Negotiating Cultural Identity and Belonging in Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi*

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ABSTRACT

Immigration is a bittersweet exile of the soul, a journey that echoes Matthew Arnold's haunting lament "wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born" (85-86). More than geographical movement from one country to another, it often entails emotional, linguistic, cultural, and social displacement. Melina Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* traverses the complex terrain of Italian immigrants and their descendants in Australia, mainly through the lives of Nonna Katia and Josephine Alibrandi. The novel highlights the difficulties of migration, including cultural alienation, language barriers, inadequate living conditions, social isolation, racial prejudice, and the struggle to belong. Nonna Katia's experiences as a first-generation immigrant reveal the hardships endured by Italian migrants who feel that the Australian language and their culture are hard nuts to crack. In contrast, Josephine, as a third-generation Italian Australian, encounters a different form of displacement as she negotiates between her Italian heritage and Australian identity. The novel demonstrates that the repercussions of migration extend across generations and influence the formation of cultural identity. At the same time, Marchetta presents cultural relationships and intercultural understanding as a panacea for overcoming prejudice and broadening social perspectives. This paper examines the representation of immigrant experiences in *Looking for Alibrandi*, with particular attention to displacement, language, cultural conflict, racism, identity, and belonging.

Keywords: immigration, displacement, cultural identity, racism

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is the movement of people from one country to another, often in search of fresh woods and pastures new. While migration can offer the prospect of a better life, settling in an unfamiliar country can be challenging. Immigrants often encounter difficulties in acclimatising to a new language, customs, social institutions, and behavioural patterns. They may also face challenges with employment, housing, healthcare, transportation, cultural disparities, and racial discrimination.

Literature provides a significant medium for representing the experiences of displaced individuals and communities. Stuart Hall views cultural identity as a dynamic process shaped by history, cultural memory, and changing social contexts rather than as a fixed essence. This perspective is relevant to Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi*, which explores the evolving identities of an Italian Australian family across generations. Nonna Katia, a first-generation migrant from Sicily, embodies displacement, cultural memory, and attachment to her homeland, while Josephine, a second-generation Italian Australian, negotiates her Italian heritage within Australian society. Through their experiences, Marchetta demonstrates that cultural identity is continuously reconstructed through the interaction of heritage, migration, and the host culture.

The immigrant experience in the novel is therefore presented at two interconnected levels. Nonna Katia represents the first generation, for whom migration involves physical displacement, linguistic isolation, economic hardship, and separation from homeland. Josephine represents a later generation whose difficulties are less directly connected with physical displacement but are strongly associated with cultural identity and racial prejudice. Her experience demonstrates that the effects of immigration are not transient but everlasting.

Immigration and the Experience of Displacement

Nonna Katia's migration to Australia illustrates the uncertainty and emotional dislocation associated with immigration. She initially believes that she is going to America, which she associates with prosperity and opportunity. Her disappointment upon discovering that she is actually travelling to Australia reveals the limited knowledge that migrants could have about distant countries during that period. With dreams and aspirations, she sails to America, but unfortunately lands up in no man's land:

So many times that happened, Jozzie, so many times, any way my cousin Adrianna was going to America with her husband. America, Jozzie. Back then it was like going to heaven. You were going to be rich if you went to America. We were going someplace too. All the time I would hear Francesco talk to his friends. Never to me. I thought we were going to America too. I was sad to leave my family, but happy because Adrianna would be there. But when he told me that we were going to Australis, oh my god, I didn't know what to do. Who knew back then, Jozzie? Who knew where this Australia was? Under Africa, people would say. (90-91)

Australia is unfamiliar to her in terms of geography, language, culture, and social life. Her arrival consequently becomes an experience of profound displacement. She is separated from her family and homeland and finds herself in an environment whose language and customs she does not understand. Australia's unfamiliarity intensifies her emotional isolation. The dilapidated and insecure setting of the house where Nonna lived speaks volumes about the misery of the immigrants. The insects enter the house uninvited, and snakes are frequent visitors. "Sometimes snakes would come in, Jozzie. Oh, Jozzie, Jozzie, Jozzie, do you know what it is like to have a snake in your house?" (138). Her husband is frequently away for work, leaving her alone for extended periods. The novel presents immigration as an experience in which geographical displacement is accompanied by psychological isolation. Nonna Katia's memories of her early years demonstrate that migration can produce a lasting emotional impact. Her struggle is particularly significant because she has been displaced not only from her country but also from the social network that previously provided her with familiarity and security.

Language Barrier and Cultural Isolation

Language, the pride of every homosapein, plays a central role in the immigrant experience as represented in *Looking for Alibrandi*. Communication is essential for social interaction, employment, access to institutions, and the development of relationships. For Nonna Katia, however, the inability to speak English effectively becomes one of the major causes of her isolation. Nonna explains that many immigrants of her generation could not speak English fluently because Australians often did not communicate with them or help them learn the language. When she speaks with Josie, she does not speak correct English. She pronounces "wit" as "with" and "nuting" as "nothing". She sometimes spells the words wrongly, and Josephine will correct them for her grandmother. She explains her anguish:

The Australians knew nuting about us. We were ignorant. They were ignorant. Jozzie, you wonder why some people my age cannot speak English well/. It is because nobody would talk to them, and worse still, they did not want to talk to anyone. We lived in our own little world, and as more relatives and friends from the same town cane out to Australia, the bigger our Italian community became, to the point where we didn't need to make friends with the Australians. (93,94)

The Italian immigrants consequently developed close communities in which they could communicate in their own language. While these communities offered emotional support, their separation from the wider Australian community also limited opportunities for cultural exchange.

Marchetta presents language as closely connected with identity. Language carries cultural memories, values, traditions, and ways to understand the world. When immigrants are unable to communicate in the dominant language, they may experience exclusion from the larger society. Nonna Katia's difficulties with English symbolise her challenge in establishing herself within Australian society. Her linguistic isolation also illustrates the mutual lack of understanding between Italian immigrants and Australians. Nonna explains that the Australians knew little about the immigrants, while the immigrants themselves knew little about Australian society. This absence of communication prevents both communities from developing a meaningful

understanding of one another. The assistance provided by Marcus Sandford becomes significant in this context. His effort to teach Nonna English provides her with an opportunity to communicate with the wider society. Although she never completely masters the language, this relationship demonstrates how interpersonal contact can reduce cultural barriers.

Cultural Conflict and Adaptation

Migration also involves confrontation between different cultural systems. Nonna Katia's experiences demonstrate the difficulties involved in adjusting to a society whose customs and social behaviour differ from those of her homeland. Her observations of Australian women and men reveal her surprise at the greater social freedom that she encounters in Australia. For example, Nonna is astonished by the behaviour of women in public spaces and by the informal interactions between Australian men and women. These experiences appear unusual to her because they differ considerably from the social conventions with which she grew up in Sicily. Australia therefore initially appears to her as a completely different world. Such cultural differences produce misunderstandings. One striking example occurs when Nonna becomes overwhelmed by grief in a public place. Her emotional expression is interpreted differently by the Australians around her because they do not share the Italian cultural convention of expressing grief openly. She reminisces,

Oh, Jozzie, of course not. It was the influenza. So, in the middle of the post office, I became hysterical. These poor Australians who are not used to the Italians do not know what to do. We Italians cry out loud, Jozzie. The Australians do not. So, nobody moved. There I am on the floor pulling my hair out, and suddenly a man picks me up off the floor and carries me out to the back. (140)

The incident illustrates how behaviour that is considered natural within one culture can appear strange or inappropriate within another.

Marchetta does not simply present one culture as superior to another. Instead, the novel emphasises the need to understand cultural differences. Immigrants are required to adapt to their new environment, but successful adaptation does not necessarily mean abandoning their cultural heritage. Nonna eventually accepts Australia as her permanent home. She begins to create a sense of belonging by establishing a household, maintaining relationships with other Italian immigrants, and continuing to speak Sicilian within her community. Her adaptation is therefore not complete assimilation. Instead, she develops a hybrid sense of belonging in which the new country and the old homeland coexist within her identity.

Racism, Prejudice, and the Immigrant Identity

One of the most significant challenges explored in *Looking for Alibrandi* is racial prejudice. While Nonna Katia experiences exclusion as a first-generation immigrant, Josephine experiences discrimination as someone born and raised in Australia but belonging to an Italian ethnic community. Josephine's identity becomes a source of confusion because others repeatedly attempt to define her nationality for her. When she identifies herself as Italian, she is told that she is Australian because she was born in Australia. When she identifies herself as Australian, she is reminded of her Italian ancestry through derogatory racial labelling. These contradictory responses demonstrate that Josephine's identity is not determined solely by birthplace or ancestry. Her experience reveals the limitations of rigid definitions of nationality. Although Josephine is Australian by birth, her Italian family, language, food, religion, traditions, and cultural practices remain important components of her identity. She therefore occupies an intermediate position between two cultures.

The racial prejudice she encounters also affects her experience at school. Josephine feels particularly uncomfortable in an educational environment dominated by wealthy Anglo-Australian students. They passed sarcastic comments and called her a “Wog,” which sliced her heart into pieces. She painfully recalled her bitter experience:

The Australian girls were the worst. They’d come up to me and say, ‘What nationality are you, Josie?’ And because I spoke Italian at home and I ate spaghetti and I lived like Italian I’d say, I’m Italian,’ and they’d put on a reprimanding voice. ‘No, you’re not. You were born in this country. You are an Australian.’ So, the next

day the same girls would come up to me and ask, ' What nationality are you, Josie?' and I'd think to myself that these smart-asses weren't going to get me twice so I'd say, 'I'm an Aussie,' and they'd say, no, you're not. You're a wog.' And I wanted to kill myself because I was confused. (281)

Economic and cultural differences intensify her sense of being an outsider. Her experiences demonstrate how race, class, and cultural identity can intersect to produce feelings of exclusion. Marchetta consequently presents racism not merely as individual prejudice but as a social problem that influences the everyday lives of immigrant communities. Josephine's anger toward racist comments reflects her refusal to accept the idea that her Italian heritage makes her less Australian.

Generational Dimensions of Immigration

Maya Angelou's statement, "Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition," suggests that home is an emotional experience rather than merely a geographical location. This idea is reflected in *Looking for Alibrandi*. Nonna Katia remains emotionally attached to Sicily through her memories, language, food, and traditions, even though she lives in Australia. Similarly, Josephine's sense of home develops through both her Australian upbringing and Italian heritage. She eventually accepts both cultures as parts of her identity. Thus, Marchetta presents home as a sense of belonging created through family, culture, memory, and relationships rather than a single physical place. The novel demonstrates that the consequences of immigration do not disappear with the first generation. Instead, they can continue to influence subsequent generations. Nonna Katia and Josephine experience displacement differently, yet their experiences are connected. Nonna's difficulties originate primarily in physical migration. She leaves Sicily, enters an unfamiliar environment, struggles with English, experiences loneliness, and gradually establishes a new life in Australia. Josephine, in contrast, is born in Australia and does not experience geographical displacement in the same way. Nevertheless, she encounters cultural displacement because her Italian heritage makes her different from many of her Australian classmates. Josephine initially believes that her struggle with cultural identity is unique. Through Nonna's stories, however, she comes to understand that her experiences are part of a longer family history. The prejudice she encounters is connected to the historical separation between Italian immigrants and the dominant Australian community.

The novel presents immigration as a process whose effects can extend across generations. The first generation experiences the difficulties of migration directly, while later generations may experience its consequences through questions of identity, prejudice, cultural expectations, and belonging.

Negotiating Italian and Australian Identities

Josephine's struggle is the attempt to reconcile her Italian heritage with her Australian identity. She appreciates many aspects of her Italian background, including family relationships, traditions, food, religion, and cultural practices. At the same time, she sometimes resents her heritage because it exposes her to prejudice and makes her feel different from her peers. Her relationship with Nonna is particularly important in this process. Initially, Josephine becomes frustrated with Nonna's traditional attitudes. However, as she learns more about her grandmother's past, she develops a deeper appreciation of her cultural heritage.

Italian traditions provide Josephine with a sense of belonging. Food, family customs, religious faith, and cultural practices function as links between generations. The preparation of traditional food, for instance, becomes a means of preserving cultural memory. Similarly, Josephine's Catholic faith influences her values and choices. Marchetta thus suggests that cultural identity need not be understood as an either-or choice. Josephine does not have to reject either her Italian heritage or her Australian identity. Instead, she gradually learns to embrace both. Her identity becomes multicultural rather than divided.

Cross-Cultural Relationships and the Possibility of Belonging

The novel also explores the possibility of overcoming prejudice through interpersonal relationships. Relationships between people from different cultural backgrounds allow individuals to encounter perspectives that they might otherwise misunderstand. The relationships between Nonna Katia and Marcus Sandford, and

between Josephine and Jacob, illustrate this possibility. Although cultural differences create tensions, interaction encourages greater awareness of other ways of living. Josephine's relationship with Jacob is particularly significant because it demonstrates that cultural interaction can challenge preconceived ideas. As Jacob becomes more familiar with Josephine and her family, his understanding of cultural difference develops. The relationship consequently becomes a space in which cultural assumptions can be questioned.

Similarly, Marcus's relationship with Nonna provides her with an important opportunity for communication and cultural exchange. His willingness to help her learn English allows her to overcome some of the linguistic barriers that have isolated her. Marchetta positions interpersonal connections as an effective tool for mitigating cultural bias.

Third Space

One of the central ideas in *Looking for Alibrandi* is that home is not simply a geographical place. For Nonna Katia, Sicily remains emotionally important through her memories, language, food, and traditions, even though Australia becomes her permanent home. Her experience reflects the concept of diaspora, where people maintain connections with their homeland while living elsewhere. Josephine's identity is more complex because she was born in Australia but remains connected to her Italian heritage. Her acceptance of both cultures reflects cultural hybridity, where different cultural identities exist together. This can also be understood through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," where individuals develop identities between different cultures. Marchetta challenges the idea that belonging requires abandoning one's original culture. The novel presents multicultural identity as a source of strength and suggests that home can be created through culture, family, memory, and relationships rather than being limited to one place**.**

Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi* offers a significant exploration of immigration and its continuing effects on individuals and families. Through Nonna Katia's experiences, the novel depicts the hardships of first-generation immigrants, including displacement, loneliness, linguistic barriers, inadequate living conditions, cultural misunderstanding, and difficulty accessing social institutions. Nonna's gradual adaptation to Australian society demonstrates that immigrants can construct new forms of belonging without completely abandoning their cultural heritage. Through Josephine Alibrandi, Marchetta extends the discussion to the second and third generations of immigrant families. Josephine's experiences reveal that geographical displacement is not necessary for an individual to experience cultural alienation. Her encounters with racial prejudice and conflicting definitions of nationality demonstrate the complexity of identity in a multicultural society. The novel ultimately presents cultural identity as dynamic and multifaceted. Josephine learns that being Italian and being Australian are not mutually exclusive identities. Her acceptance of both aspects of her heritage enables her to develop a stronger sense of self. At the same time, the relationships between characters from different cultural backgrounds suggest that intercultural contact can challenge prejudice and promote understanding.

Looking for Alibrandi presents immigration not merely as a movement between countries but as an ongoing process of negotiating identity, culture, memory, and belonging. Marchetta's representation of the Alibrandi family demonstrates that although migration can produce isolation and discrimination, cultural heritage can also provide strength, community, and continuity. The novel advocates a broader understanding of belonging in which multiple cultures can coexist and enrich one another.

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