

Between Two Shores: Cultural Adaptation, Hybrid Identity, and the Assertion of Selfhood in Mitali Perkins's *Monsoon Summer* and *You Bring the Distant Near*

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Abstract

*Mitali Perkins plays a vital role in contemporary young adult literature. She portrays the interior geography of cultural displacement with rare emotional precision. Perkins's salient novels *Monsoon Summer* and *You Bring the Distant Near* are renowned and are often considered twins in the second-generation immigrant experience. The discourse on received memory comes not from their ancestors but from their current lived experiences in the USA.*

This article analyses how Perkins conceives cultural adaptation not as a twofold choice between adaptation and conservation, but as an organic, deeply personal process through which young protagonists build their own hybrid identities. Based on theories of third space, hybridity, and diaspora identity, the article argues that Perkins's fiction captures the capacity of young people to honour ancestral roots while asserting an irreducibly individual selfhood – a selfhood that belongs fully to neither culture yet is enriched by both. This article demonstrates how Perkins represents generational rigidities and emotional alienation within immigrant families as fundamental aspects of identity formation. The protagonists experience cultural in-betweenness when they are forced to mediate between familial expectations and personal ambitions. Perkins seldom presents hybridity as a crisis; instead, she transforms it into a site of creative self-fashioning and emotional resilience. Through everyday experiences involving friendship, education, romance, and family obligations, the novels confirm how diasporic youth gradually build fluid identities that resist fixed cultural boundaries.

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This article examines how cultural adaptation and selfhood assertion function as permeating themes in both novels, thereby highlighting the changing aspirations of young adult immigrants in the USA using the theory of third space. It situates her fiction within the theoretical framework of Bhabha's third space, Stuart Hall's production of diasporic identity, and Du Bois's double consciousness. Through close textual analysis, the article shows that Perkins's protagonists do not choose between cultures; instead, they build new, hybrid identities that belong to neither tradition yet are enriched by both.

Keywords: cultural adaptation, hybrid identity, diaspora, Young Adult Fiction, third space, double consciousness, South Asian-American Literature, Mitali Perkins.

Introduction

The phenomenon termed 'cultural displacement' is the state of carrying one culture within oneself while living in another, and it is a prominent feature of contemporary diasporic life. The condition is rarely simple and never fully resolved, yet millions of individuals negotiate it every day, often in silence. This negotiation is especially acute for second-generation immigrants, the children born or raised between two cultural worlds, who must construct their identities not from a single lucid tradition but from the creative resistance between competing inheritances. This idea is one of the most prominent themes in Young Adult (YA) literature, especially Young Adult (YA) Fiction.

Young Adult (YA) literature has also been called adolescent literature, teen novels, and tween fiction. In the view of Nilsen and Donelson, it is generally intended for readers who are neither children nor adults. They define YA L as, "those who think they're too old to be children but who others think are too young to be adults" (Nilsen and Donelson 1). Although this genre is popular and many books are written every year, defining YA literature is challenging because the field is less explored in academic curricula and less popular among commercial readers.

Some scholars have tried to explain its prominent characteristics. According to Carlsen, YA literature can simply be understood as the literature that adolescents choose to read. He explains, "It is that literature which adolescents read" (1). VanderStaay argues that YA texts often feature teenage protagonists or contemporary experiences from an adolescent perspective, use first-person narration, and depict a young person's transition into adulthood. Similarly, Campbell states that the central theme of YA literature is the transition to adulthood, particularly the search for identity and purpose. She further notes that such works typically include a moment of personal realisation or increased maturity, which is narrated through an adolescent voice, and they maintain relevance to the experiences of young readers. It is the simple answer to the questions, "Who am I and what am I going to do about it?" (70). She also opines that YA literature "must have a climactic epiphany of new maturity as the subtext and be told in the YA voice from the limited adolescent viewpoint. In addition, it must be relevant to the lives of young readers in some way" (75). Kaplan mentions that YA literature continually

evolves, reflecting the changing nature of adolescence itself.

Mitali Perkins, a Bengali immigrant who settled in the United States in her childhood, writes from firsthand experience with an accuracy and emotional honesty which is rare in contemporary Young Adult fiction. Her two novels, *Monsoon Summer* (2004) and *You Bring the Distant Near* (2017), are the most remarkable literary treatments of South Asian diasporic adolescence in the American literary tradition. These two texts engage a fundamental question: what does it mean to adapt to a culture, or to multiple cultures, without surrendering the irreducible singularity of one's individual self? The question is not just sociological. It is a matter of survival, dignity, and the deepest form of self-knowledge.

In *Monsoon Summer*, fifteen-year-old Jazz Gardner, who is half-Indian and, half-white American, travels with her family to Pune, India, for a summer that forces her to confront the Indian half of her identity she has spent years suppressing. She states, "I knew I should just smile and nod to cut off the conversation, but I was irritated by his question. India was my mother's birthplace. And his, too, for that matter. 'It's a wonderful country,' I answered firmly: 'I'm glad I'm half Indian.'" (Perkins, *Monsoon* 131). In *You Bring the Distance Near*, Perkins expands her frame to tell the multigenerational story of the Das family, Bangladeshi immigrants to New York, whose three generations of women—grandmother Ranee, mother Sonia, and daughter Shanti—each navigate the distance between the memory of and the daily life of country in distinctly individual ways. Both novels form a continuous meditation on cultural adaptation: not as the erasure of identity, but as its most challenging and most generative test.

This article analyses how Perkins constructs the theme of cultural adaptation and individual identity formation across both texts.

Review of Literature

Research on Mitali Perkins's fiction remains relatively limited compared to the critical attention given to her South Asian American contemporaries, a gap that reflects broader patterns of marginalisation within Young Adult literary criticism. Nevertheless, several significant critical interventions have shaped the field in which her work is read.

Craig Storti, a renowned American author and researcher in anthropological studies, has studied cultural shifts in communities. Storti's research on intercultural communication and cross-cultural adaptation provides the foundation for the dome concept mentioned in the article. He examines the lives and motivations of immigrants and settlers, offering a robust framework for analysing Mitali Perkins' novels. These narratives often mirror the complexities of immigrant identity and the tension between native and acquired cultures. Storti thus provides a valuable lens for exploring the challenges of cultural integration and the evolving sense of self experienced by characters navigating different cultural worlds.

Storti systematically balances the abstractions in Perkins's novel. In his valuable work *The Art of Crossing the Culture*, he examines the settled life of

immigrants, who face the dilemma of maintaining the cultural practices of their origin. These confusions have psychological dimensions; he discusses the cultural shifts settlers face and their struggle to adapt to a new culture while maintaining their lineage from the past. His examination associates Jazz's dilemma with the holistic adaptation to a new culture, and it was positioned in his seminal work *The Art of Crossing the Culture*.

Many, perhaps most, people who go abroad to live and work genuinely want to adapt to the local culture. And most of them do not. It's not that they don't appreciate the reasons for adapting to the culture or know that it is all but essential to being successful in their work and at ease in society, but rather that true cultural adjustment and effective cross-cultural interaction are more elusive than we might imagine. (Storti)

Meena G. Khorana's article "Break Your Silence: A Call to Asian Indian Children's Writers" (1993) contends that YA novels dramatise the hybrid bicultural self of the Indian American protagonists by mapping the struggle to reconcile ancestral obligations, patriarchal family expectations, and American teenage autonomy through an immersion in the homeland that exposes unspoken differences in custom, value system, and physical appearance, ultimately marking the kind of generational identity negotiation Khorana considers central to the new wave of South Asian immigrant children's fiction.

Clare Bradford's *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Theory and Children's Literature in a Global Context* (2007) applies this framework to the genre. Bradford argues that the most politically prominent YA texts refuse the assimilationist narrative and instead articulate forms of belonging that challenge the identical categories of insider and outsider. Perkins's novel falls directly within this tradition, consistently going beyond the binary logic of 'belonging to either of the cultures' or the assumed crisis of the 'caught in-between' predicament.

Roberta Seelinger Trites's landmark study, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), provides a genre-theoretical framework for understanding the stakes of identity formation in YA fiction. Trites argues that the YA novel is fundamentally concerned with the power relations that shape the adolescent subject—the institutional, social, and cultural forces that both constrain and constitute the self. For Perkins's protagonists, these forces are cultural and racial as well as institutional, and the novels dramatise the complex process by which young people negotiate these forces without being reduced to them.

This article examines how the young adult protagonists in *Monsoon Summer* and *You Bring the Distant Near* come to perceive their dual cultural identity not as a burden of contradiction, but as a distinct advantage that sharpens their sense of self and purpose. Rather than being paralysed by the tension between their ancestral heritage and the expectations of their adopted society, these characters gradually learn to inhabit both worlds with confidence and intentionality. Their bicultural experience becomes a lens through which they develop a more expansive worldview

—one that informs their ambitions, guides their career aspirations, and deepens their interpersonal relationships.

Theoretical Framework: Third Space, Hybridity, and the Productive Self

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on three interlocking concepts: Bhabha's third space of enunciation, Stuart Hall's notion of identity as cultural production, and W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness. Each illuminates a distinct dimension of the cultural negotiation that Perkins's protagonists undertake, and together they provide a comprehensive account of what cultural adaptation means in the context of diasporic adolescence.

Bhabha's concept of the third space, which is the liminal zone of cultural encounter that is neither purely the culture of origin nor purely the culture of settlement, is the most immediately applicable framework. For Bhabha, cultural meaning is not simply transmitted in this third space but translated, and in that translation new hybrid identities become possible. As he writes: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (Bhabha 55). Jazz Gardner and the Bose women inhabit exactly this third space, and the novels chart their gradual understanding that this position, far from being a site of lack, is a site of creative possibility.

Stuart Hall's formulation of diasporic identity as a production that is never complete, always in process, provides a temporal dimension to Bhabha's spatial metaphor. Hall insists that cultural identities are not fixed essences to be recovered but narratives to be constructed. "Cultural identity," he writes, "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 225). For Perkins's protagonists, identity is precisely this becoming—an ongoing process that the novels follow in real time.

Du Bois's concept of double consciousness is the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on with contempt, which resonates with particular force in Perkins's rendering of her characters' interior lives. Jazz Gardner's suppression of her Indian heritage is itself an act of double consciousness; a defensive self-division motivated by the desire to be legible, and therefore safe, in the eyes of the dominant American culture around her.

***Monsoon Summer*. Adaptation as Self-Discovery.**

In her novel *Monsoon Summer*, Jazz Gardner does not try to adapt to either Indian culture or American culture, but instead blends both through her embodied self. She has hidden her Indian heritage to maintain a confident, capable American identity. Her trip to India strips away that confidence entirely. The ideas that once defined her, such as organising, fixing, and charming, no longer work, forcing her to genuinely change instead of just adjusting on the surface. This makes her a kind of double outsider, as she feels too American in India and quietly different at home. Her identity becomes something unresolved rather than fixed and stable. Her mother serves as a contrast, representing the more balanced self that Jazz had

pushed aside. Meanwhile, her relationships with Danita and the orphanage children reflect her and encourage her to grow culturally and morally.

The cultural shift becomes more rooted, and language becomes the easiest barrier to cross. The novel moves through a hidden lane, and communication and language mark the deep rift between cultures. Jazz, as a born American, never needs to adopt her parental languages, but the positioned character in the novel, Jazz, notes that, "At least I'll finally get some use out of those Hindi language classes. And see India for the first time. I am half Indian, you know. Mom's side of the family had this thing about "preserving our Indian heritage," (Perkins, Monsoon 9)

The announcement of the family's summer in Pune therefore arrives in the novel as a form of disruption. It forces a confrontation with the stifled half of Jazz's identity. Perkins dramatises with great skill that Jazz's discomfort in India is not simply the discomfort of a stranger in a foreign place; it is the more specific discomfort of someone who is expected to belong to a place that feels unacquainted. She is neither Indian enough for India nor white enough, in India's eyes, for America. For the first time, she exists fully in Bhabha's third space and cannot retreat to either cultural identity as a place of stable belonging.

The orphanage in Pune becomes the site of Jazz's most significant adaptation. Her work with the orphaned children does not involve her performing either her American or her Indian identity; it requires her purely to be present, attentive, and capable. Through this work, she discovers that her most central qualities, like her warmth, her practical intelligence, and her directness, are not culturally specific. They are hers. And yet they are also, she begins to understand, partly the product of her Indian inheritance: the value placed on service, on community, on the care of those without family. Adaptation, for Jazz, is not replacing one cultural identity with another; it is integrating what both cultures have given her into a coherent, individual self.

Though Jazz has her ancestral lineage in India, she has never experienced India firsthand. Rather, she has known India only through stories. Her inbuilt conceptions about India and its culture are completely oppositional to the ground reality, but later she integrates with the minds of India. She emits a raging idea about India at the very first moment she enters India, "I knew India was a poor country, but it was still a shock to see it with my own eyes. A lot of the children wore rags, and very few of them wore shoes. How did . . . their makeshift houses survive the heavy rains?" (Perkins, Monsoon 36). The projection of Jazz is completely American.

The monsoon rain that arrives midway through the novel functions as its chief symbolic event. In Indian cultural and literary imagination, the monsoon is a season of renewal: rain after drought, abundance after deprivation. Perkins positions this symbolism with care. The monsoon in Jazz's summer is precisely this: the arrival of the suppressed, the return of what had been shut out. As Jazz watches the rain

break over Pune, she experiences a kind of emotional release which is not a resolution of her cultural tensions, but an acceptance of their productive irresolution. She does not become Indian in the summer; she becomes more completely herself, which is to say, more completely both.

Jazz's relationship with Danita, a young Indian girl she meets during the summer, serves as a vehicle for cultural negotiation. Danita represents not a romantic escape but cultural mirroring: someone who sees Jazz's hybridity not as confusion but as richness. In the eyes of Danita, Jazz begins to perceive herself in a different way, not as someone who has failed to completely inhabit either of her cultures, but as someone who has the capacity to inhabit both. The novel's central declaration is that adaptation comes through honesty and courage, a form of self-enlargement rather than self-erasure.

***You Bring the Distant Near*. Generational Dimensions of Cultural Adaptation**

You Bring the Distant Near expands Perkins's examination of cultural adaptation across time and space, tracing the different forms adaptation takes across three generations of Das women. The novel's multigenerational structure lets Perkins show that no single template exists for diasporic adaptation. The process is inevitably shaped by specific circumstances, personalities, and historical moments of each individual who undertakes it.

Ranee, the grandmother, represents deep cultural rootedness. She carries Bengali culture and tradition within her as an imaginary world, such as its landscapes, its cuisine, its customs, its language: "Bengalis are famous for nicknames—we each end up with about a dozen" (Perkins, *You Bring* 21). She adapts to American life as hardheaded rather than groundbreaking innovation: she adjusts where it is necessary but does not allow American culture to shift her fundamental sense of identity. Ranee is not portrayed as a figure of pathos or cultural rigidity. On the contrary, she is the novel's most secure individual, and her deep roots in her culture give her children and grandchildren something rich enough to question, argue with, and ultimately love.

Sonia, the mother, occupies the more vexed middle position that characterises first-generation adult immigrants. She arrived in America when her identity was already considerably formed, and the immigration experience in adulthood produces a specific kind of cultural replication. She shifts between Bengali and English not just linguistically but ontologically, and herself in English is genuinely different from herself in Bengali. Perkins renders this doubleness with great tenderness, refusing to pathologise it. Sonia's doubled self is not a failure of integration; it is an achievement of a different order—the capacity to inhabit two complete worlds rather than settling for one diminished one.

The daughters, Shanti (Chantal Jonson) and Anu (Anna Sen), represent the generation that stands at the centre of Perkins's novelistic project. Though they were born or raised in America, they inherit a cultural legacy they did not choose and cannot fully possess. Their responses to this inheritance differ significantly.

Shanthi's primary instinct is assimilation, whereas Anna, more curious and confident, energetically seeks out the Bangladeshi aspects of her heritage. Their contrasting paths demonstrate one of Perkins's dominant insights: adaptation is individual, idiosyncratic, and shaped by the personality of the person ready to accept it.

Self-Perception in a Mixed-Culture Environment

One of Perkins's most significant contributions to the literary treatment of cultural adaptation is her insistence that hybrid identity is not purely a sociological condition but a personal achievement. Her protagonists do not simply find themselves in a mixed culture; they prove themselves within it. To prove oneself, in the sense the novels deploy, is to demonstrate through action and choice that one's identity is not merely the product of circumstances but the expression of character, will, and values.

Jazz proves herself through her practical, human competence at the orphanage. She shows her capacity to care for children with nothing, to keep her warmth and humour under genuine difficulty, and to solve problems with the resources available. This competence is simultaneously culturally specific and individually hers; it draws on her American directness and her Indian inheritance of service and community, but it belongs most essentially to Jazz herself, the individual who has assembled these influences into a coherent and functioning self; she narrates as "Those belonged to my family, but the rest had been designed for me, and me alone, strewn like treasures everywhere after I'd arrived in India." (Perkins, *Monsoon* 256).

Shanthi and Anna prove themselves through the choices they make about their futures and choices that sometimes strain their relationships with their mothers and grandmother but which are ultimately recognised as expressions of the same core values that shaped the women who came before them. When Shanti eventually finds her way back to her Bangladeshi heritage, it is not through compliance or filial obligation but through genuine discovery and the recognition that what she dismissed as foreign is irreducibly part of who she is. This is not assimilation back into the original culture; it is individuation through cultural recovery.

Language, Food, and Domestic Ritual as Sites of Cultural Negotiation

In both novels, Perkins locates the practice of cultural adaptation in the concrete particularities of daily life, especially in language, food, clothing, and domestic ritual, rather than in abstract philosophical reflections. These are not incidental details within realistic settings; they are the substance through which the novels' thematic concerns are embodied and felt.

Language is the most charged of these sites. Jazz's struggle to speak Bengali is both a practical limitation and a symbolic one. It marks the cultural self-editing she undertook throughout her adolescence. But in Pune, she realises that fluency in a language is not the only form of communication, and she communicates with the children at the orphanage through gesture, expression, and the universal language of care and attention. This discovery reframes the question of cultural belonging: it

is not chiefly linguistic but relational.

In *You Bring the Distant Near*, language is inflected differently across the three generations. Raneer thinks and prays in Bengali; Sonia moves fluidly between Bengali and English as contexts shift; the daughters sometimes struggle to find the Bengali word for a feeling that English cannot quite hold. This linguistic layering is one of Perkins's most subtle technical achievements. It renders the generational transmission of culture not as the handing down of a fixed tradition but as a living process of translation which is imperfect, inevitable, and generative.

Food functions in both novels as the most tangible form of cultural memory and love. Raneer's cooking is a form of storytelling, and each dish carries within it a geography and a history, a connection to people and places that are no longer accessible except through the sensory memory of taste and smell. When Shanthi and Anna eat their grandmother's food, they are not merely nourishing their bodies; they are receiving a narrative about who they are and where they come from. Generally, the deepest form of cultural transmission is not the lecture or the lesson, but the meal, whose sensory experience carries the past into the present and makes it living.

Conclusion

Mitali Perkins's *Monsoon Summer* and *You Bring the Distant Near* offer a sustained and nuanced literary treatment of South Asian diasporic adolescence in contemporary American Young Adult fiction. Through the experiences of Jazz Gardner and the Bose women, both novels argue that cultural adaptation is not the erasure of identity but its most demanding creative test. The cultural shift has been noted by Jazz as, "I tasted the drops on my own henna-stained hand. Oh, they were delicious! If only I could bottle them and take them back with me. *Monsoon Summer*, I'd label the bottle, and take a sip every now and then, just to remember the taste (Perkins, *Monsoon* 257).

Drawing on the theories of Bhabha, Hall, and Du Bois, this article has shown that Perkins's protagonists live in a cultural in-between that is not a deficit but a site of creative possibility. When she returns from India, Jazz Gardner is not more Indian or less American, but completely herself. The Bose women, across three generations, do not reach a final resolution to the question of belonging, but they live the question and, in doing so, demonstrate that the question itself is a form of richness.

Perkins's fiction also participates in the broader political project of decolonising the Young Adult literary imagination, thereby placing South Asian diasporic experience at the centre of narratives about identity, belonging, and self-formation, and refusing to treat it as peripheral or exotic. In a literary landscape that has historically centred the white Anglo-American experience, this centering is itself a form of cultural adaptation: the adaptation of a genre to the full diversity of the humanity it serves.

This study focuses on two novels by a single author and does not engage comparatively with other South Asian-American YA writers. The theoretical frameworks deployed, while productive, do not exhaust the interpretive possibilities

of these rich texts. This article has established that Perkin's protagonists are torn between cultures, but they prove their selfhood with their dual identity.

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