

Home is Where the Feet Are: A Diasporic Study of Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2025-13049030

Volume: 13

Issue: 4

Month: September

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 01.06.2025

Accepted: 29.07.2025

Published Online: 01.09.2025

Citation:

Muthulekha, J. "Home Is Where the Feet Are: A Diasporic Study of Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2025, pp. 33–38.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v13i4.9030>



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J. Muthulekha

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology
Vadapalani Campus, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2450-5244>

Abstract

Diasporic writing has garnered interest among literary audiences because it amplifies the voices of colonial individuals on a global stage. It advocates indigenous people's identity within their ancestral territory. The key themes included displacement and exile, regret for the past, identity crisis, alienation, belonging, culture shock, assimilation, and acculturation. V.S. Naipaul, Uma Parameswaran, Meena Alexander, and Yasmine Gooneratne were the most notable diasporic writers. In this paper, Yasmine Gooneratne's A Change of Skies has been taken up for study and it attempts to analyse the novel through the prism of diasporic studies. This paper begins with a succinct introduction to diaspora and diasporic literature, followed by an author introduction, a literature review, the research methodology employed, a synopsis of the novel, and a comprehensive discussion of the study. It concludes with an optimistic perspective on cultural adaptation and assimilation in the adopted land while also emphasising the potential for future research on this topic. Novel.

In this paper, three recurrent phases experienced by diasporic people, cultural shock, assimilation, and acculturation, have been used as research tools to elucidate the distinctions between traditionalists and assimilationists and conclude on an optimistic note regarding cultural hybridity, emphasising the significance of adaptation and assimilation in a new environment, as well as the role of multiculturalism in enabling diasporic individuals to lead fulfilling lives abroad, while also underscoring their emotional ties to their homeland.

This novel is a luminous debut that chronicles the adventures of the Sri Lankan couple, Bharat Mangala Devasinha, and his wife Navaranjini, as they settle in Australia. Bharat and Navaranjini had to accommodate the new culture at the initial stage of their arrival, but later started to embrace their new culture and lead a harmonious life in their adopted land. Acceptance serves as the superior remedy for expatriates seeking to alleviate their feelings of alienation, as illustrated by the author through her characters Barry and Jean. Thus, this study underscores the significance of assimilation and cultural hybridity while preserving their original identity. Future research may further investigate the diasporic literature through comparative analyses of South Asian diasporic experiences in various host nations, explore the identity formation of second-generation immigrants, and assess the transformative role of digital media in influencing diasporic consciousness and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Postcolonial Literature, Sri Lankan Literature, Australian Immigration, Migration, Alienation, Identity Crisis, Cultural Shock, Assimilation, Acculturation.

Introduction

Migration is not merely geographical but also an emotional upheaval and, as a consequence, it destroys or damages the very texture of life. Expatriates persist by alienation and displacement when they recall their past life in the native land. The self plays a crucial role in their lives; however, when exposed to new culture, language, and surroundings, they tend to lose their identity and have been threatened by the word belonging. There is always a look back in some way or another.

Diaspora and Diasporic Writings

The word diaspora is derived from Greek word; the word ‘dia’ refers “across” and the word “sperien” means “to scatter” (Cohen, 2008, p.1) and in Latin it refers to “dispersion” (p.178). This mostly illustrates the migration of individuals from one location to another. Various factors may contribute, including employment, globalisation, marriage, conflict, and other considerations. The diasporic literature primarily addresses cultural clashes, acceptance, assimilation, and acculturation. Diasporic literature emphasises multiculturalism, exile, the expatriate’s pursuit of identity, the quest for belonging, and the profound connection to their homeland, alongside the challenges of adapting to a new environment and culture. Notable figures in diasporic literature include V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Toni Morrison, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Yasmine Gooneratne. Despite the analogous themes, the authors diverge from their perspectives and stylistic approaches. Yasmine Gooneratne’s own experience as an Australian immigrant is a contributing factor to the success of her debut novel, *A Change of Skies*. This paper deals with the protagonists’ Bharat and Navarajini’s exploration of their identities in a foreign place, and further underscores the significance of assimilating and adapting to a new culture while preserving their local cultural values.

Yasmine Gooneratne

Yasmine Gooneratne was born in Srilanka, had good education in Britain and currently she is residing in Australia. Her experience as an expatriate is reflected in her presentation of Asian and European countries. Her vast experience in both worlds helped her portray the two different worlds in an exquisite manner.

Review of Literature

Some researchers have concentrated on the challenges and issues faced by immigrants, while others have sought to emphasise cultural dissonance and conflict within the chosen work. Technological innovation and globalisation have motivated cross-border movements in South Asian societies. Keeping this in mind, Singh (2017) argues that technological development and new opportunities have triggered cross-border movements. The immigrants therefore

keep on navigating the permeable boundaries of “filiation and affiliation” (131). The diaspora literature too reflects “these contradictory allegiances” (p.131) of transnational characters, as manifested in the novels of Gooneratne. He further asserts that the novelist revisits the experiences of immigrants from the standpoint of the diasporic consciousness formed by colonial/postcolonial familiarities of the home country Srilanka and unfamiliarity ties of the settling Island Australia.

Research Design

Research Objectives

- To examine the diasporic experiences of identity crises, cultural shock, assimilation, and acculturation, as shown in *A Change of Skies*.
- To analyse how protagonists traverse cultural conflicts and negotiate dual identities within a global framework.
- To examine the representation of traditionalism and assimilation through protagonists’ real experiences.
- To emphasise the importance of cultural hybridity and adaptation as mechanisms for survival and self-reconstruction in heterogeneous environments.
- To enhance the broader discourse of South Asian diasporic literature through a concentrated analysis of Gooneratne’s novel.
- To propose future trajectories for diasporic studies, especially regarding the transformation of identity creation in digital and global contexts.

Research Questions

- In what manner do Yasmine Gooneratne depict the psychological and emotional aspects of displacement and cultural dislocation in *A Change of Skies*?
- How do the characters encounter and react to culture shock and how do these events influence their diasporic identity?
- In what manner are the conflicts between traditionalist ideals and assimilationist inclinations portrayed in the novel?
- What function does cultural hybridity serve in facilitating characters’ reconciliation of their past and current identities?

- In what ways does *A Change of Skies* embody the overarching themes prevalent in South Asian diasporic writing, specifically concerning belonging, nostalgia, and adaptation?
- What insights does the novel provide regarding the formation of diasporic identities within modern global and heterogeneous societies?

Methodology Adopted

This study presents a thematic analysis of the narrative, examining significant problems, such as cultural shock, assimilation, and adaptation within the novel. These fundamental themes were employed to highlight the distinction between traditionalists and assimilationists regarding diasporic experiences. The author illustrates Bharat's traditionalist perspective on cultural shock and his initial reluctance to adapt upon arriving in Australia, while through the character Navaranjini, he emphasizes the necessity of assimilation and its significance in fostering happiness and prosperity in their new environment by the conclusion of the novel. Subsequently, Bharat recognises the imperative of cultural assimilation, adjusts to his surroundings, and derives a sense of belonging and identity from this new environment. They exemplify the fusion of both Asiatic and Australian flavours, cultivating their Asiatic palate to suit Australian taste. This finding demonstrates that anyone can thrive in a new country by embracing it with openness and compassion.

Synopsis of the Novel

The novel centres on the life of a Sri Lankan couple, Bharat Mangala Devasinha, a dedicated young specialist in Asian Linguistics, and his wife Navranjini, who travels to Australia as Bharat assumes a five-year position at the Southern Cross University. Initially experiencing cultural shock throughout their stay in Australia, they managed to cope and adapt to the local culture to thrive in an alien environment. During their adaptation process, they adopted the names Barrie and Jennie, established a new restaurant, introduced continental cuisine to the Australian palate, and translated the *Kamasutra*, selling numerous copies of the book. They assimilated into the new society to such a degree that when they visited Sri Lanka on vacation,

they yearned for Australia. They ultimately cultivate an affinity for the country and decide to stay there.

Cultural Negotiation and Adaptation

Gooneratne's narration vividly stresses multiculturalism and the process by which protagonists adapt their new culture without losing their original identity. The protagonist's readiness to accept a change and their sudden embrace of their adopted land serve as a key theme of the novel. Loss of identity, alienation, and nostalgia are the inherent and inevitable traits of diasporic individuals which the author vividly portrayed at the initial stage of their arrival and shows the process of adaptation and acculturation they undergo at a later stage. Their journey reflects displacement, cultural hybridity, and multifaceted identity, and redefines their identity in the adopted land. They marked their footprints on the new land that they embraced.

From Alienation to Assimilation: Navigating the Diasporic Experience

The novel clearly portrays the emotional imbalance that the protagonists experienced in the initial state. Their fear of loss and alienation transforms into a sense of joy and belonging. Gooneratne depicts the emotional turmoil faced by immigrants and portrays how it affects their psyches and selves. The couple handled the situation in bold and symbolised resilience and a sense of belonging. Like traditionalists, they did not drown in the nostalgia of the past. Their tragicomic experiences highlight the fact that migration often involves both suffering and adaptation.

When they landed Australia, Bharat sees their new land as was "a black pink space shaped like the head of a scotch terrier with its ears pricked up and its square nose permanently pointed westwards, towards Britain" (*A Change of Skies*, 11). The novel abounds in such subtle humours.

Although they faced many difficulties in coping with Australian culture in the beginning, they made up their minds to transform themselves over the next five years. Their readiness to change is the ultimate solution for their loss of identity, alienation, and trauma in the adopted land.

Like all expatriates, Bharat and Navaranjini underwent various phases of cultural assimilation. The first phase of cultural shock and confrontation occurred soon after they landed in Australia. Asians always choose to occupy the back seat of the taxi either through 'self-importance among men' or 'modesty among women' (*A Change of Skies*, 59). However, in Australia, WHEN IN A TAXI, ALWAYS SIT IN FRONT NEXT TO THE DRIVER AND TALK PLEASANTLY TO HIM AS IF GO AN EQUAL, NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT THIS MIGHT BE FOR YOU TO DO (59). Bharat duly notes this down, so he does not repeat his first mistake, having tried to occupy the back seat out of such a habit. Bharat and Navaranjini have been well informed that there is nothing in Australia except kangaroos and sheep and "oh" tennis courts (*A Change of Skies*, 18). "Australians are drunken foul mouthed and crude" (18). "The meeting with Sandra Coquella comes as a pleasant surprise; Sandra is an Australian-refined and genuinely interested in Sri Lankan and its history. Bharat's sister Vera also writes to him from New York "there is nothing there but kholas, kangaroos, and sheep, and I think they called them Wombats" (*A Change of Skies*, 33).

A brief reference to the White Australia Policy has also been incorporated. Confronted with this evidence, Bharat and Navaranjini are already prepared for what awaits them in Australia. Their first encounter with the Australian landscape surprises Navaranjini, as she observes the bustling traffic, decals on the backs of vehicles, and a large monster truck driven by an auburn-haired operator. Startling slogans such as "ASIANS OUT" (*A Change of Skies*, 14) and "BASH A PAKI A DAY" (*A Change of Skies*, 14) heighten their unease and deepen their sense of discomfort.

Hence, the hailstorm they experienced for the first time becomes 'stoning' (*A Change of Skies*, 15) against them by the Aussies. When their neighbour appears with 'Glad Wrap' (*A Change of Skies* 16) to mend their broken windows they realise that Aussies are not brutes, not is Australia a "cultural desert" (*A Change of Skies*, 17). They cross the first phase, enter the phase of acceptance, and become aware of reality.

Acceptance, in exile writings, refers to adjustment with the new culture, new land and new language. Individuals respond in various ways when exposed to new cultures. When Bharat persists in the sense of 'belonging', he tries to adopt a new culture. In one of his letters to his mother, Bharat readily admits his problem "how to maintain our cultural identity in the face of displacement and expatriation?" (*A Change of Skies*, 33). He has to change his image, and the process starts. In seeking ways to be assimilated into their new surroundings, a change in name seems to be the first to Bharat.

Bharat changed his image, and Navaranjini blamed it on Prof. Blackstone and his radio talk. The comic encounters between Blackstone and Navaranjini represent the beginning of cultural assimilation. Mangala Devasinha which poetically combines words meaning "wedding day" with a complimentary description of the person being an all-conquering lion is first shortened to Mangal Dy and then Mundy, thus retaining neither the sound nor the sense of the original name. Bharat's grandfather named him as - "Bharat" that represents India but this name was transformed into Barry which in Sinhalese refers to "impotent" (*A Change of Skies*, 25) whereas Navarajini's name that is abbreviated into Jean signifies "remains" or "drugs" (*A Change of Skies*, 26).

Both Bharat and Edward had many experiences that were comparable to one another. Bharat writes to his mother one may change his name and image "but there are certain things which can never alter and among them are devotion.... I feel for my homeland and family. Edward writes in his diary. "He who crosses the ocean may change the skies above him but not the colour of his soul" (*A Change of Skies*, 22). Nostalgia for their homeland remains unerasable by expatriates.

Usually, assimilation depends on the economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds of the people. It is often thought to be in the interest of the elites more than the interest of the weak and consequently results in conflict between the traditionalist and assimilationist among the scattered community.

The traditionalist dreams of their past life in their ancestral land and resists accepting the adopted land. They dwell obsessively on rich memories of the

past. When Edward goes to Australia, he is alarmed by cultural confrontation. He was unable to adjust to the new culture. Even though he lives there for a brief period, his acceptance is only passive. When he is entangled between the two worlds, he chooses his homeland to Australia. He left Australia and led a prosperous life in Sri Lanka. Similar experiences were experienced by Bharat and Navaranjini, who prepared to lead a better life in Australia. He leaves Australia and leads a prosperous life in Sri Lanka. Bharat, on the other hand, is aware that he does not possess the same level of effortless acceptance of another culture as Navaranjini and Edward.

Simultaneously, Jean established a vibrant cultural centre that integrates a restaurant with a culinary academy, enabling individuals to acquire cooking skills and cultivate appreciation for various cuisines. This enterprise serves as a genuine convergence of civilisations, where cuisine, language, and narratives unite individuals; Jean's metamorphosis is significant. This shift in geographical skies inspired a deep change in her soul. Now, enhanced by her new surroundings, she is no longer only adapting—she is actively influencing the cultural world. Empowered and motivated, she endeavoured to broaden the perspectives of her fellow Australians, cultivating a more open, inquisitive, and interconnected society.

With the support of his friend Mr. Koyako, Barry Mundy started to publish a book named *The Guide* and, in the past, he published a biography of his grandfather Edward named *Lifeline*. By composing *The Guide* at this time, Barry believes he will be advancing his family's longstanding heritage of translation and interpretation into a new nation. *The Guide* will definitely be helpful to those who yearn to migrate to Australia.

The mythological story told in the prologue and epilogue also plays a vital role in this novel. The prologue narrates the story of a prince who marries the beautiful daughter of a merchant: Her beauty is inexplicable yet she remains dumb before her husband. The prince doubts her mysterious behaviour and tries to discover the truth. One day, he pretends to be asleep and watches her wife's actions.

The latter part of the story is described in the epilogue. The lady goes to the palace of Indira Saba and sings sweetly before him. When Indira gives her

the option to choose either her husband or celestial palace, she prefers to stay with her husband rather than the eternal palace. The story concludes with deliberate acceptance of the lady.

Conclusion

Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies* is a poignant literary depiction of the diasporic experience, highlighting the emotional, psychological, and cultural obstacles encountered by immigrants as they navigate cultural transitions. Despite its light-hearted and often funny tone, the work confronts the profound topics of alienation, identity crises, and cultural clashes. The book chronicles Bharat and Navaranjini's journey, illustrating the initial cultural shock faced by diasporic persons and their subsequent progression towards assimilation and acculturation. The evolution of characters from cultural outsiders to engaged members of a multicultural society illustrates the potential for forging a harmonious identity that respects both their native and adopted cultures. Their endeavours to modify Sri Lankan customs for the Australian milieu, encompassing culinary alterations and the translation of culturally important literature, such as the *Kamasutra*, exemplify the phenomenon of cultural hybridity. This hybridity, rather than compromise, is seen as a constructive and empowering condition that allows diasporic individuals to flourish emotionally and socially in their new surroundings. Acceptance, exemplified by the characters Barry and Jean, is seen as a crucial method for surmounting feelings of displacement. Gooneratne advocates adaptation as a dynamic negotiation of identity rather than a negation of the past, facilitating the coexistence of multiple cultural affinities. The novel encourages readers to accept reality while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness, thereby promoting a harmonious and significant diasporic life. This study confirms that diasporic literature serves as an essential arena for examining the conflicts and resolutions between tradition and modernity, belonging and alienation, and self and society. Future studies should investigate related themes, including language and power, gender roles in diasporic families, intellectual displacement, and identity formation in second-generation individuals. In a time characterised by

rising transnational migration, such studies are crucial for comprehending how individuals traverse and redefine their identities across cultural and geographical divides.

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Author Details

Dr. J. Muthulekha, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Vadapalani Campus, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, **Email ID:** muthulekhaj2@gmail.com