



Representations of Transnational Identity in Contemporary Literature through a Comparative Literature Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze representations of transnational identity in contemporary literature through a comparative literature approach. The issue examined in this study concerns how literary texts represent migration, diaspora, multilingualism, cultural memory, home, race, gender, and belonging in a globalized world. This research used a qualitative design based on comparative literary study. The data were collected through documentation, close reading, and textual observation of selected contemporary literary texts that contain issues of migration, diaspora, and cultural negotiation. The corpus was selected through purposive sampling based on relevance to transnational identity, contemporary literary context, and richness of narrative evidence. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis by identifying codes, categories, and major themes across the selected texts. The findings show five main themes: home as an unstable and negotiated space, language as a marker of identity and difference, the racialized and gendered body in transnational space, memory as a bridge between past and present, and comparative differences across literary traditions. These findings indicate that transnational identity in contemporary literature is not fixed, but continuously formed through movement, social relations, cultural contact, and narrative strategy. The study contributes to comparative literature, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism by offering a framework for reading identity across national and cultural boundaries. Future studies may include Indonesian diaspora literature and Southeast Asian migrant writing to broaden the discussion from non-Western perspectives.



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1. Introduction

Contemporary literature increasingly represents identity as a dynamic process shaped by migration, diaspora, multilingualism, cultural memory, and global mobility. Literary characters no longer belong only to one nation, one language, or one cultural origin. They often move between homeland and hostland, family memory and public identity, local attachment and global belonging. This issue has become more visible in contemporary fiction and poetry because transnational mobility changes how people understand home, language, race, gender, and cultural belonging. Recent studies on diasporic and migrant literature show that identity is often represented as fluid, negotiated, and unstable rather than fixed or singular (Lazzari, 2023).

In the global context, transnational identity appears as a response to historical displacement, forced migration, postcolonial memory, and cultural contact. Contemporary literary works such as *Americanah*, *Exit West*, *Whereabouts*, *Brown Girls*, and other diasporic narratives present characters who must negotiate multiple forms of belonging. They face cultural dislocation, racial marking, linguistic tension, and emotional attachment to more than one place. Rodrigues (2022) shows that contemporary Brazilian fiction about Middle Eastern diasporic identities questions the meaning of home through narratives of return, memory, and mobility. This finding indicates that literary texts do not only reflect migration, but also interpret the emotional and cultural consequences of living across borders.

The issue is also relevant in national and educational contexts because readers in Indonesia increasingly encounter global literary texts through translation, digital platforms, higher education, and cross-cultural literary studies. This condition requires a reading model that can explain how identity is constructed across cultural and national boundaries. In literature classrooms and academic research, transnational identity helps readers understand the experience of migrants, refugees, diasporic communities, and multilingual subjects. This perspective supports a broader humanistic understanding of cultural difference, social adaptation, and intercultural communication. Pérez (2023) argues that transnational and comparative approaches are important because ethnic and migrant literatures cannot be fully understood through a narrow national framework.

Several empirical findings from recent literary studies show that contemporary texts often represent identity through tension between origin and destination. In *Exit West*, migration is not only a physical journey, but also a psychological and social transformation. Abbas et al. (2025) explain that the novel represents identity as a continuous negotiation shaped by memory, language, community, and changing geography. A similar pattern appears in studies on *Americanah*, where migration exposes the protagonist to race, gender, language, and cultural politics in the host country. Acharya and Koirala (2022) show that the novel redefines immigrant identity through nationality, globalization, home, and culture. These studies confirm that transnational identity is central to contemporary literary representation.

However, previous studies still show a clear research gap. Many studies focus on one author, one novel, or one diasporic community. Studies on Jhumpa Lahiri often discuss language, translation, and self-reinvention. Studies on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie often discuss race and African migration. Studies on Mohsin Hamid often focus on refugee mobility and border politics. These studies are valuable, but they do not always compare how different literary traditions construct transnational identity through narrative structure, language, memory, spatial movement, and character formation. A comparative literature approach can fill this gap because it allows the researcher to examine similarities and differences across texts, cultures, and literary traditions.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze representations of transnational identity in contemporary literature through a comparative literature approach. The study focuses on how selected literary texts represent migration, diaspora, language, cultural memory, home, race, gender, and belonging. It also examines how narrative strategies shape the reader's understanding of transnational subjectivity. Theoretically, this study contributes to comparative literature, diaspora studies, and postcolonial literary criticism. Practically, it offers a useful reading framework for literature teaching, cultural studies, and academic discussion on identity in a globalized world.

2. Materials and Methods

This study used a qualitative approach with a comparative literature design. This design was selected because the study aimed to interpret meaning, narrative pattern, cultural representation, and identity formation in literary texts. The study did not seek statistical measurement. It focused on how transnational identity is represented, negotiated, and contested across selected contemporary literary works. Comparative literature was used because the research object

involved texts from different cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds. Wang (2022) explains that comparative literature studies two or more literary phenomena across boundaries of language, nation, culture, and tradition.

The research was conducted from January to April 2025. The research location was not limited to a physical field site because this study was library-based and text-based. Data were collected through academic libraries, digital journal databases, publisher websites, and online repositories that provided access to literary texts and scholarly articles. The main research materials were selected contemporary literary texts that represent migration, diaspora, multilingualism, cultural displacement, and transnational belonging. The research also used secondary sources from journal articles, book chapters, and recent literary studies published between 2020 and 2025.

The data source was divided into primary and secondary data. Primary data consisted of selected literary texts that contain transnational identity issues. The corpus was selected through purposive sampling. The criteria were: the text belongs to contemporary literature, the narrative contains migration or diaspora experience, the characters face cultural or linguistic negotiation, and the text is relevant to comparative literature analysis. Secondary data consisted of academic studies on transnational literature, diaspora, postcolonial identity, multilingualism, thematic analysis, and qualitative research. Campbell et al. (2020) state that purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative studies because it helps researchers select information-rich sources that fit the research focus.

Data were collected through documentation, close reading, and textual observation. Documentation was used to collect literary texts, academic articles, and theoretical materials. Close reading was conducted by reading each text repeatedly to identify relevant narrative units. Textual observation focused on dialogue, narration, setting, symbols, code-switching, memory, conflict, and character development. Each relevant quotation was recorded in a data sheet that included the title of the text, textual context, quotation, initial code, category, and interpretive note. This process made the data traceable and allowed limited replication by other researchers.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, theoretical triangulation, and audit trail. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing evidence from different literary texts and previous academic studies. Theoretical triangulation was applied by using concepts from comparative literature, diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, hybridity, and transnational studies. An audit trail was prepared by keeping records of corpus selection, coding decisions, thematic categories, and interpretation notes. Because this study did not involve human participants, member checking was not used. Instead, peer review and repeated textual verification were used to ensure that each interpretation remained grounded in textual evidence. Ahmed (2024) emphasizes that credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are important principles in qualitative research trustworthiness.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis supported by comparative interpretation. The analysis followed several stages. First, the researcher became familiar with the corpus through repeated reading. Second, relevant textual units were coded based on issues such as migration, home, language, memory, race, gender, hybridity, and belonging. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. Fourth, themes were compared across texts to identify convergences and differences. Fifth, the findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework of transnational identity and comparative literature. Braun and Clarke (2021) explain that thematic analysis is useful for identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Byrne (2022) also shows that reflexive thematic analysis allows researchers to move from coding to deeper conceptual interpretation.

3. Results and Discussions

The analysis shows that contemporary literature represents transnational identity as a continuous process of negotiation. Identity does not appear as a fixed attachment to one nation, one culture,

or one language. It emerges through movement, memory, adaptation, and conflict. In the selected texts, characters experience identity as something that changes when they cross borders, enter new social spaces, and face new cultural expectations. In *Exit West*, migration transforms Nadia and Saeed not only geographically, but also emotionally and relationally. Their movement through different cities changes their sense of home, intimacy, and belonging. This pattern supports Abbas et al. (2025), who explain that *Exit West* presents migrant identity as dynamic and shaped by language, memory, community, and continuous adjustment.

The first major theme is home as an unstable and negotiated space. Home is not represented only as a physical place. It becomes a memory, an emotional attachment, and sometimes a source of tension. In several narratives, characters cannot fully return to the homeland, yet they also cannot fully belong to the host country. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's experience in the United States shows that migration creates a double awareness. She remembers Nigeria while learning how race, accent, and social class shape her life abroad. Her return to Nigeria does not simply restore her original identity. It creates another form of negotiation. This finding is close to Rodrigues's (2022) study, which shows that diasporic fiction often questions the meaning of "home" through the tension between return, memory, and mobility.

The second major theme is language as a marker of identity and difference. The selected texts show that language does not only function as a communication tool. It marks class, race, cultural memory, and emotional belonging. In works related to Jhumpa Lahiri, the movement between languages becomes a way to rethink selfhood. The narrator's linguistic displacement shows that identity can be shaped by the decision to enter another language and leave the comfort of a dominant language. In Korean transnational poetry, the use of Korean, English, and Konglish shows how multilingual expression resists monolingual norms and gives voice to diasporic experience. Han (2025) argues that linguistic hybridity in Korean transnational poetry challenges dominant cultural narratives and allows poets to negotiate personal and collective identity.

The third major theme is the racialized and gendered body in transnational space. Transnational movement does not erase social inequality. Instead, it often exposes characters to new forms of racial, gendered, and cultural classification. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu becomes more aware of Black identity after living in the United States. The text shows that race is not experienced in the same way in every national context. Race becomes a learned social category that shapes how the migrant body is seen and treated. Motahane (2025) also explains that *Americanah* represents African transnational experience through race, gender, hair, language, and cultural transformation. This finding shows that transnational identity cannot be separated from unequal social structures.

The fourth major theme is memory as a bridge between past and present. Memory allows characters to connect with their cultural origin, but it also produces conflict. Characters remember food, family, language, homeland, and childhood as part of identity formation. However, memory does not always create comfort. It can produce nostalgia, guilt, loss, and alienation. In diasporic narratives, memory often works as a counter-space against assimilation. It helps characters resist being fully absorbed by the host culture. At the same time, memory can also prevent them from fully accepting new identities. This pattern appears in studies of Lahiri's works, where memory, translation, and language become central to the construction of migrant and translingual identity (Lazzari, 2023).

The fifth major theme is comparative difference across literary traditions. The selected texts share similar concerns about migration, displacement, and belonging, but they represent these concerns through different narrative strategies. *Exit West* uses magical doors to represent sudden mobility and the collapse of conventional borders. *Americanah* uses realist narration, blog discourse, and return migration to examine race and cultural adaptation. Lahiri's works use linguistic minimalism and translingual reflection to explore identity through language and place. Korean transnational poetry uses code-switching and linguistic hybridity to express cultural

tension. These differences show that transnational identity is not a single universal experience. It is shaped by genre, language, history, race, gender, and the politics of place.

Discussion

The findings confirm that transnational identity in contemporary literature should be read as a relational and processual identity. It is relational because characters define themselves through contact with other people, places, languages, and cultural expectations. It is processual because identity changes over time. This supports the theoretical position of comparative literature, which reads literary texts across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Pérez (2023) argues that transnational and comparative approaches help scholars move beyond narrow national categories. The present study strengthens that view by showing that contemporary texts construct identity through movement between cultural spaces rather than through stable national belonging.

The finding on home as an unstable space also extends previous research on diaspora and migration. Earlier studies often viewed home as a lost origin or a destination of return. The selected texts show a more complex pattern. Home becomes something reconstructed through memory, relationship, and cultural practice. In *Americanah*, return does not erase the experience of migration. In *Exit West*, mobility makes home temporary and fragile. In Lahiri's works, home can appear through language, silence, and place-based relation. This finding aligns with Rodrigues (2022), who shows that contemporary diasporic fiction questions the possibility of return and invites readers to rethink home as a shifting category.

The discussion on language offers an important theoretical implication. Language in transnational literature does not merely reflect identity. It actively produces identity. Code-switching, translation, accent, and language choice become narrative devices that reveal cultural hierarchy and emotional attachment. Lahiri's turn to Italian, for example, shows that writing in another language can become a form of self-reconstruction. Lazzari (2023) argues that Lahiri's translingual practice deprovincializes both Italian and Anglophone literary fields. This study supports that argument and adds that language should be treated as a central analytical category in comparative studies of transnational identity.

The finding on race and gender shows that transnational identity is not only about mobility. It is also about power. Migration creates new opportunities, but it also places characters inside unequal systems of racialization, gender expectation, and cultural judgment. In *Americanah*, the migrant subject learns that race operates differently across societies. In diasporic women's narratives, female characters often experience double negotiation because they must confront both cultural displacement and gendered control. This finding is consistent with Biswas (2025), who argues that diasporic women's identity is shaped by displacement, gender, race, and adaptation. Therefore, transnational identity must be analyzed through an intersectional lens.

The comparative findings also show that genre affects how transnational identity is represented. Fiction often develops identity through plot, character development, and spatial movement. Poetry often condenses identity into language, sound, fragmentation, and symbolic expression. This difference matters because each genre produces a different form of transnational experience. In *Exit West*, magical realism creates a compressed image of global displacement. In Korean transnational poetry, multilingual form becomes the main site of resistance. This finding suggests that future research should not only compare themes, but also compare narrative and poetic strategies.

Practically, the findings can support literature teaching and cultural studies. Teachers can use transnational literary texts to help students understand migration, diaspora, race, multilingualism, and cultural negotiation. These texts also help students see that identity is not only inherited, but also formed through experience, memory, and social interaction. For literary researchers, the study offers a model for analyzing transnational identity through themes such as home, language, memory, race, gender, and narrative form. Future studies can expand the corpus by including

Indonesian diaspora literature, Southeast Asian migrant writing, or translated works to understand how transnational identity is represented from non-Western perspectives.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that contemporary literature represents transnational identity as a fluid and negotiated formation shaped by migration, memory, language, race, gender, and cultural belonging. The findings show that home is not presented as a stable geographic origin, but as an emotional, cultural, and relational space that changes across movement and displacement. Language also appears as a central marker of identity because multilingual expression, translation, accent, and code-switching reveal the tension between assimilation and cultural memory. These findings contribute to comparative literature by showing that transnational identity cannot be understood through a single national or cultural framework.

The study offers theoretical, practical, and educational implications. Theoretically, it strengthens the relevance of comparative literature, diaspora studies, and postcolonial criticism in reading identity across borders. Practically, it provides a useful framework for analyzing contemporary literary texts that address migration, displacement, and intercultural relations. In literary education, the findings can help students understand identity as a social and cultural process rather than a fixed category. Future research may expand the corpus by including Indonesian diaspora literature, Southeast Asian migrant writing, or translated literary works to deepen understanding of transnational identity from non-Western perspectives.

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