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Between Nations and Narratives: Transnational Engagement and Flexible Citizenship in *American Betiya*

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Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, diasporic identities are not confined to fixed nations and cultural belonging due to the complexities of citizenship and return to ancestral homelands. Anuradha D. Rajurkar's debut novel, *American Betiya* voices the profound contributions and implications of the diaspora's efforts in the ancestral land, navigates identity, belonging, and home. The novel's diasporic characters reflect a generational shift in how cultural identity is perceived as an ongoing fluid negotiation process through return journeys and engagements in the host society. This paper examines how the novel's diasporic return theme underscores the flexibility inherent in contemporary citizenship, allowing individuals to sustain multiple cultural attachments and participate in transnational engagement across national boundaries. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Schiller, Basch and Blanc's transnationalism, and Aihwa Ong's flexible citizenship, the paper demonstrates how diasporic subjects navigate multicultural affiliations, enact agency across borders, and reshape their attachments to dual lands. Ultimately, the paper argues that *American Betiya* elucidates return, transnational engagement, hinting at the multiplicity of diasporic life where flexible citizenship enables transnational subjects to craft new meanings of home across the shifting landscapes of belonging.

Keywords: Flexible Citizenship, Globalization, Indian Diaspora, Local Development, Transnational Engagement, Return Journeys.

The boundaries of belonging, citizenship, and identity have become increasingly fluid through the mobility of people, cultural practices, and ideas across borders, which Arjun Appadurai has popularized as the scapes framework in his book, *Modernity at Large: The Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Within this context, the diasporic communities have emerged as pivotal actors reconfiguring the meanings of nationhood, cross-border participations, and home. In the current global era, members of the Indian diaspora actively negotiate their attachments through multiple return journeys, cultural transmissions, economic contributions, and a strategic engagement with both homeland and host society. The Indian diaspora encompasses a wide range of interactions, exchanges, and connections between India and the community of Indian origin people living outside India. Estimated to comprise over 30 million people worldwide, the Indian diaspora holds a significant role in cultural exchanges, retaining culture, recreating the homeland, and contributing to the economic development of the motherland. The Indian diaspora propels an increase in the “flow of trade, investment, finance, technologies, and ideas to their country of origin” (Raghavan, 2012, p. 69). The Indian diaspora is paramount in establishing successful business ventures and entrepreneurship, research institutions, and innovation strategies, leading to overall growth in the home country. The remittances sent by the diaspora have a visible impact on India’s development, improving living standards and alleviating poverty, reflecting the multi-stranded. Beyond remittances, direct investments and securing funds for local organizations have burgeoned India’s entrepreneurial landscape. Globally, the Indian diaspora has served as a bridge for soft power projection, cultural diplomacy, and even wielded trade agreements on international platforms. Diasporic organizations have funded several social development projects to improve education, aid local shelters, border immigration, and human rights. Such extensive activities of the Indian diaspora foster transnational engagement that promotes an intermediating effect on

business negotiations, partnerships, and efforts on cross-border collaborations.

Anuradha D. Rajurkar's debut novel, *American Betiya*, is positioned within young adult literature and offers a fertile ground to examine how diasporic subjects enact flexible citizenship, which is a mode for navigating transnationality and strategically mobilizing cultural and national affiliations for empowerment and agency. Rajurkar contends that transnational engagement is not a singular act of return but a generationally layered, inflective process of negotiation that reflects the diasporic actors' participation in rituals, domestic caregiving, and identity formation to elucidate how transnational life is simultaneously gendered, affective, and political. *American Betiya* voices the profound contributions of the diaspora's transnational engagements in social welfare, philanthropy, and knowledge transfer, encapsulating the potentialities of temporary diasporic returns to the homeland. Thus, Rajurkar presents a compelling narrative that aligns with the captivating framework of flexible citizenship and transnational engagement.

The multinational ties of diasporic individuals exemplify the concept of flexible citizenship, where individuals can navigate different identities and citizenship status. The idea of flexible citizenship articulated by Aihwa Ong refers to the strategic use of multiple citizenships or national affiliations to maximize one's socio-political and economic benefits. This flexibility allows the Indian diaspora to engage in local development goals in ancestral lands through temporary and multiple returns, developing a fluidity of "sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power" (Ong 1999: p. 6). Ong situates her arguments within the era of globalization, recognizing that national borders gain a porousness in terms of human mobility, capital, and ideas, leading individuals to adopt flexible approaches to sovereignty. Through "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1999: p. 6), Ong recognizes that fixed, singular, and traditional notions of citizenship and national belonging are being reshaped by transnational flows. Flexible citizenship is a dynamic

form of engagement that provides a unique opportunity to contribute to the development of the homeland while maintaining transnational ties and global mobility. Ong's concept is particularly emphasized in the context of globalization, creating cross-border collaborations and fluidity, allowing people to have multiple national allegiances. This flexibility necessitates responding opportunistically to the changing socio-political scenario.

In the age of globalization, diasporic identity had undergone essential transformation moving beyond fixed notions of national belonging and towards a more hybrid and transnational subjectivities. Stuart Hall observes the diaspora more than a scattering of population but a mode of identity formed through negotiations. Hall's conception of cultural identity is observed as "a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222), which is pivotal in understanding the dynamic process of return journeys in American Betiya. Aihwa Ong's Flexible citizenship complicates this discussion on late modern subjects, such as "multiple-passport holder is an apt contemporary figure; he or she embodies that split between state-imposed identity and personal identity caused by political upheavals, migration and changing global markets" (2) elucidates the diasporic subjects multiple returns as strategic, cultural and affective negotiations. Complementing Ong's framework is the foundational work of Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc (1994), who introduced the idea of transnationalism who view it as "multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (1994). Together, their work underscores the multi-sited nature of belonging and the dual orientation many diasporic individuals maintain toward both host and home countries. Further expanding this discourse, Arjun Appadurai (1996) theorizes global cultural flows and the 'scapes' framework which indicate "deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors,

nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities” creating disjuncture and imagined communities that transcend national boundaries. Appadurai's notion of deterritorialized identity aligns with Ong's argument that global subjects do not root their sense of self solely in one place. Similarly, Steven Vertovec (1999) introduces the idea of transnationalism to describe a condition of “sustained linkages and ongoing exchanges among non-state actors based across national borders - businesses, non-government-organizations, and individuals sharing the same interest (2009, 3) where migrants can inhabit multiple spheres of engagement simultaneously, facilitating dynamic and hybrid forms of identity.

By adopting a qualitative methodology, the paper interrogates how diasporic temporary return journeys become a transformative site for development, generational continuity, contribution, and identity reimagination. Central to the analysis, the paper introspects on how diasporic return journeys represent a site for cultural negotiation and empowerment. The paper also questions how the characters exercise flexible citizenship while sustaining multiple attachments to India and the United States. And these dynamics are mediated through generational, gendered, and cultural lenses.

The concept of diasporic ‘return’ and its impact on development has pushed forth an influential role in shaping national initiatives, where diaspora is treated as “political subjects whose existence and behavior transcends” (Raghavan, 2012, p. 66) and the contemporary relationship between “nation-state and their diasporas is actually driven by the states themselves” (Raghavan, 2012, p. 66). The notion of return encompasses both physical permanent and temporary returns when “conditions are appropriate” (Safran, 1991, p. 83) and offers repatriation in the involvement of cultural events, business, or development-oriented initiatives that possess the potential to catalyze transition in India. Multiple visits to India allow returnees to observe their previous

efforts, often creating opportunities to share ideas, expertise, and best global practices. Such cross-pollination of ideas leads to reforms in the homeland in areas such as higher education policies, e-governance strategies, and sustainable development. Thus, development strategies in diaspora returns pertain to the “pooling of financial capital, intellectual capital and political capital by members of an ethnic community” (Patterson, 2006, p. 1897) where its flexibility is the promoter of transnational engagement and connections. In conditions of diasporic return, flexible citizenship implies that the Indian diaspora is not bound by rigidity in territoriality-bound conceptions and singular multiple allegiances. Instead, they can navigate multiple spaces of belonging by leveraging and promoting their transnational connections. Since return allows the diaspora to share its financial resources towards community projects, their donations can aid or fund local economies, schools, hospitals, and public services underfunded in their ancestral homeland. The abroad experiences of the returnees can provide excellent mentorship, alternative strategies on effective goal planning, and empower local communities to sustain their development goals. The prolonged engagement and repeated returns to the homeland lead to the establishment of sustainable programs that continue to benefit communities even after their departure. As a result, such long-term commitment can lead to lasting changes in the socio-political landscape of the homeland.

Rajurkar echoes the substantial contributions of the Indian diaspora, portrayed as more than just familial obligations of visiting ancestral land; they look for opportunities for meaningful contributions to local development. Rajurkar captures the flexibility of Rani Kelkar’s father, Alok, who attempted multiple returns to India while studying industrial engineering in America. Alok’s transnational engagement is fueled by his contributions to the homeland that “called upon for his American-educated advice on cutting costs” (Rajurkar, 2023, p. 299), representing millions of

diasporic Indians strategically connecting to India through transnational engagement positioning him as a valued member of local community development. Alok's mobility in the porousness of global borders allows him to exist in the state of "a flexible notion of citizenship" (Ong, 1999, p. 6) bringing innovative ideas from across the border to aid local initiatives in a "local shelter that found jobs for village women" (Rajurkar, 2023, p. 298). Ong characterizes flexible citizens as responding "fluidly and opportunistically" (Ong, 1999, p. 6) to the changing conditions. This idea captures the centrality of diasporic returns in driving social welfare. Programs such as uplifting women's causes, creating economic stability for village women in localities, and fostering community development in homelands reflect the opportunistic nature of flexible citizens, whose multiple allegiances can leverage transnational resources and expertise in ways that benefit women's causes in ancestral communities. Women's shelters in India often operate with limited resources and face challenges in providing for the needy. Alok is exemplary of diasporic return, making substantial contributions to organizing fundraising campaigns for "negotiating with employers about wages, finding companies to help fund the program" (Rajurkar, 2023, p. 299), utilizing his networks to reach a greater impact. As such, it can be deduced that Alok maintained and facilitated partnerships and cross-border collaborations between Indian organizations and international support networks to bring in the best practices. His support of a woman's local shelter contributes not only to community development but also to gender equality and women's empowerment in India. Thus, Alok's engagement is not merely transactional but deeply enmeshed in his sense of responsibility and involvement in local development towards his homeland.

Alok's attempt to find employment opportunities for village women exemplifies his potential to fluidly navigate between his American experiences and the local realities of India. Traversing dual lands imbues him with a sense of recognition of the socio-political challenges

faced by women in rural areas. Ong acknowledges the role of “travel, and displacement that induce subjects” (Ong, 1999, p. 6) in shaping flexible citizenship, reflecting the opportunistic aspect of capitalizing on his knowledge of both American and Indian systems through mobility and migration. Alok’s return to India demonstrates diasporic Indians who have attempted multiple returns, catalyzed by mobilizing local community members to look for sustainable development and future goals. Witnessing the strategies of the diaspora towards their homeland, local people such as Suresh become more engaged in developmental goals. Moreover, Alok’s return allowed him to meet and connect with his future wife in the local shelter, and together, they could find myriad ways to contribute to local needs.

While Alok’s engagement is more visible, Rani’s mother elucidates a quieter embodiment of Ong’s framework. Her past as a women’s activist in India working in a local women’s shelter reflects a preexisting political consciousness, but her diasporic identity marks a subdued engagement and compromise on domesticity. However, her rootedness in domestic life represents the maintenance of multi-stranded relationships with India- cultural, emotional, and social relationships, especially through phone calls and setting up Zoom calls to connect to her Indian roots. Thus, her subjectivity as a former activist is redirected towards her values on femininity and maternal surveillance of her daughter Rani through a transnational lens, holding Indian socio-cultural norms as an anchor. This maternal surveillance and existence in the diaspora is a political act to “develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect simultaneously to two or more nation-states” (Basch et al., 1994). Her flexibility lies in her ability to mediate cultural codes within the recreated home and navigate American assimilationist systems through cultural and affective labor, sustaining their hybrid identity that negotiates their place in American society without abandoning symbolic ties to India. Rani’s mother becomes a vessel for

transmitting cultural ideologies, redefining home through rituals, parenting styles, food, and memory. This is further reflected in the celebration of family Christmas with the “usual style — braiding Indian traditions with American ones” (Rajurkar, 2023, p. 195), encapsulating the “multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al., 1994). Rajurkar posits how the Kelkar family celebrates Christmas with Indian gifts like hand-knit slippers, embroidered kurta, and mugs, followed by vegetable biriyani and chai ritual. At the same time, the infusion of American elements such as a Christmas “tiny twig of a tree” (Rajurkar, 2023, p. 195), the Nutcracker ballet, and the holiday gifting constructs a hybrid space of belonging. The fusion of Christmas becomes a site of transnational subjectivity negotiated across borders, even in private and domestic spaces. The fusion of Christmas becomes a site of transnational subjectivity negotiated across borders, even in private and domestic spaces. Rani’s commitment to family traditions elucidates a hybrid celebration of Christmas, where Indian gifts and rituals blend with American holiday practices marking a symbolic act of transnational belonging. This cultural fusion is not simply about the maintenance of traditions but about reinterpreting and re-contextualizing them within her lived reality in the U.S., demonstrating her agency in transnational cultural reproduction. Rani’s transnational engagement in *American Betiya* is intricately shaped by her ability to navigate and reinterpret the complex legacies of her parents’ migration experiences. Unlike her father, Alok, whose transnationalism is more visibly rooted in economic and developmental contributions to India, Rani’s engagement manifests in her emotional and cultural negotiation between two homelands. As a second-generation diasporic subject, Rani is constantly immersed in transnational practices, yet her engagement with her dual identities is deeply personal and rooted in everyday actions.

Rani’s subjectivity is shaped by what Ong refers to as “graduated sovereignty,” which

reflects a “postdevelopmental state strategy whereby governments cede more of the instrumentalities connected with development as a technical project to global enterprises but maintain strategic controls over resources, populations and sovereignty” (Ong, 1999, p. 20). This denotes how certain groups and individuals of diasporic communities like Rani are subjected to distinct intersectional factors based on rights, duties, and discipline. Rani, a second-generation Indian-American, exists at the nexus of being legally American, racially marked as the cultural other, and subjected to racial microaggressions. Simultaneously, she is expected to hold the cultural authenticity of her ancestral land. Rani’s embodiment of flexible citizenship is deeply shaped by the dual legacies of Alok’s economic transnational engagement and her mother’s cultural anchoring, which enabled her to navigate, resist, and reimagine belonging across borders. However, such intersecting pressures depict how flexible citizenship does not allow equal freedom for all diasporic subjects, reflecting an uneven subjectivity where different logics of power simultaneously operate. Rani’s lived reality within an Indian American household makes her inhabit a tight zone of Indian moral surveillance, which imposes a rigid structure of respectability, cultural preservation, and reputation. Although these expectations are cultural, they function as disciplinary regimes where the familial norms regulate the female body and subject. However, outside the house, Rani enters a different zone of sovereignty provided by American high school culture, where her self-expressions, individuality, and dating world are normative. It is in this world that she briefly enjoys freedom from the cultural vigilance of her home, with conflicted experiences of existing between being a good Indian Betiya and a liberated American. Rani is caught in overlapping zones of belonging, gender norms, cultural expectations, and affect, which actively shape her sense of self in “a contingent ‘in-between space’ that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7). Rani enacts flexible citizenship through her

strategic performance of cultural hybridity—adhering to Indian norms at home while asserting personal autonomy in American social contexts. This flexibility allows her to critique both American racialization and Indian patriarchal traditions, expounding the notions that the third space “is not simply one thing or the other, nor both at the same time, but a kind of negotiation between both positions” (Bryne, 2009, p. 47) while resisting, adapting and forging a self that is fluid and emotionally resilient. Thus, Rani’s hybrid identity becomes a lens of critique, resistance, and adaptation, forging a self that is fluid, negotiated, and emotionally resilient.

Aaji’s mobility across national borders for emotional support and health care facilities makes her a part of the transnational circuit of care, providing relief to her arthritis. Her presence in the United States is enabled by the migration decisions of her children, where she is benefiting from the flexibilities allowed to citizens of long-term residents in a first-world country. Aaji’s temporary mobility shows a quiet but significant form of flexibility that disrupts rigid definitions of immigrant vs. non-immigrant. The doctor’s recommendation to Aaji to “knit to help with my arthritis” (Rajurkar, 2023, p. 97) ironically becomes a channel to preserve cultural memory and generational wisdom. Her knitting becomes a feminist archive which invokes the “transversal, the transactional, the translational and the transgressive aspects of contemporary behaviour”, representing cultural continuity within Americanized settings. Thus, Aaji’s arthritis, a bodily condition, becomes a site of the “logics of states and capitalism” (Ong, 1999, p. 4), and her presence in the transnational contexts is a testament to how families in the diaspora must perform caregiving and traditions while navigating dual worlds. Aaji’s decision to seek medical treatment in the U.S. reflects a strategic use of transnational family networks for health and survival. This echoes Ong’s observations of how people use their connections to multiple states for pragmatic gains, not necessarily tied to formal citizenship. While Aaji remains deeply rooted in her Indian

identity, she displays a willingness to adapt to new social rhythms, such as adjusting to American norms in the household, negotiating her role in a multigenerational, multicultural space, and communicating with her granddaughter, Rani, across linguistic, ideological, and emotional boundaries.

To conclude, *American Betiya* unveils the intricate tapestry of contemporary citizenship and transnational engagement of diasporic Indians in the context of globalization. Diasporic returns reflect the idea of flexible citizenship as exemplified in the narrative that offers a lens to understand the dynamic and ongoing contributions of the Indian diaspora to their homeland, highlighting transnational engagement and betterment of local communities. While the flexibility of citizenship plays a pivotal role in developmental strategies, it challenges traditional notions of national identity, belonging, and territoriality, potentially leading to perpetuating power imbalances, conflicts, and creating dependencies. *American Betiya* offers a compelling literary meditation on what it means to belong 'between nations' based on the layered performances of flexible citizenship through the lives of diasporic Indians negotiating cultural, emotional, and political geographies. Through characters like Rani, Alok, Aaji, and Rani's mother, the novel destabilizes fixed notions of identity and homeland, illustrating that citizenship is not solely a legal or territorial category but a lived, strategic, and often affective practice. Drawing on Aihwa Ong's theory of flexible citizenship and Schiller et al.'s framework of transnationalism, the paper captures how diasporic subjects enact agency by engaging in cross-border familial care, local development, cultural transmission, and hybrid identity-making. These acts of transnational engagement are shaped by generational, gendered, and ideological differences that foreground the multiplicity of diasporic life. Ultimately, *American Betiya* illuminates how flexible citizenship can both bridge and complicate the borders it seeks to transcend, raising critical questions about

whether transnational engagement is a mode of liberation or a reiteration of global hierarchies under the guise of mobility and care.

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