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## THE PERILS OF DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE AND THE MYTH OF RETURN IN CHANDANI LOKUGE'S *TURTLE NEST*

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### Abstract

Chandani Lokuge's novel *Turtle Nest* (2003) provides a subtle yet challenging depiction of diasporic identity, female vulnerability, and the fascinating but eventually destabilising myth of return. The novel is about the protagonist, Aruni, a Sri Lankan-born adoptee who brought up in Australia revisits Sri Lanka in search of her biological mother and to find her roots. It explores how diasporic desire is shaped by memory, loss, longing and belonging. Drawing insights from diaspora theorists such as William Safran, Robin Cohen, and Avtar Brah, this paper examines the perils of diasporic experience in *Turtle Nest* in terms of fractured identity, ethnicity, gender, and the commodification of homeland as a byproduct of globalization. This paper argues that the novel shatters the myth of return, revealing "home" not as a stable or recoverable site but as a relational and contested space shaped by loss, ecology, and affect.

**Key words:** Diasporic Identity, Female Vulnerability, Myth Of Return, Fractured Identity, Commodification, Globalization, Contested Space

### Introduction

Diaspora studies have long identified the friction between longing and displacement as central to diasporic consciousness. William Safran states that diasporic communities maintain "a collective memory and myth about the homeland" and frequently foster "a belief in the eventual return" (83). Robin Cohen agrees with this assertion and describes the "myth of return" as a defining emotional force in many diasporas (Cohen 24). Contemporary diaspora scholars, on the other hand, say that the idea of "returning home" is not necessarily realistic or even desirable. Instead, they emphasize that people who live in diasporas often construct new, mixed identities that combine the features of their own culture with those of the cultures of the locations where they dwell. In this view, belonging isn't about going back to one country but it's about dealing with many cultural influences and forging hybrid identities.

Chandani Lokuge's *Turtle Nest* is a Sri Lankan-Australian diasporic novel that uses a very personal story to talk about these theoretical issues. The main character Aruni delineates the plot of the novel as she tries to find herself by connecting with her mother's background. Aruni's journey of self-discovery evolves into an encounter with uncomfortable truths about motherhood, female sexuality, environmental degradation, and the exploitative structures of global tourism. Lokuge questions the assumption that the homeland can resolve diasporic fragmentation, demonstrating that return often brings danger and disillusionment rather than redemption. This viewpoint aligns with Stuart Hall's assertion that cultural identity is "not an essence but a positioning" (Hall 226), highlighting identity as fluid and dynamic, subject to ongoing reconstruction.

In the same way, Avtar Brah says that being part of a diaspora means "multi-locatedness" and complicated discussions of belonging, not just going back to where you came from (Brah 193). Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" elucidates Lokuge's narration, portraying the homeland as a locus of hybridity and ambivalence rather than resolution (Bhabha 37). These theorists together emphasize that Lokuge's work demonstrates the impossibility of reconciling diasporic identity through return, instead highlighting hybridity, estrangement, and continuous negotiation. In this context, this paper argues that *Turtle Nest* depicts diasporic identity as intrinsically perilous, influenced by psychological fragmentation, gendered fragility, and a conflicted connection to "home". Simultaneously, it deconstructs the myth of return by illustrating how nostalgia, fantasy, and memory intersect the diasporic perceptions of the "home". Through Aruni's return, Lokuge



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attacks both the romanticization of the homeland and the idea that returning can help heal the trauma of being away from home.

## Diaspora Theory and the Myth of Return

Over the past thirty years, diaspora theory has undergone major changes. Early models often focused on exile and the hope of returning to the homeland. These approaches assumed that identity and belonging could be restored through return. However, more recent postcolonial perspectives challenge this view. Thinkers such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Avtar Brah emphasize hybridity, ambivalence, and the complex negotiations of identity that occur in diaspora. Instead of seeing return as the central goal, these critiques highlight how diasporic identities are shaped by movement, mixing, and uncertainty.

William Safran's essay, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" presents a traditional way to think about diasporas. They are marked by exile, shared memory, and the aspiration of returning home (Safran 83). Safran says that the "myth of return" is an important ideological structure that connects people who have moved away from their homes to their roots. Cohen expands this definition, suggesting that return often becomes "a symbolic centre of gravity" rather than a concrete reality (Cohen 25). As diasporic generations progress, the homeland may shift from a tangible territory into a symbolic construct shaped by nostalgia, imagination, and intergenerational memory.

Avtar Brah, on the other hand, criticizes the idea of diaspora as a straightforward journey of departure and return. She introduces the idea of "diaspora space," which she describes as a place where different histories, identities, and perspectives come together. Brah posits that diaspora space encompasses not merely the physical transgression of borders but also the everyday negotiations of inclusion and exclusion. As she puts it, "the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of 'we' and 'they,' are contested" (Brah 181). Lokuge's *Turtle Nest* vividly illustrates this theoretical insight. When Aruni returns to Sri Lanka, she doesn't find the sense of home or completeness she might have hoped for. Instead, she steps into a space full of tension where her right to belong is questioned and her identity feels unsettled, caught between different worlds. The homeland becomes a place where the boundaries between insider and outsider are constantly renegotiated, echoing Brah's idea of diaspora space as a zone of friction and encounter.

This theoretical idea is clearly shown in Lokuge's *Turtle Nest*. Aruni doesn't feel at home or complete when she goes back to Sri Lanka, which is what she might have hoped for. Instead, she walks into a space full of chaos where her right to belong is questioned and her sense of self is shattered and caught between two worlds. The homeland becomes a place where the lines between natives and migrants are always being redrawn. This is similar to Brah's idea of diaspora space as a place of conflict and meeting.

Through Aruni's encounters, diaspora appears less as a return to roots and more as a life shaped by multiple histories, inherited memories, and evolving cultural identities. Home is not a fixed point of origin and it is a changing idea that is transformed by memory, politics, and feelings of attachment. *Turtle Nest* locates Aruni precisely within such a diaspora space. Though Sri Lankan by birth, she is culturally Australian, though an outsider in Sri Lanka, she is drawn there by an emotional compulsion to reclaim her identity. Her journey dramatizes the ambivalence that shapes diasporic dilemma with part desire, part anxiety, part fantasy.

## Plot Context and Aruni's Diasporic dilemma

Aruni's adoption delineates a story of dislocation and displacement that begins before she can even form memory. Growing up in Australia with Sri Lankan migrant parents, she inherits not only their longing for the homeland but also the anxieties and silences that surround it. Their refusal to speak about the circumstances of her adoption leaves her unaware of, with a silence that becomes part of her own inner life. Her diasporic identity is influenced by factors beyond mere



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geographical distance. There is a genealogical void, which means that memory and origin are not being passed down. This emptiness makes her feel like she doesn't belong, locating her in a diaspora where identity isn't just about where you are, but also about the fragments of knowledge that are withheld, forgotten, or lost.

Lokuge's *Turtle Nest* begins in a Sri Lankan fishing village where Aruni Ratnayake returns to her native land, Sri Lanka to meet her maternal uncle Priya and, more importantly, to learn the story of her biological mother Mala. This beginning situates the novel within a framework of return and recovery, since Aruni's search for her people is connected to her search for her own identity. Raised in Australia by her adoptive parents Mohan and Neela, she carries with her both the silences surrounding her adoption and the desire to reconnect with her roots. The coastal setting is described with vivid attention to everyday life, and characters such as Simon, the vendor of tender coconut water, embody the constant local memory. When Simon recalls Mala and recognizes Mohan and Neela, the narrative highlights the entanglement of Aruni's adoptive and biological worlds.

The seashore becomes a symbolic space where Aruni experiences a momentary sense of belonging, expressed in her thought. This moment illustrates how diasporic identity is negotiated through affective attachment as well as through silences and discontinuities in memory. The opening scene can be read through Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space, where histories of displacement and kinship intersect and where belonging is constantly redefined. Aruni's embrace of the sand dramatizes the tension between estrangement and connection, showing that her identity is shaped not only by geographical distance but also by the fragments of memory and knowledge that remain withheld. Lokuge thus situates the personal search for family within broader questions of diaspora, memory, and the politics of belonging.

“These my people she thinks, digging her feet into the sand as far as they will go, her arms closing around herself in embrace-this my land, my home.” (Lokuge 9)

## Perils of Diasporic Experience in *Turtle Nest*

### 1. Fractured Identity and Psychological Dislocation

Lokuge's *Turtle Nest* explores Aruni's acute sense of belonging and her search for identity. Although she resides near Paul and other foreign tourists, her emotional attachment remains with Priya and the Sri Lankan community, underscoring her desire to remain connected to her roots. Despite her upbringing in Australia, Aruni experiences a persistent sense of incompleteness, a feeling that something essential is missing from her life there.

Lokuge highlights the pivotal role of memory in shaping the lives of different characters. While memory operates across distinct times and places for each individual, it consistently functions as a force that sustains longing for the past. Aruni's predicament reflects the challenges of adapting to an unfamiliar country, where cultural dissonance and silence about her origins complicate her sense of self. Upon her return to Sri Lanka, however, she experiences a profound recognition of belonging, affirming her connection to the land and to the people who embody her heritage. Through this portrayal, Lokuge emphasizes how diasporic identity is negotiated between displacement and return, and how memory serves as both a burden and a bridge in the search for home.

The writer mentions Aruni's predicament in her adaptation to an alien country. After arriving in Sri Lanka, she feels that she belongs to this country.

“Unwillingly, Aruni begins a fragment of her own life, lived away from home, in the adopted world” (Lokuge 25).

Lokuge recounts an incident where Paul and Simon insist that Aruni is a foreigner. But Aruni disagrees. The beach boys say her 'kalu suddhi' means black and white woman. She convinces Paul that



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“I’m a local, see? This is my Country. I belong here. Belonging , so important to her.  
 And she has belonged nowhere so far, she says. No mother, no home, no  
 country” (Lokuge 73).

Aruni’s subjectivity is torn between the cultural codes of Australia and the biological pull of Sri Lanka. Her return intensifies this fragmentation, confronting her with contradictions she cannot reconcile. As Homi Bhabha notes, diasporic identity is shaped by “unhomeliness,” an unsettling state in which the subject feels estranged even in familiar spaces (Bhabha 13). Aruni embodies this condition that she is visibly Sri Lankan yet socially foreign, emotionally connected yet culturally distant.

Her longing for her biological mother stems from an idealised belief that origin will provide emotional coherence. Yet each attempt to locate herself within Sri Lanka only heightens her sense of alienation. Lokuge illustrates that diasporic identity is not simply divided but perpetually unsettled, vulnerable to instability and psychological dislocation.

## 2. Gendered Vulnerability and the Female Body

In *Turtle Nest*, Lokuge demonstrates how diasporic return is shaped by gender. Aruni’s body becomes the site of multiple gazes from local men, foreign tourists, and members of the village community. Her brown skin identifies her as a local woman, yet her manner of speaking and her behaviour mark her as foreign. This ambivalence places her in a liminal space that generates both suspicion and desire.

Lokuge underscores how patriarchal structures within the village render Aruni vulnerable. She struggles to interpret social cues, misjudges the intentions of others, and places trust in individuals who ultimately exploit her. Diasporic belonging is therefore inseparable from gendered precarity, as the female diasporic subject is exposed to sexual danger precisely because she occupies the unstable position of being both part of the community and apart from it.

The narrative of Aruni’s mother Mala reinforces this connection between diaspora and gender. Marginalized due to her sexuality and social position, Mala becomes emblematic of the ways in which female agency is constrained across both homeland and diaspora. Lokuge thus highlights how the search for belonging is complicated by structures of gender, memory, and power, revealing the vulnerability of women who navigate the intersections of displacement and return.

## 3. Tourism, Commodification, and Neo-colonial Desire

The beach village that Aruni visits is shaped by global tourism, with hotels, bars, and attractions such as turtle watching presented as “exotic.” Lokuge reveals how tourism commodifies local bodies, particularly women’s bodies, and in doing so reinforces neo-colonial power structures. As Aruni moves through these spaces she becomes both complicit in and vulnerable to this economy.

Her position as a diasporic come back makes her confused between tourist and native. To the local community she appears at once familiar and foreign, a perception that heightens mistrust. At the same time, her desire to experience what she imagines as an “authentic” Sri Lanka mirrors the fantasies of tourists, showing how diasporic longing can unconsciously reproduce colonial ways of seeing. Aruni’s romanticised vision of the homeland creates cognitive dangers, as it masks the social and economic violence tied to class, gender, and global capitalism. Lokuge’s narrative demonstrates how the search for belonging is entangled with structures of power that shape both tourism and diaspora.

## 4. Ecological Struggles and the Symbolic Role of Turtles

In *Turtle Nest*, the endangered turtles function as an ecological metaphor for diasporic return. Turtles instinctively return to the same nesting grounds generation after generation, yet their return is fraught with danger from poaching,





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pollution, and the destruction of habitats. Aruni identifies with the baby turtles because both are drawn back to a place that may no longer offer safety. Their threatened nesting becomes a parallel to her own vulnerable search for roots. Lokuge uses ecological imagery to expand the discussion of diaspora, showing that return is not only a psychological and cultural journey but also a confrontation with environmental histories that have been reshaped by tourism and human intervention. The image of the turtles' survival highlights the vulnerability of diasporic identity, reminding us that the quest for home is shaped by larger environmental and social forces.

## Deconstructing the Myth of Return

### 1. Imagined Homeland vs. Lived Reality

In *Turtle Nest*, Aruni's vision of Sri Lanka is initially constructed as an imagined homeland, pieced together from parental stories, photographs, and fantasies. Stuart Hall reminds us that such mediated memories often shape identity more powerfully than direct lived experience (Hall 234). Yet when Aruni finally arrives, the reality unsettles her expectations. The village she encounters is marked by economic hardship, environmental degradation, and social complexity, which sharply contrasts with the idealised image she had carried.

Her disappointment reveals the distance between diasporic imagination and historical reality. The homeland is not a timeless or pristine space but a living place with its own wounds and transformations. Lokuge's narrative underscores how diasporic return is shaped by this tension between fantasy and actuality, showing that belonging is always negotiated through both memory and confrontation with the present.

### 2. The Impossibility of Wholeness

Aruni seeks a coherent narrative of origins that might reconcile her multiple identities, yet her return demonstrates that origin itself is fractured. The suffering of her biological mother, the silence of her adoptive parents, and the complex social realities of the village cannot be integrated into a single unified sense of self. William Safran observes that for many diasporic subjects, actual return is no longer possible, whether in physical or psychological terms (Safran 91). Aruni's return exemplifies this difficulty, as it becomes painful, incomplete, and ultimately destructive. The ideal of return collapses under the weight of historical and personal complexity, revealing that the homeland cannot serve as a simple resolution to diasporic longing.

This collapse resonates with Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space, which emphasizes that homeland and diaspora are not fixed categories but intersecting sites of memory, power, and identity (Brah 193). Aruni's experience shows how return is not a restoration of wholeness but a confrontation with the layered histories of displacement and belonging. James Clifford's idea of "routes rather than roots" further illuminates this tension, suggesting that diasporic identity is shaped less by a singular origin than by the ongoing journeys, connections, and disconnections that define movement across spaces (Clifford 302). Stuart Hall similarly argues that cultural identity is not an accomplished fact but a production that is always in process (Hall 236). Lokuge's narrative demonstrates that the myth of return is destabilized by these theoretical insights, showing that diasporic belonging is always provisional, negotiated, and entangled with both memory and history.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory also deepens this reading. Aruni's imagined homeland is constructed from parental stories, photographs, and silences rather than direct experience, which aligns with Hirsch's idea that second-generation subjects inherit memories so deeply that they seem to constitute their own (Hirsch 107). Lokuge's novel thus illustrates how diasporic longing is mediated by memory and imagination, and how the confrontation with reality unsettles these inherited narratives.



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### 3. Return as Exposure to Violence

Aruni's attempt to reclaim her cultural identity by returning to Sri Lanka is stigmatized, even though she has already experienced failure in her efforts to begin anew abroad. As she tries to restore her connection to tradition and re-situate herself within an indigenous community, she encounters sexual violence that underscores the vulnerability of women in diasporic return. Lokuge's narrative depicts this moment with stark intensity:

“And they raped her. Some she recognised, some she didn't. She lay inert, as if she hardly felt the repeated thrust to her most hurting depths. She saw Premasiri's face in the line of men. She felt his lips clamp down on hers. She felt her breasts sore, her body torn and stripped. She swallowed another scream and another. But like bile, they welled up and out of her, thick and bitter. Later, there were only cries, and whispers” (Lokuge 239–240).

This passage illustrates how Aruni's return is marked not by reconciliation but by violence, revealing the intersection of gender, diaspora, and power. Her experience demonstrates that the search for belonging is complicated by patriarchal structures that render the female diasporic subject especially vulnerable. Lokuge's novel thereby critiques the myth of return, showing that the homeland can be as dangerous and alienating as the diaspora itself.

### 4. Reconfiguring Belonging

Eventually the novel discloses the fact that belonging cannot be equated with territorial return. Instead, it becomes relational, hybrid, and uncertain. Aruni's sense of home emerges not from Sri Lanka or Australia alone, but from the emotional, ecological, and ethical ties she forms across spaces.

Lokuge thus aligns with Avtar Brah's theory that belonging is constituted in “diaspora space,” not in recovered origins (Brah 208). The homeland does not restore wholeness; instead, it forces a confrontation with loss and fragmentation.

### Conclusion

*Turtle Nest* offers a powerful analysis of diasporic longing and the myth of return. Through Aruni's journey, Lokuge reveals that diasporic identity is shaped by psychological dislocation, gendered vulnerability, and globalised inequalities. The homeland, far from being a site of redemption, becomes a space of confrontation as to where fantasy dissolves into complex social realities.

The novel suggests that the peril of diaspora lies not simply in displacement but in the desire for an impossible wholeness. Return does not heal, instead, it exposes the layers of trauma, silence, and structural violence that shape both diaspora and homeland. Lokuge ultimately reimagines belonging as a fragile, relational process that transcends national boundaries and engages with ecological and ethical concerns.

In challenging the myth of return, *Turtle Nest* contributes to contemporary diaspora studies by presenting a nuanced understanding of identity that acknowledges fracture, embraces hybridity, and resists simplistic notions of home.

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
ISSN:2277-7881(Print); IMPACT FACTOR :9.014(2025); IC VALUE:5.16; ISI VALUE:2.286

PEER REVIEWED AND REFEREED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

(Fulfilled Suggests Parameters of UGC by IJMER)

Volume:14, Issue:11(1), November, 2025

Scopus Review ID: A2B96D3ACF3FEA2A

Article Received: Reviewed: Accepted

Publisher: Sucharitha Publication, India

Online Copy of Article Publication Available: [www.ijmer.in](http://www.ijmer.in)

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