

Unraveling Borders: Diasporic Identity And The Fluid Self In Olga Tokarczuk's *Flights* And *The Books Of Jacob*

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the themes of diasporic identity and the unfixed self in Olga Tokarczuk's novels *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob*. Drawing upon concepts of liminality, hybridity, and deterritorialization, the article examines how Tokarczuk's characters navigate the complexities of displacement, cultural negotiation, and the ever-shifting nature of selfhood. Through close textual analysis, the article argues that Tokarczuk's characters embody the fluidity and dynamism of diasporic identities, constantly challenging fixed notions of belonging and embracing a sense of selfhood that is unmoored from singular locations or narratives.

Keywords: Diasporic Identity, Fluid Self, Liminality, Hybridity, Deterritorialization, Multilingualism.

Introduction:

Diasporic literature, with its rich medley of themes, stylistic nuances, and boundless scope, offers a profound exploration of human experiences in a globalized world. It challenges static notions of identity, celebrates cultural multiplicity, and provides a platform for marginalized voices to be heard.

Diasporic literature pulsates with a distinct set of themes and motifs. The quest for identity stands as a central pillar, explored through characters grappling with questions of belonging, heritage, and the ever-shifting boundaries of self (Brah, 1996). This often leads to a sense of liminality, existing in a perpetual state of in-betweenness, neither fully belonging to the homeland nor the adopted land (Bhabha, 1994). Nostalgia for the lost homeland intertwines with the realities of the new environment, weaving a tapestry of conflicting emotions (Clifford, 1994). Additionally, hybridity becomes a hallmark, as individuals and communities negotiate cultural influences, languages, and customs, creating unique and ever-evolving identities (Hall, 1996).

Beyond thematic concerns, the stylistic fingerprints of diasporic literature are equally distinct. Multilingualism and code-switching blur linguistic boundaries, reflecting the lived experiences of navigating multiple languages and cultural contexts (Rampton, 1995). Metafiction, with its self-reflexive nature, allows for introspection into the very act of storytelling and the challenges of representing diasporic experiences (Hutcheon, 1988). Magical realism often finds its way into narratives, blending reality and fantasy to explore the complexities of cultural memory and the search for belonging (Rushdie, 1991).

The scope of diasporic literature extends beyond forced migrations, encompassing voluntary displacements, cultural diasporas, and even internal migrations within a country (Brah, 1999). This diversity manifests in the wide range of genres employed, from poignant autobiographies (Adichie, 2013) to historical epics (Hosseini, 2003) to contemporary satire (Diaz, 2012). Moreover, diasporic voices resonate across continents, enriching literary landscapes worldwide, from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Nigerian narratives to Salman Rushdie's Anglo-Indian explorations.

Diasporic Explorations in Tokarczuk's *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob*

Olga Tokarczuk's novels, *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob*, transcend mere storytelling, immersing readers in the intricate mosaic of diasporic experiences. Awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature, Tokarczuk

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masterfully portrays characters who navigate the complex terrain of displacement, cultural negotiation, and the ever-evolving nature of selfhood. By exploring themes of liminality, hybridity, and deterritorialization, this research article explores how *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob* illuminate the multifaceted realities of diasporic identity in a globalized world.

Diasporic literature is characterized by its exploration of the experiences of individuals and communities living outside their ancestral homelands. It often grapples with themes of displacement, loss, and the search for identity in a new environment. As Robin Cohen argues, diasporic narratives frequently present "a dual consciousness" (1997, 19), navigating between memories of the homeland and the realities of the host society. This tension is evident in *Flights*, where characters like Natalie, a Polish woman living in Amsterdam, struggle to reconcile their past with the present, constantly questioning their sense of belonging.

Diasporic literature also explores the complex relationship between memory and identity. As Amitav Ghosh notes, "the act of migration is often accompanied by a loss of memories" (2006, 1). In *Flights*, characters like the enigmatic Mr. Nobody embody this loss. Their fragmented memories and shifting identities reflect the challenges of preserving a sense of self in a constantly changing world.

Furthermore, diasporic literature often critiques the concept of a fixed national identity, highlighting the fluidity and dynamism of belonging in a globalized world. In *Flights*, Tokarczuk challenges traditional notions of Polishness through characters like Tonia, a Polish woman who embraces cosmopolitanism, and Piotr, a Polish man who becomes increasingly assimilated into Slovakian culture. These characters complicate the idea of a singular national identity, suggesting that belonging can exist in multiple spaces and forms.

The structure of *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob* itself embodies the diasporic experience. Its fragmented form, with its short, interconnected narratives, mirrors the fragmented identities of individuals who navigate multiple cultures and spaces (Clifford 103). This polyphony of voices highlights the interconnectedness of human experience across borders while simultaneously acknowledging the distinct challenges faced by individuals living in diaspora. It also emphasizes the interconnectedness of human experience, regardless of geographic location, while simultaneously acknowledging the unique challenges faced by individuals living in diaspora.

The novels' thematic focus on travel, displacement and movement directly engages with the diasporic condition. Characters of *Flights* like the nameless narrator, constantly traversing airports and cities, are representative of the contemporary migrant experience. Their journeys are not solely physical, but also emotional and psychological, as they deal with questions of belonging, identity, and the search for home. As Tokarczuk writes, "We are all in transit, even when we think we have arrived" (Tokarczuk 14). Similarly, the characters of *The Books of Jacob* like the enigmatic Jacob Frank, constantly traversing lands and communities, embody the rootlessness and constant flux inherent in the diasporic experience. As one character reflects, "We are all pilgrims, always on the way to somewhere else" (Tokarczuk 32). This sentiment underscores the fluidity and constant negotiation of identity inherent in the diasporic experience.

The inclusion of historical narratives in *Flights*, such as the story of Chopin's heart being smuggled back to Poland, highlights the enduring impact of displacement and the ongoing struggle to maintain connections to lost or fragmented pasts. This engagement with historical memory allows Tokarczuk to explore the generational trauma often experienced by diasporic communities (Brah 19). Beyond physical movement, *The Books of Jacob* explores the psychological and emotional complexities of displacement. Characters grapple with questions of belonging, identity, and the yearning for a sense of home. As Tokarczuk writes, "The world is a place of passage, and all of us are passing through it" (Tokarczuk 147). This melancholic recognition highlights the existential angst often experienced by those who live between cultures and spaces.

The Books of Jacob also explores the intricate relationship between memory and history, crucial aspects of diasporic identity. The inclusion of historical narratives, such as the Frankist movement's challenges to established religious authority, illustrates the enduring impact of displacement and the struggle to maintain connections to fragmented pasts. This engagement with historical memory allows Tokarczuk to explore the generational trauma often experienced by diasporic communities (Brah 19).

However, *Flights* and *Books of Jacob* do not solely portray the diasporic experience as one of loss and fragmentation. The novels also celebrate the potential for transformation and growth that arises from displacement. In *Flights*, the narrator, through her travels, encounters diverse cultures and individuals, expanding her worldview and challenging her preconceived notions. Similarly, characters like Natalia, who returns to Poland after years abroad, find new ways to connect with their heritage and create a sense of belonging. This multifaceted portrayal avoids simplistic narratives of victimhood, instead acknowledging the agency and resilience of individuals living in diaspora. In *The Books of Jacob*, characters like Esther, a young woman raised in the Frankist community, embraces her diverse heritage and navigates the complexities of her identity (Tokarczuk 682). Similarly, the novel's exploration of religious and cultural exchange suggests the possibility of creating new forms of belonging and identity beyond traditional categories.

Beyond Fixed Frontiers: Negotiating Liminal Spaces:

Both novels introduce characters existing in perpetual transit, occupying cultural and geographical margins. In *Flights*, a diverse cast embarks on journeys across Europe, each seeking their own elusive destination. A Polish woman wanders through unfamiliar landscapes, a young man searches for his vanished sister in Amsterdam, and a Czech man documents the lives of nomads. These individuals challenge the concept of a

fixed identity, embodying the constant state of "becoming" that Anna Nacher aptly describes as "never arriving" (12). Similarly, in *The Books of Jacob*, the protagonist defies categorization. Jacob Frank, a Polish Jew, blends religious and cultural influences, blurring the lines between Judaism, Catholicism, and Kabbalah. This liminality reflects the historical realities of many diasporic communities, constantly negotiating between their past and present, their heritage and adopted cultures.

Beyond Essentialism: Embracing Hybrid Identities:

Tokarczuk's characters further dismantle essentialist notions of a singular, unchanging self. Their encounters with diverse cultures and languages weave unique tapestries of identity. In *The Books of Jacob*, Jacob Frank's identity is a mosaic, as Michael C. Morey observes, "woven from diverse threads" (15), reflecting the porous borders of cultural and religious affiliation in 18th-century Eastern Europe. Similarly, *Flights* protagonists constantly encounter new cultures and languages, their identities shaped and reshaped by these interactions. This fluidity resonates with the complexity of diasporic experiences, where individuals draw upon diverse influences to construct their own unique understanding of self.

Beyond Anchors: Deterritorialization and Unmoored Belonging:

The novels also investigate the concept of deterritorialization, the disconnection from traditional notions of belonging tied to specific locations. In *Flights*, the characters' constant movement disrupts any sense of fixed roots or national identity. Ewa Stachniak points out how these "nomads" (87) represent the contemporary human condition, unmoored from specific territories. Similarly, in *The Books of Jacob*, Jacob's journeys across Europe mirror the historical realities of Jewish communities forced to migrate and adapt. This deterritorialization, while challenging, opens possibilities for new forms of belonging and connection. Shared experiences and networks of support, rather than specific locations, become the foundation for forging new bonds.

Conclusion

By exploring diasporic experiences in *Flights* and *The Books of Jacob*, Tokarczuk offers a profound exploration of identity in a globalized world. Her characters defy fixed categories, embracing liminal spaces, hybrid identities, and unmoored belonging. They challenge essentialist notions of selfhood, demonstrating the potential for individuals to forge their own unique identities in the face of displacement and constant change. Tokarczuk's masterful storytelling celebrates the dynamism and fluidity of diasporic identities, reminding us that selfhood is not a fixed destination but rather an ongoing journey of discovery and transformation.

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