown place. Some characters completely adopt the foreign culture to avoid the matter of identity as in *American Brat* Feroza, she accepts a new culture and its traditions to adjust there and to avoid discrimination some are unable to accept a new culture, and come back to their original roots as Changez came back to his homeland because he feels alienated there and the reason of isolation was the conflictual attitude of west towards east. Changez was humiliated there due to the feeling of inferiority. He was made to realize that his country was not so prosperous and after the 9/11 attack, his religion and country were labeled as cause of terrorism.

Gul et al., (2016) conducted their study on the basic elements of mimicry, unhomeliness, and ambivalence, all of which fall under the umbrella of hybridity. Whenever we talk about the hybridity of cultures then surely the concepts of mimicry, unhomeliness, and ambivalence exist there. Mimicry is the act of copying something or someone, and it is the notion of cultural hybridity in which a person attempts to mimic the

ideology, culture, and way of life of another society. Feroza the protagonist of the fiction copied the way of living of Western society so this is the concept that has been discussed in this research. Unhomeliness and ambivalence are also the major concepts of hybridity in which one can feel loneliness in an unknown place so the research deals with whether these elements are found in the personality of the character or the impacts of these elements compel the protagonist to make decisions. The theme of identity crisis also has been taken under consideration.

Liu et al., (2020) highlight the impacts of the hybrid background on the identity crisis of the characters who lived in America as Pakistani immigrants. A Pakistani young girl was sent to America by her parents to reduce her rigid religious thinking and to learn some modernity. However, when Feroza went to America, she was deeply captivated by the country's independence, liberty, and autonomy and she became completely immersed in its culture to become American so that she would not feel alone and alienated there. She disguised up like an American, lived with a girl and boy, and even fell in love with that American guy all of which were highly banned and forbidden in her culture. She also did this to avoid identity crisis and distinction.

But whenever two cultures that are opposed intersect, differences emerge. The clashes between racial and alien cultures disperse the immigrant's peculiarities and they start to meditate about their identity so this research paper deals with identity problems due to cultural collision.

Diasporic literature is included in the post-colonial heading which deals with the happenings of scattered people who suffer a lot and face troubles like inferiority, discrimination due to racial background, identity crisis, and racism. The study also investigates the hybrid journey of Saira the protagonist of the novel, and deals with whether the protagonist of the novel faced the dilemma of identity crisis and in what way the switching of cultures drove her to make different choices.

## **Material and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, specifically focusing on a close textual analysis of Nafisa Haji's 'The Writing On My Forehead' through the theoretical lens of Homi Bhabha's concepts of cultural hybridity and colonial influence. Key narrative segments, dialogues, and character developments will be scrutinized to identify and interpret how cultural hybridity influences the characters' identities and decision-making processes. This approach will enable an in-depth exploration of the interactions between different cultural influences within the text, and how these contribute to the formation of hybrid identities as described by Bhabha. Comparative analyses with other post-colonial literary works will also be conducted to further contextualize the findings within the broader discourse of post-colonial studies. This methodological framework will ensure a comprehensive understanding of cultural hybridity as portrayed in the novel, aligning closely with Bhabha's postulations on the subject.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Colonialism is the idea of establishing one's dominance over other territories and people on the other side of the world the so-called 'Mission Civilis trice' stated that they were there to 'civilize' the 'savage' people. But the fact is entirely at variance with this comment, the colonists simply took the area to live there and benefit on an individual basis, to expand their country for various reasons like accessibility to other markets, cheap labor required for the production of goods, etc. Colonizers justified their policy and questioned

themselves as being far superior to the inhabitants of their colonies which were the natives. In much of the contemporary textual content, this scenario has been portrayed; in ways that reveal the misconception about colonialism.

Bhabha further dilutes this postulate and transforms this notion into the foundation of identity. He provokes ceaselessly the solidarized self and staking his claim that the identity is the one in transition. This can be deemed to mean that identity is constructed in such a way that it is placed within a given multiple cultures. He also develops this idea more and talks about individuality and its presuppositions. He continues again and again with the concern for a fixed self and is told in response that identity is postmodern. This suggests that identity is made to be located in many cultures, as pointed out by Bhabha. Several scholars argued that Bhabha's overemphasis the cultural displacement is a result of his account since he is from the minority. The subject of hybridity according to Bhabha is informed by colonialism thinking because when colonizers invaded other nations to start colonies, they could not but bring along with them cultural, and religious beliefs of their origin, and their civilization hence impacting the people of the colonized nations. Thus the intercultural associations or what is commonly referred to as cross-cultural interactions started with colonialism.

Bhabha (Bhabha, 2012) the extract of "Signs Taken for Wonders" says: What hybridity reveals, therefore, is the effaced process of domination by disavowal; it names the differential and disciplinary Incorporation into the symbolic fabric of colonialist power by repetition of the discriminatory Otherness that produces that power. In his article "The Location of Culture," Bhabha highlights the dwelling as a significant indicator of the experience of culture, writing, "The place of the dwelling, at once public and private space, is inscribed in the experience of culture."

Alternatively, Bhabha deems the hybridity to be a product of colonialism. When the West came to other countries for their benefit, which they believed was the right thing to do for the less civilized, they brought in their way of thinking, the languages, and the arts, thus creating hybridity and this happened in some cases, because there was integration of two different cultures. But in the present scenario, people travel to and fro at their convenience or in their self-interest but are entrapped into the 'intermediate zone' since they feel they do not rightly belong to that location or area and hence have an identity crisis on account of their dual rootedness. It is noteworthy that Bhabha is occupied with the process of hybridization; that is with the process of continuous hybridizing. Thus, cultures continue the process of their construction of "becoming" but block the vectors of cultural hybridization. By choosing the third space, cultural rigidity is being severed and we are allowed an unending creation of identity. Even from the quasistatic duality to the concept that constructs a culture and an identity, it is thus understood that these are not things that are fixed but rather are always shifting.

It would be impossible not to notice that there is cultural differentiation that persists throughout this process. When the culture detement from each other novelty takes place then the Third space of Enunciation is seen and in this contrary space, identity takes place. Hybridity is not the new form of culture says Bhabha. (Bhabha, 2012) Though, this assertion hinges on the understanding of Bhabha's work. "Thus, to assert hybridity as a form of otherness is not the same as being able to delineate two original 'moments' and the third that is produced as the moment between; hybridity for me is the 'third space' which other positions take place"

Therefore, he raises hybridity as the "Third Dimension" from which one can fashion and evolve other identities and cultures. It means that in the given post-colonial world no

culture is simply solid, innocent, but rather polluted and mixed, so hence, talking about cultural homogeneity and solidity is utterly impossible. The novel which has taken under discussion for this research is also dealing such concerns of hybridity which is why using the celebrated theory of Homi Bhabha justifiably to determine and explicate the concerns of hybridity in it. Peculiarities of Bhabha's interpretation of the relation between colonial and post-colonial texts, which can be applied to every diasporic fiction, are represented by K. Bhabha. This theory fits all the problems hovering around cultural hybridity since it covers all the problems.

### **Results and Discussion**

In the novel issues of conflict between cultures are raised and characters have to try to solve it. Even the novel explores immigration and therefore all main characters have a hybrid background that causes conflict and confusion in their heads. Saira can think for herself and establish herself as unique due to her varied and free-spirited lifestyle. Saira has a rebellious attitude towards society because she wants to perform the acts that are prohibited in the culture that she has embraced. Saira's mother tried to make her two daughters be properly behaved females while at the same time trying to confine both daughters to Indian traditions. Her mother says;

"That is the meaning of jungle then. the cycle of doing things without first processing."

As per her mother are girls meant to fight like "wild beasts" with the other girls because this might end up causing a lot of harm and hurt. She enlists her cousin's example the same as she spat out her eye while fighting with her brother and then she was thrown out of her home because no man wanted to be near her.

Saira's background is of course a bit hybrid or blended as she also represents two contrasting cultures. For instance, whenever she goes back to Pakistan in the current generation, despite people being generally racially relatively similar, she sometimes feels a little strange. This might be due to her style, especially the type of clothing she wears, as this gives her uniqueness that can be associated with peculiarity. Karachi airport was no different, she was immediately subjected to curious stares the moment she set foot inside the airport premises.

"This was my first visit to Karachi as a "young adult" I wanted to see, with my own newly awakened eyes, the bustling city that my parents had often described to me during their early years of marriage. I had noticed. How male everything around became. I wanted to get rid of men's ogling stares that tried to look beneath my clothes as if they were trying to punch holes through the fabric just to look at me. This is what I was wearing that particular day: I was putting on blue jeans\_ ..... what was all the rumpus." (Haji 27)

She turns into the 'Airport Kardashian;' all the men in the airport stare at her as she is attractively dressed inappropriately. It also puts the idea forward that she may not come from a decent household. This is self-explanatory because a country has its climate or environment as well as its own culture, which means that what may be normal and can be overlooked in one culture may not be normal in another culture. Despite the strict cultural and religious norms that Saira goes through many things in her life, she does so because of the environment modern.

When Saira's twin cousins arrived to take her home, she changed back into her bright outfit as per the family's practice. Saira finds her cousin Mehnaz standing with one foot raised on a cigarette that she has in her hand and opposition to a pillar. Everything she does bears a meaning and is somehow symbolic starting with the way she is standing. Her cousin Mohsin who is so engrossed in taking snaps of the Sikh ladies, is described as;

"His hair was long and slightly unkempt, with strands of purple visible amid the dark brown color; on his left, I could distinguish the piercing on his ear which bore a silver sign of peace; he was dressed in black, drain-pipe trousers complemented by thick and clunky boots." (Haji 53)

As for culture, there can never be a complete fusion, there is always some biculture, and it changes people's way of thinking and character. By not completely immersed in Western ways because her mother's Ramkali practice was forbidden and she also did not adhere to the code of Ramkali fully but lived in the 'middle ground'. One day, when the teenage girl Saira is performing at her cousin Zahra's wedding in Karachi she comes across a revelation about her family in the process and the incident is very shocking for her personality. Concisely, on the plane, Saira says something she could have said about her visit to Pakistan;

'It was rather strange and always quite confusing especially because when people from the Pakistan side either came to visit or we visited them, we had an entire host of aunts and uncles. To search the friendly faces of racially recognizable people who in turn, look at me with the absent gaze of strangers I 'unwittingly' connected to individuals who possess skin that has a different color from that of the speaker.'" (Haji 19)

From her confused look, it can be said that she too felt uncomfortable and was strangers in her race and that it is okay for a person to be looked at, in the same manner one would look at a foreigner from another nation or culture. However, after the wedding soon Saira pays a visit to London where Ahmad Chacha and his family live. In many ways, Saira behaves as a protective figure and takes extra care to observe the environment in which her Uncle and his family reside. Their lifestyle is modern western and trendy as he watches Saira briefly, and for the first time, she finds herself shocked at the difference between her father and his brother. Her twin cousins Mohsin and Mehnaz appear to be fascinated with the Western way of life. It is especially important to note that Mehnaz is depicted as a self-sufficient and rather individualistic female protagonist. Saira recognizes her dress, attitude, or personality and comments as follows:

"Mehnaz came into the kitchen one day dressed in a leather mini skirt that would have certainly fainted my mother the very first time that I introduced her to her; her heels had gotten even higher and deadlier; she also had on more makeup than I could imagine." (Haji 55)

This makes some sense that it is common for Mehnaz to wear such type of clothing. And here we have the notion of mimicry because except for other characters Mehnaz attacks and emulates the lifestyle of "others," such as her dress, her affair with an English guy, and staying out till late at night even though her mother told her to stay home for a family dinner tonight with Saira but she refused as she was waiting for her friend's call and the fact that having friend is more important than parents.

Saira used to do all those things that her mother did not let her do because she had decided that like Rizzo she was ready for anything for the sake of it. She has had stage

rehearsals of kissing and hugging and dancing which she begins to enjoy as she has to do these things for two and a half months. To compose her angle and formulate her opinions

“Of course, I betrayed all these promises. This rebellion started slightly earlier than predicted. Alcohol was the first sin followed by pot dating and sexual intimacy. Sex not love, all of them, while rather enjoyable on a rainy afternoon after some practice, were overrated.” (Haji 101).

She loves the freedom and self-identity that are imparted in America. Some influences are physical such as the environment we find ourselves in while others are cultural such as the religious beliefs, food diet, dress code, language, and manner of living pressure people into adopting to the new environment.

Thus, cultural diversity plays an evident role in the immigrant’s choices regarding their lives. Because sometimes the people around you make you morph into someone else and make decisions like that as well. Saira from the start of the story desires to be able to make decisions on her own freely as she is influenced by the Western culture. All the money she is saving she would like to spend on becoming a journalist. Before that, however, she made outrageous decisions which she narrates as;

“The choice not to save my virginity for the sanctity of a wedding night.” (Haji 103)

She freely enjoyed her college where she fell in love with several boys and also slept with many of them. She wishes to do it “except that it wouldn’t be what my mother planned and prayed for” The West is a culture where the boy and the girl do not wed but make out and no one is punished.

Her mother worried about her daughter not repeating her wrongdoings as she just did on stage. But she failed to notice that doing the most immoral and wicked things, she had already done them after her foolish show. Saira’s mother took her to Karachi for her matchmaking where everything would be perfect. Saira is good going with Big Nanima so much that she tries to force her to agree with her by saying;

“Here people do not start alone in this apartment inaccessible, unmissed and unnoticed for weeks as I learn to happen in America.” (Haji, p. 115)

In this regard Nanima thinks that our culture is vice-versa to that of the West where she says here the case is different, here everybody has great importance you are known by your family, by your father, or your mother, and here what matters is who you are.

Here the issue is that although Saira's origins reflect she belongs to the East, she has been depicted in views that represent her as representing the West. Saira talks to Big Nanima and complains about why her mother is not like this.

“She expects that I should do something unbearable for me ‘Big Nanima’ “

In response to this Big Nanima provides her with a logical discourse;

“All of us require a guide to go by, if you have dumped the old paradigm completely, you will need to spend a considerable amount of time penning down a new paradigm then – that would be rather impossible.” (Haji 115)

Consequently, it could be argued that the “old script” is an expression of our culture and an indication of our ancestry. Otherwise we do not follow the rules and regulations of culture then we are confused about which way we need to go.

After Graduation in journalism, Saira decides not to get married and elopes with her cousin brother Mohsin to see the world against the will of her mother. They both work together, Saira with words and Mohsin with his camera, Mohsin captures images while Saira constructs stories being them a journalist.

“My friend Mohsin and I went around the globe, often the only whites in sight, the only people caring, he with his camera and I with my pen and paper.” (Haji 126)

Finally, she comes home after five years but unlike the earlier occasions her mother is not angry with her rather she is so worried for her daughter and asks her how she has traveled alone all over the world and how she had dared to take the risks. Her attitude towards her seems to be top-notch, she tells her ‘You are a little fearless girl.’

Her mother was on her deathbed and she regrets it because she used to waste her time merely telling her mother she appreciated her through the stories her mother can understand that she wasted days railing against her father for marrying an English girl when he was very old. Perhaps it was a mistake she would have wished she had done the other days with her father after all; he was human and was capable of making mistakes. What is more, after some powerful people die, Saira buries her mother, sister Ameena, and Big Nanima, and the lady turns completely different. On the other side she adapts to the third lady her father marries her Indian lady she has no hatred like her mother. Finally, the following lines uttered by Saira are noteworthy:

“We do. That’s what Mommy would want for us to do more of. Hope. And to try our best in being good and doing good because we’re afraid.” (Haji 165)

The story of Saira’s father attempting to emulate other cultures, and actively trying to attain an elevated identity is also represented by Nafisa haji’s novel where she tries to portray the harsh realities of a married woman who despite having her identity surrenders herself to the desire of her husband and his family members. Saira’s desire to become a journalist also represents her desire for an identity. She wants to go to Europe primarily to discover there, especially her family mysteries. To assess the identity of a Narrator, one is required to explore all the memories that concern one’s family and culture. She mentions this in the early part of the novel where she states that;

“Complexity has always troubled me, Simple explanation has always made me uneasy I suppose that is why I became a Journalist, For years I have been traveling to parts of the world looking for the details that were lost in obscurity, avoiding the details of my existence.” (Haji 15)

It is a personality that is perpetually in the search for new frontiers to conquer. She is concerned and never takes simple things seriously.

## **Conclusion**

To bring theoretical analysis to light, one might affirmatively assert that, having analyzed “The Writing on My Forehead” by Nafisa Haji in terms of the concepts developed by Bhabha, it is possible to assert that the novel indisputably contains elements of cultural hybridization. The novel reflects diaspora formation in the given society in which the basic issues that are described are displacement, the question of identity, alienation, and the



issues related to memories and the process of cultural fragmentation. It is perhaps, the author of this novel, Haji has hybrid genes, which may be that is why she has written this novel with a sentimental touch of successful autobiography. A remarkable use of the device in the novel is the intermingling of cultures affects the personalities, which in a way is annoying the characters. It is said that because 'they are far from their roots' – the origin is something that everyone cherishes and when a person is far from that origin, then they become confused. Sairah, Mohsin, Mehnaz, Ahmad's uncle, Saira's father, and mother all the characters of the novel are struggling in the cultural areolar world.

They are all depicted to be under the effect of hybridization, culture that is, the main character Saira is struggling with her issues due to her half identity. She was born in a foreign country far away from here; however, she originates from a Muslim family, from India and Pakistan.

It is very clear that modern society is positively influencing the personality of these characters and they begin to think in the modern ways to fit in that society. In this case, Saira works, goes out, and does all she feels like doing regardless of the consequences, empowered by the new spirit of modernism and individualism. Saira's mother always reminds her of her religion and the cultural values of the Muslim community and thus should not step out of these norms. Another event that has been mentioned in the novel is the 9/11 attack which is important because everyone in this world suffers from it and it leads to experiencing hatred between two people of different cultures.

backgrounds. In detail, many of the contemporary novels explored this great issue as well. This kind of attack is also referred to as a terrorist attack, and in essence, it is linked to Islam and Muslims. It got bad the image of Islam and Muslims was tarnished in front of the whole world and they were taken to be terrorists. Thus, it was clear that Muslims encountered enormous obstacles and prejudice in the West based on their race. This attack means that Muslims were being killed just because they had a certain background in terms of race, and Saira's sister Ameena was one of them. She died because she wore a hijab, and the hijab is related to Islam and its ideology.

The protagonist, Saira in the novel, in the novel, is confused and she travels to different countries with her cousin searching for her identity. She had this urge to do things on her own accord and she can by completely overcoming all warnings from her mother. However, towards the end of the fiction, she wakes up from her dreams and does what her mother wants her to do by following the sayings that her mother used to tell her. Thus, both the various characters and the reader are experiencing the problems of postcolonial cultural identity, such as the feeling of the loss of a homeland, the / ambivalent attachment to one's cultural background, an identity crisis as well as nostalgia. And I said it would be impossible for any person actually to retain their real character and individuality, there are always changes that occur affecting the individuals.

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