Available Online: 23 November 2026 DOI: 10.54254/2753-7080/2026.39396

A comparative study of cultural belonging dilemmas in contemporary British and American migrant fiction

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Abstract. The issue of cultural belonging is complicated by individual attachment versus family obligations or conditions of recognition imposed from outside. The current project provides a comparative analysis framework for Brick Lane, White Teeth, The Namesake, and Native Speaker based on corpus-assisted methodology. Twenty scenes out of eighty are analyzed per each novel and involve close reading in context, thematic annotation, retrieval of concordance, and indexing of character trajectories. NVivo software provides the classification of belonging into five categories, AntConc extracts lexical patterns, and Python assigns tokens to speakers, focalizers, and scene outcomes. Smoothing of log-odds measures allows one to discriminate between the concentration of themes and plain word frequencies without assuming that lexical item equals identity assessment. The inter-coder agreement is 0.84 ± 0.04 for themes and 0.78 ± 0.05 for narrative outcomes. Family obligation coding gives average 0.63 ± 0.07 for pairs of domestic narratives, and linguistic recognition coding produces 0.58 ± 0.08 for pairs of public narratives. The distribution of these results is linked to naming, silence, racialized recognition, and reoccurring domestic items.

Keywords: migrant fiction, corpus-assisted literary analysis, concordance indexing, cultural belonging, narrative annotation

1. Introduction

Migration belonging in migrant fiction may be marked with conflicting expectations rather than a choice between cultural origins and the destination society. The attachment to family traditions may coexist with an aversion to family responsibility, and public inclusion in a community may be evaluated in racial and linguistic terms. Such oppositions are turned into literary issues via dialogue, focalization, sequence, and the distribution of recognition among characters. Contemporary theorization of migrant aesthetics pays attention to how literary narrative explores the conventional stories about migration and assimilation [1]. The contrast between attachment and recognition is especially critical. The affection for a household, a language, a neighborhood is not synonymous with recognition from their representatives. Studies on displaced belonging reveal the relation of domestic practices to political boundaries and conditions of inequality of membership [2]. In the case of comparative literature study, such relations need to be taken into consideration in regard to the particular scene: who sets the boundary, what norms define the relation, and what is the character's reaction. Thematic labeling is helpful when it maintains these relational aspects instead of presenting identity

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in terms of culture. Finally, recent studies of migration consider individual aspirations along with the societal narrative on mobility and settlement [3]. The article focuses on four novels, *Brick Lane*, *White Teeth, The Namesake*, and *Native Speaker.* British and American setting provides different narrative constructions of family obligation, naming process, linguistic competence, and attachment to place. The comparison addresses the narrative organization of the described conflicts without assuming that novels are representative observations of national populations. Corpus-assisted approach allows to make such a comparison systematic by identifying recurrent expressions and their correlation with the annotated scene. The design of corpus research insists on the necessity of defining the relation between chosen material and the domain of the analysis [4]. Therefore, the current design includes eighty conflict scenes chosen purposefully and searches across the entire novel text. The analysis deals with the way belonging is questioned, negotiations of conflicting expectations and their representation in narrative form. The combined annotation-concordance model enables inspecting the comparison made by literary analysis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultural identity and the politics of belonging

The concept of cultural identity refers to the relations in terms of which affiliation attains meaning, while the politics of belonging relates to the borders that determine membership in terms of acknowledgment. Refugee literature studies question the adequacy of the concept of national belonging as an analytical tool [5]. The separation allows distinguishing the individual's declared affiliation from the acknowledgment offered by the family, community, or institution. As a result, the analyst discovers the agent who constructs the border, the affiliation that is claimed, and the requirement of the acknowledgment.

2.2. Family, generation, and migrant attachments

Interrogations into the dynamics of Jamaican-American fiction reveal how intergenerational strife is related to the dynamics of racialization and precariousness, along with the structural aspects of migration discourse [6]. Therefore, kinship ties come to be perceived as comprising conflicting elements and differentiated access to safety, instead of being regarded as a binary opposition between custom and autonomy. The concept of generation is relational; individuals might preserve customs in one case, but change them in another. In this comparison, naming, familial duties, and recurring objects serve as areas where kinship ties can be negotiated. Gender and generation represent the structuring of certain conflicts, not their predetermined results.

2.3. Narrative form in British and American migrant fiction

The study of the marginalization of migrants shows how narrative innovation brings into question the authority given to migrant narrators [7]. Research of British migration literature in the contemporary period has found connections between narrative devices and attempts to break down the discourse of exclusion [8]. Stylistics offers tools for the study of viewpoint, speech presentation, and narrative structure [9]. Corpus stylistics combines all these characteristics with search possibilities within the text, while at the same time retaining close reading [10]. All this makes it possible to construct a comparative approach, connecting vocabulary with the speaker and the narrative result.

3. Methodology

3.1. Primary texts and comparative corpus

The primary corpus comprises the English originals of *Brick Lane*, *White Teeth*, *The Namesake*, and *Native Speaker*. Each digital text receives an edition identifier, chapter map, and checksum. Front matter, publisher material, and running headers are removed; punctuation, paragraph boundaries, and dialogue remain. Eighty conflict scenes, twenty per novel, form the comparative subset. A scene begins with a recognizable interaction or focalized situation and ends with a change in setting, time, participants, or conflict. Inclusion requires competing demands concerning attachment or recognition, not merely migration-related vocabulary. Selection proceeds from a complete chapter inventory, with opening, middle, and closing sections represented. Python stores immutable text, character offsets, and token positions in linked scene and passage records. Separate tables identify characters, speakers, focalizers, thematic labels, and narrative outcomes. Overlapping scenes are consolidated to prevent duplicate token counts. The full-text corpus supports concordance searches and counterexample retrieval; the selected scenes support structured comparison.

3.2. Theoretical foundation and analytical categories

Stuart Hall's account of cultural identity and Nira Yuval-Davis's politics of belonging provide the conceptual foundation. Five categories operationalize the framework: family obligation, linguistic association, racial exclusion, spatial association, and negotiated affiliation. Each annotation identifies a claimed attachment, a competing demand, an actor controlling recognition, and the character's response. Multiple themes can coexist within one scene. Negotiated affiliation requires textual evidence of a revised relationship, practice, or claim rather than an analyst's assumption of successful integration. Narrative outcomes distinguish accepted membership, conditional accommodation, refusal, and unresolved tension. These describe scene-level consequences, not permanent psychological states. Character generation, gender, setting, and relationship receive separate metadata fields. This separation prevents demographic descriptors from functioning as automatic explanations of thematic outcomes.

3.3. Contextual close reading and narrative analysis

Close reading records the triggering event, competing expectations, focalization, speech presentation, and immediate consequence. Analysis attends to naming, dialogue, silence, household objects, and movement between private and public spaces. Silence receives a code only when narration or interaction makes withholding speech consequential. Irony requires a contextual discrepancy between an expressed position and its narrative framing. Each interpretation links to a passage identifier and an explanatory memo. A trajectory register connects recurring characters across scenes in story chronology while preserving narration order. Retrospective passages therefore remain distinguishable from later events. Comparisons examine whether an apparent resolution survives subsequent encounters and whether narrator and character assign different meanings to the same outcome. This structure retains reversals and contradictory affiliations rather than compressing a character's development into a single identity label.

3.4. Thematic coding and corpus-assisted reading

NVivo is used in managing annotations and interpretive memos. AntConc software is used to extract the seed terms home, belong, foreign, native, name, and family using documented word-form searches. Inflected forms are part of the search results, while homographs and non-relevant uses are manually labeled with exclusion

tags. The keyword-in-context windows display twenty tokens to either side of the target, followed by an analysis of the full context before the stance is assigned. No keyword can automatically determine classification of a word as an identifier, rejection, uncertain, or irony term. Python scripts connect the concordance with the scenes, producing five-token collocates around sentence breaks. Collocational concentration within theme-coded scenes as shown in Equation (1):

$$\lambda_n(w,k) = log\frac{(a_{nwk}+\frac{1}{2})(d_{nwk}+\frac{1}{2})}{(b_{nwk}+\frac{1}{2})(c_{nwk}+\frac{1}{2})} \tag{1}$$

Here, a counts seed anchors whose windows contain collocate w in scenes coded k; b counts remaining anchors in those scenes. Counts c and d describe corresponding anchors in other selected scenes. The correction stabilizes sparse cells; v_n^{-1} supplies a working weight for the descriptive pooled score. Novel-specific profiles remain primary. Counts, normalized rates per thousand scene tokens, and source concordances accompany every profile. Manual review retrieves expressions of connection and exclusion lacking the seed terms, preserving an independent route into the corpus.

3.5. Cross-text comparison method

Comparison matrices compare the types of conflict, generation, gender, context, narrative method, response, and result. In particular, the books "*Brick Lane*" and "*The Namesake*" will be paired based on domestic expectations, naming methods, and redefined familial affection. On the other hand, "*White Teeth*" and "*Native Speaker*" will be compared with respect to public acknowledgement, language standing, and problematic identity. The comparison pairs are meant to facilitate discussion questions, rather than to categorize the novels; each novel will also be compared with respect to the conflict associated with the alternative pair. "Python" uses themes, lexicology, and trajectory information, along with scene indicators, to produce sortable matrices. Each of the comparison statements should be validated through context, with examples of alternative scenarios being sought out. The differences noted are due to the narrative structure in the selected books; "country" tags are used to identify the book contexts. Figure 1 illustrates how scene identifiers link concordance evidence, thematic annotations, and character trajectories to support contextualized comparison of cultural belonging dilemmas across the four novels.

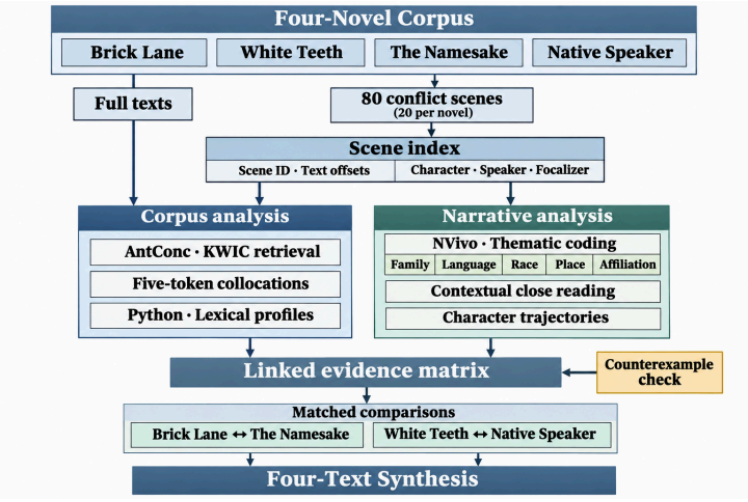

Figure 1. Scene-indexed corpus-assisted framework for comparing cultural belonging dilemmas in migrant fiction

4. Comparative analysis design and interpretive validation

4.1. Selecting scenes and coding agreement

A total of eight pilot scenes, each two from the novels, are used to identify scene codes and coding rules. Two literary scholars conduct independent coding of the pilot, resolve any confusion, refine the codebook, and recode the same scenes. The other twenty scenes are independently coded before adjudication, with five scenes from each novel. For thematic coding, Krippendorff's alpha coefficient is calculated for binary coding decisions and nominal outcomes separately, with the alpha coefficient being the average of all thematic alphas. Agreement intervals are estimated based on two thousand bootstrapped scene-level samples of scenes stratified by novel.

4.2. Matched cases and narrative trajectories

12 matching cases are involved in scene comparison based on either naming, family pressures, language evaluation, or place attachment. Matching is based on the trigger of the conflict and the competing acts of recognition, but the forms of narratives remain intact. Case descriptions show how the trigger, reaction, frame, and the consequence follow. The paths of Nazneen, Irie, Gogol, and Henry serve as guides in comparing scenes across paths. Multiple meetings are analyzed for continuity, reversal, and accommodation based on conditions. There could be acceptance and rejection in one path simultaneously.

4.3. Contextual checks and counterexamples

Contextual validation is provided through paratextual editions, author interviews, and historical literature relevant to the study. Character interpretation continues to be based on the formal properties of the novels. Search for counterexamples will be done with regard to membership, longstanding connections in culture, and disagreements in immigrant groups. Delineation of alternative scenes will involve either addition or exclusion of paragraphs surrounding the scene under consideration. Comparative summaries maintain the denominators of each novel while the computation of lexical profile involves exclusion of keywords of uncertain relevance.

5. Results

5.1. Family obligations and intergenerational belonging conflicts

Family-obligation prevalence averages 0.63 ± 0.07 across *Brick Lane* and *The Namesake*, compared with 0.38 ± 0.07 across the other pair. The contrast is +0.25 ± 0.10. Domestic conflicts connect attachment with authority over naming, mobility, and family expectations. Table 1 summarizes coded patterns and agreement.

Table 1. Scene-level thematic estimates and coding agreement

Measure	Estimate ± bootstrap SE	95% interval
Family obligation: *Brick Lane*	0.65 ± 0.11	[0.45, 0.85]
Family obligation: *The Namesake*	0.60 ± 0.11	[0.40, 0.80]
Family obligation: *White Teeth*	0.40 ± 0.11	[0.20, 0.60]
Family obligation: *Native Speaker*	0.35 ± 0.11	[0.15, 0.55]
Linguistic recognition: *White Teeth*	0.55 ± 0.11	[0.35, 0.75]
Linguistic recognition: *Native Speaker*	0.60 ± 0.11	[0.40, 0.80]

Table 1. Continued

Unresolved tension: four-novel mean	0.55 ± 0.06	[0.44, 0.66]
Thematic coding alpha	0.84 ± 0.04	[0.76, 0.91]
Narrative-outcome alpha	0.78 ± 0.05	[0.68, 0.87]

5.2. Linguistic recognition, racialized boundaries, and spatial attachments

Prevalence of linguistic recognition is estimated at 0.58 ± 0.08 for *White Teeth* and *Native Speaker*. Language acts as the condition of recognition which is dependent on the judgments made about names, speech, and social skills. Attachment of space connects home comfort to public claims of membership. Concordance interpretation helps distinguish between affiliation and refusal of such claims.

5.3. Narrative negotiations and unsettled forms of cultural belonging

The average level of unresolved tension is 0.55 ± 0.06 in each of the four novels. Trajectory analysis reveals that local accommodation is linked to revisions and not necessarily to final resolution. Focalization and retrospective narration create differences between the reactions at the moment and the interpretation that follows. Affiliation negotiated refers to changes in practice and relationship.

6. Conclusion

This approach uses the belonging conundrum as a set of configurations between attachment, obligations, and membership. The scene indexing, concordance linking, and collocation analysis offer an algorithmic framework that allows to detect recurring problems and keep the context of their interpretation intact. The four-novel comparison connects domestic expectations with public acknowledgment via direct scene matching and character development. The value of this comparison is in traceability of its methodology: all thematic distributions and comparisons can be traced back to concrete texts, speakers, and outcomes of narration.

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