

A Single Structure of Return: Analysing Gender and Class in Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*

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Outward migration has long been central to discussions in Indian Diaspora literature. Return, however, occupies a marginal position; as a result, it remains understudied. This paper reads two homecomings that share only their direction: Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, who, after her husband's death, splits her year between Calcutta and the United States, and Biju in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, robbed on the road home and returned to his father in a woman's nightgown. The two returns pit a woman against a man. While Ashima's homecoming seems to turn on gender, Biju's seems dominated by class. This paper reads their returns through the interlock of gender and class and shows the two working as one structure, not separate forces. Ashima's widowhood results in her return, and her sound class position gives it the form of an oscillation. On Biju, the GNLF men rob him of his savings on his way home to Kalimpong; he covers his nakedness with a woman's nightgown, losing his money and his manhood together. Gogol never returns, and the paper makes no claims about him. The judge, stripped of his manhood by his Cambridge years, proves the structure is not new, but older than Biju by a generation. This paper reads the difference as the work of one structure — gender and class. It draws on William Safran, Stuart Hall, Vijay Mishra and Avtar Brah for the diaspora frame; it also uses the intersectional framework of Kimberlé Crenshaw and of Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis in a supporting role.

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Introduction

Existing scholarship on the Indian diaspora has paid more attention to migrants' departures than

to their returns. When critics discuss return, they typically treat it as the story's endpoint, not as a subject that warrants independent study. William

Safran's account is telling: he calls return eschatological, a utopia held against the conditions of an actual diasporic life (94). Ashima packing suitcases for decades in a Boston kitchen and Biju coming home to his father in a woman's nightgown shatter that abstract view. When a character in New Diaspora fiction actually returns, the arrival settles nothing. The central problem is not whether a return happens, but the specific shape of that return.

This paper reads the homecoming of Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* against the homecoming of Biju in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Ashima returns home slowly and by choice. After her husband dies, she splits her year, spending "six months of her life in India, six months in the States" (J. Lahiri 275), and she crosses with an American passport in her wallet (276). Biju returns in one afternoon and against his will. Robbed of everything on the road to Kalimpong, he covers himself in a woman's nightgown, "he put on the nightgown" (Desai 349), and returns to his father with nothing. Ashima settles into a life split between two countries. Biju's homecoming is a sudden collapse. Both returns are driven by the same structure: the interlock of gender and class.

These two characters, Ashima and Biju, are chosen intentionally for this research because they form the basis of the argument. At first glance, Ashima and Biju together seem to suggest that gender explains the woman while class explains the man. It pits a woman against a man, the two cases where treating gender and class as separate looks most convincing. In both homecomings, the structure of gender and class is at work. Ashima's return takes its oscillating shape from class. For Biju, class defeat arrives as the loss of his manhood. Gogol has no homeland to return to and never goes back; he is the limit of the claim.

The characters' returns are predicated on gender and class. This paper reads both homecomings as a single interlocking structure, not two separable forces. New Diaspora Studies and postcolonial theory carry the primary weight of

the framework and rest on Safran, Hall, Mishra, Brah, Cohen and Clifford. Intersectional theory enters only in a supporting role through Crenshaw and through Anthias and Yuval-Davis to explain why the two divisions must be read as one. The sections that follow review the state of the criticism, define repatriation within the conceptual framework, examine Ashima's return and then Biju's, compare the two, and close on the force of the comparison and the limits of the claim.

The Namesake and The Inheritance of Loss: The Critical Reception

Ranasinha's *Contemporary Diasporic South Asian Women's Fiction*, the most comprehensive comparative study in the field, takes up both novels; however it reads them along separate lines. She sets Desai and Lahiri beside a wider group of diasporic South Asian women writers. On the judge, she joins gender and class without strain: his Cambridge education, she notes, is paid for by "the trading and commodification of potential brides" (Ranasinha 71). For the judge, she reads gender and class together; for Biju she keeps only class. She reads the cook's son through class, race, and undocumented labour, and closes on an endpoint of thwarted mobility: a migrant who crosses geographic borders but never those of class (82). The two novels sit inside the most detailed comparison in the field, yet the single structure this paper describes is not among its findings.

Existing scholarship on Biju's homecoming either overlooks the nightgown scene or reads it without a gender lens. Sabo, in "Disjunctures and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," reads the return as a labourer's defeat. She sees a man who crosses borders of geography but not of class, and she never stops on the garment (387–88). Khandait, in "Reclamation of Inheritance: Biju's Homecoming in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," treats the robbery as a cleansing that sends Biju home in a "purest Indian form" (178). The woman's dress on his body contradicts the claim. Jackson, in "Globalization, Diaspora, and Cosmopolitanism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*," sets class

as the only measure from the beginning: “not by nationality or ethnicity or even gender, but by social class” (32). She then calls the reunion the book’s “most affirmative moment” (38). Nanda, in “Of Cityscapes, Affect and Migrant Subjectivities in Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss*,” comes nearer than the rest. She applies “skewed masculinity” to the judge (123), quotes the nightgown in full, and admits that Biju looks ridiculous in it. Yet she still names the ending “a new and more affirmative subjectivity” (130). The dress she mentions plays no part in her conclusion.

On Ashima, the existing criticism takes into account both gender and class, but does not bring the two together. Alfonso-Forero reads her as a transnational subject and notes the class behind her mobility, observing that her “class status affords her the privilege of mobility” (Alfonso-Forero 857). She reads Ashima’s late movement between countries, though, as an opportunity, not as a return with a set shape:

This rootless and nomadic existence is approached not as something alienating or empty, but instead as an opportunity to enjoy both the life she long ago left behind and the one she strived to create over the course of over thirty years. Neither the U.S. nor India can claim her; she claims both lands as her own. (859)

S. Lahiri, too, reads the ending as a commingling of two cultures, with the hyphen becoming an “and” that completes an identity (135). Both critics bring gender and class into their readings, but neither considers how they affect the timing or form of Ashima’s return.

Across the criticism of these novels, gender and class are treated as separate aspects of the two characters, even though the novels bring them into closer relation. In Biju’s case, the class reading pushes gender aside. For Ashima, gender and class are named but left on separate lines. This paper therefore reads *The Namesake* and *The Inheritance of Loss* together. Criticism already records the pressure of class on Ashima and the force of gender on Biju. The advance lies in recognising that each term already carries the other within it, and that only reading

Ashima’s return and Biju’s together makes the single structure visible.

Defining Repatriation: The Theoretical Framework

Indentured labour carried the old Indian diaspora abroad with little prospect of return. The new diaspora that followed is a voluntary migration, equipped with citizenship papers, a bank balance and the standing option of a return flight (Cohen 18). Ashima and Biju both belong to this later group, though they occupy its opposite edges: she, the wife in a professor’s household; he, an undocumented worker in a restaurant basement. The two novels make that class difference within a single diaspora visible. The question their returns raise is not whether they can return but what the return costs them.

In law, repatriation means a citizen permanently resettling in the country of the passport; it is a bureaucratic and one-time occurrence. This paper uses the word in a different sense. It means a diasporic life oriented toward home, a direction that can be fully carried out, forced, or refused, and that may or may not end in the body actually crossing back. Homesickness is not enough; repatriation begins only when the life itself changes course. Ashima longed for Calcutta for thirty years; the change comes after her husband’s death. She books the ticket and begins the oscillation of half the year in each country. Biju’s turn is forced on him, stripped and sent up the mountain road. Gogol never turns homeward as he has no separate homeland. The definition still covers him: the return that never takes place.

Avtar Brah untangles two longings usually run together: the “homing desire” and the desire for an actual homeland. Home, for her, is a “mythic place of desire,” a site one cannot truly return to even when the ground remains open to a visit (177, 188). Homing desire can burn for decades without a return; repatriation begins the moment life changes direction. Ashima’s homesickness across thirty years in Massachusetts stays homing desire; her decision to divide the year between two countries is the repatriation.

Diaspora theory has long suspected that a return of this kind can never be complete. Hall gives the reason: identity is “a production which is never complete” (392), a becoming as much as a being (394), so no fixed origin waits in the homeland to be reclaimed and no literal going home is possible (399). Mishra goes further, treating any “engineered return to a purist condition” as a contradiction (432). Ashima and Biju both cannot complete a full return, just as predicted by the theory. The theory, however, explains little about either, because the shortfalls themselves look nothing alike. Ashima finds Calcutta foreign even as she settles into the oscillation of two homes; Biju reaches his father with nothing, the homeland unable to restore what the hostland took. Both fall short as the theory predicts, but the two shortfalls look nothing alike. That difference is what this paper examines.

Crenshaw’s intersectional theory helps explore the question the diaspora approach leaves open: why do two incomplete returns take such different forms? It helps explain this difference without replacing the present framework. The principle originates with Crenshaw. Writing about Black women in antidiscrimination law, she maintains that the intersectional experience is “greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 140). Reading Ashima through gender alone, or Biju through class alone, would miss the single structure that determines each return. This paper takes a principle from Crenshaw, not a framework; New Diaspora Studies and postcolonial theory still do the main work.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis extend the discussion to race, gender and class. They reject the double- and triple-burden models, which treat a woman’s disadvantages as separate burdens that can be counted and added together. For them, these divisions work through one another, so their effects cannot be understood separately. Race, gender and class, they write, “cannot be treated as different layers of oppression” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 70). They explain how this works in practice:

At the empirical level it is important to explore the different experiences of men as against women; racially dominant as against racialized women; working-class as against middle-class women, in terms of their articulation and intersection and not only mechanistically, since each division is practised in the context of the others. (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 79)

The phrase “each division is practised in the context of the others” offers the basis for reading Ashima and Biju together. Ashima’s widowhood and her class standing are one fact about her return, never a pair. Biju’s stolen money and his borrowed nightgown merge into one experience instead of an addition.

Mohanty warns against the idea that diasporic women can be grasped through a single experience. She challenges the notion of the “average third world woman,” a figure created by treating women’s oppression as the same across every class and culture (Mohanty 337). Ashima could easily be flattened into that figure, a Bengali wife carried abroad and homesick for Calcutta. This paper studies how Ashima’s experience differs from that of the other diasporic women. Mohanty states the claim plainly:

Practices which characterize women’s status and roles vary according to class. Women are constituted as women through the complex interaction between class, culture, religion and other ideological institutions and frameworks. They are not “women”—a coherent group—solely on the basis of a particular economic system or policy. (Mohanty 344)

In this reading, class cannot be separated from gender.

Clifford points out that diasporic experience is “always gendered” (313). He warns that an approach centred on displacement rather than dwelling can make the male migrant the tacit norm, leaving women out of the picture. This paper takes that point in another direction. Seeing the male experience as gendered changes how Biju’s homecoming is understood. Biju’s homecoming is more than an economic defeat;

it is likewise defined by gender. Clifford also describes diasporic women as living “between patriarchies” (314). His discussion leaves open the question of how gender shapes the experience of return.

Ashima: The Oscillating Return

At the end of the novel, Ashima decides how she will live the rest of her life. The decision occurs about a year after Ashoke’s death, as the house on Pemberton Road is being sold and she prepares the last party there. She is alone for the first time since losing him, and in that solitude she settles on a life divided between India and the United States:

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States. It is a solitary, somewhat premature version of the future she and her husband had planned when he was alive. In Calcutta, Ashima will live with her younger brother, Rana, and his wife, and their two grown, as yet unmarried daughters, in a spacious flat in Salt Lake. There she will have a room, the first in her life intended for her exclusive use. (J. Lahiri 275)

The passage reveals two important aspects of Ashima’s return. First, the return is “premature,” a future Ashima and Ashoke had planned together, but that is brought forward by his death. Widowhood has made that future possible earlier than they had intended. Second, the return is not a single move home. Ashima divides the year between India and the United States, spending six months in each, so that her life moves between the two countries. The room in Salt Lake, “the first in her life intended for her exclusive use,” brings the two details together: it is a room for a widow living alone, but also part of a spacious, comfortable flat. Gender and class meet in this small detail.

Gender sets the timing of Ashima’s return. Early in the novel, exhausted after Gogol’s birth, she tells Ashoke that she cannot “raise Gogol alone in this country” and asks to return home (33). For three decades, that wish remains unrealised. Ashima arrived in America as a young wife, accompanying her husband on his fellowship,

and her life as a wife and mother leaves no separate path for her return. She lives within that role until Ashoke’s death, which finally makes her return possible. On the last morning, she looks in the mirror and sees “a widow’s face,” though for most of her life, she reminds herself, it had been a wife’s (278).

The life Ashima has built in America gives her a different way to go home. A return to India could have meant a single, final journey home, as it did for many migrants of the earlier diaspora. Instead, she can move between India and the United States. She travels “with an American passport,” and keeps “her Massachusetts driver’s license, her social security card” (276), the documents she needs to move between the two countries. In Calcutta, she has the spacious Salt Lake flat and a room of her own. Thirty years of a professor’s salary have given her a settled life at both ends of the journey. That security makes it possible for her to divide the year between the two countries instead of choosing one as her permanent home.

Gender and class each illuminate part of Ashima’s return, but neither fully explains it. Together, they form one structure. The household shaped Ashima’s position as a dependent wife. She came to America on her husband’s fellowship and followed the customs that had ended her schooling. That same household also provided the professional and material security that accumulated over the years, including the house, citizenship, and the Salt Lake flat. Gender determined when she could go; class shaped the form her return took. Both belong to the same life, seen from two sides. Her return therefore answers to gender and class together; neither term, taken alone, accounts for its form. Her American passport indicates both her class position and her changed position as a widow.

By the time she leaves, the America she once wanted to escape has become her second home. On the last morning, the narrator lists what she will miss:

For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library,

the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed . . . She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. (279)

The things Ashima will miss show how much of her life she has built in America. Her library job, her friendships, her parties, and her home with her daughter are part of the life her class position made possible. These attachments give her a life worth keeping in America and a home to return to in India. Her return therefore takes the form of an oscillation between two homes, not a final departure from one to the other.

Gogol never returns to India. Born in Massachusetts, he encounters India as a tourist. His first time there is a childhood train trip to Agra with his sister, a tourist's visit, not a homecoming (84). The novel gives him no return. At his mother's last party, he remains upstairs, apart from the noise, and opens at last the book of Gogol stories his father had given him: "he starts to read" (291). For Gogol, India remains a place of visits, not a homeland, and so there is no return for gender and class to shape. His non-return marks the limit of the argument. The argument concerns the form taken by returns when they occur. It does not suggest that every diasporic life ends in a return home.

Biju: The Ironic Return

Biju's homecoming reverses his migration: all he earned is taken from him on the road. His years in New York's restaurant basements leave him with a little money, which he hides in his shoes. On the last road to Kalimpong, the men in the jeep strip him one item at a time:

"But give us your wallet and remove your shoes before you go." He turned around again. "His belt is also nice," said another of the men, eyeing the leather. "Such nice clothes you get in America. The quality is very good." Biju handed over his wallet. He took off his belt. "You're forgetting your shoes." He took them off. Under fake soles were his savings. "Your jacket." And when his denim jacket was off,

they decided even his jeans and T-shirt were desirable. (Desai 348)

The robbery takes away everything Biju had earned through his years abroad. His wallet, the savings hidden under the fake soles, his belt, and the American clothes the robbers admire are all taken from him until he "stood in his white underpants" (348). The earnings of those years are gone within an afternoon on the hillside. The man who left home to become a provider comes home "with far less than he'd ever had" (349).

By this point, Biju has lost his money, savings, and clothes. The loss of his money becomes a blow to his manhood. Left naked and jeered at, Biju covers himself with the only thing at hand, a garment pulled from a hedge: "He put on the nightgown. It had large, faded pink flowers and yellow, puffy sleeves, ruffles at the neck and hem. It must have been carefully picked from a pile at the bazaar. Why had he left? Why had he left? He'd been a fool." (349).

The simple statement "He put on the nightgown" draws attention to Biju's agency even within a moment of humiliation. His only cover is a woman's nightgown, with faded pink flowers and ruffles at the neck. His economic loss is also a loss of manhood. The savings gone from his shoes and the ruffles at his throat belong to the same moment. The same robbery that empties his shoes dresses him as a woman, so that Biju is defeated as a provider and as a man in a single stroke.

Biju's homecoming also needs to be explored through gender; this dimension has received little attention in the existing criticism. Criticism places his defeat within class and migration, but does not consider how the defeat affects his sense of himself as a man. Nanda's discussion is particularly relevant here: she uses the term "skewed masculinity" to describe the judge (123), quotes the nightgown in full, and notes Biju's ridiculous appearance, yet concludes with "a new and more affirmative subjectivity" (Nanda 130). Nanda applies the idea of skewed masculinity to the judge, but does not extend it to her reading of Biju in the nightgown. Taken

together, these details show that Biju's class defeat is experienced as a loss of masculine standing. The irony of his return lies in this connection. He comes home after trying to become a provider, only to return stripped of the possessions that marked that role and dressed in a garment that humiliates him as a man.

The same pattern appears a generation earlier, in the judge. The judge, the cook's employer and a member of the declining elite, rises through a colonial education, and the ascent costs him his sense of self. At Cambridge he becomes a stranger to his own body, finding "his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar" (Desai 45). He comes to "envy the English" and to "loathe Indians" (131), working at an Englishness that leaves him alienated from both sides. His mimicry becomes a loss of manhood, as his efforts to become English estrange him from his own identity. He turns this self-disgust on Nimi when she takes the puff and powders her own breasts (182). The incident shows how the wound of his colonial self-alienation carries into his marriage. A generation before Biju, and at the opposite end of the class scale, the structure of gender and class is at work: class ascent is lived as a loss of manhood and then displaced as violence against a wife.

The judge's story provides an earlier instance of the connection between class and manhood that appears in Biju's homecoming. The judge loses his manhood through his colonial ascent and takes his frustration out on Nimi; Biju loses his through economic decline and is sent home in a woman's dress. The two men stand at opposite ends of the class scale, and reach the same end by opposite routes. The judge's colonial ascent and Biju's failed migration give the same structure two different forms: the powder and the nightgown.

Ashima and Biju: Class, Gender and the Shape of Return

Ashima returns by choice, with a passport in her wallet and a room waiting in Salt Lake. Biju returns under duress, empty-handed and in a borrowed dress. Ashima's journey has been

planned over months and leads her between two comfortable homes. Biju's return takes place in an afternoon and ends on a hillside with nothing. The widow and the labour-migrant seem to belong to different books.

Ashima and Biju have very different homecomings, but neither can be explained by gender or class alone. In both novels, gender and class work together to shape the form of the return. Ashima's widowhood determines when she can return, while the security of a professor's household allows her to move between two homes; the timing and the shape of her return come from the same life. For Biju, the loss of his savings and the loss of his manhood occur in the same event: the theft leaves him without his money, and the woman's dress leaves him humiliated. Their outcomes are very different, but both returns are determined by the same relation between gender and class.

The two returns challenge the assumption that gender explains the woman and class explains the man. These two returns reverse that pattern. In Ashima's case, class does the work criticism usually misses: it gives her return its oscillating form, while gender determines when she can return. In Biju's case, gender does the work criticism usually misses: it gives his class ruin the shape of a woman's dress, while class produces the ruin itself. The woman's homecoming is shaped by the class, and man's homecoming is impacted by gender. This reversal becomes clear only when the two returns are analysed together.

The comparison between Ashima's and Biju's homecomings does the analytical work. This paper varies gender by comparing a woman with a man, the two returns where the usual split between gender and class seems most convincing. The point does not depend on treating Ashima and Biju as equivalent subjects. It depends on what the two returns reveal about the relation between gender and class: each return brings the category usually associated with the other to the centre of the analysis. For Ashima, it is class, the category usually assigned to the man, that gives her return its form; for Biju, it is gender, the category usually assigned to

the woman, that gives his defeat its shape. Treating gender and class as separate forces cannot explain the reversal in these two homecomings.

Gogol never returns to India. The paper accounts for returns that happen; it makes no claim about a life that never returns. The judge, a colonial generation before Biju, shows that the relation between class and manhood has an earlier history. His education at Cambridge alienates him from his Indian identity and leaves him estranged from his own sense of manhood. He later directs that frustration towards Nimi. The paper does not claim that every diasporic life returns home, only that where a return occurs, its form is produced through gender and class.

Conclusion

Ashima and Biju return home under very different conditions, but gender and class shape their return. Ashima's return is timed by widowhood and determined by class into an oscillation, a year split in two, made possible by

the American passport in her wallet (J. Lahiri 276). Biju's is a single stroke of ruin: robbed of the savings hidden in his shoes and left to cover himself with a woman's nightgown (Desai 349). His economic defeat is also a loss of manhood. Together, the two cases show that gender and class act together in moulding these returns. The reversal makes this relation clear: on the woman, class does the work one expects from gender; on the man, gender does the work one expects from class.

Return, in these novels, is not simply the completion of a diasporic journey. Both Ashima and Biju reach home, but their arrivals do not carry the same meaning. Their different circumstances give each return a different form. In the New Diaspora, return is not a single event that can be marked as success or failure. Its form is produced through the interlock of gender and class. The question is therefore not only whether the diasporic subject returns, but what form that return takes, what it costs, who bears that cost, and what the homeland gives back.

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