

**Negotiating Identity and Belonging:
A Study of Second-Generation South Asian Immigrant Experience in Derek Mascarenhas'
*Coconut Dreams***

by
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Summary:

The South Asian immigrant experience in Canada is often marked by a profound sense of isolation, alienation, and identity crisis. Immigrants and their descendants face the ongoing challenge of navigating two distinct cultural spheres, shaping their sense of self. First-generation immigrants frequently negotiate between the cultural traditions of their homeland and the societal norms of their new country, while second-generation individuals grapple with an inherited cultural identity that sometimes conflicts with their lived experiences in Canada. These dual identities are further complicated by racialization, as South Asians are often categorized as the 'other,' reinforcing their sense of marginalization and cultural displacement. Derek Mascarenhas' *Coconut Dreams* (2019) is a collection of seventeen interconnected short stories. Through multiple timelines and perspectives, the stories present a unique picture of the lives of the Pinto family, an Indian immigrant family living in a predominantly white neighborhood in Burlington, Ontario. Most of the stories are told from the perspectives of Aiden and Ally, the children of Felix Pinto and Clara Pinto who are first-generation immigrants in Canada. The stories weave together themes of colonialism, ethics, racism, and migration. In addition to incorporating multiple timelines and perspectives, the collection spans nations and historical periods, offering a broad view of the lives of the Pinto family and those connected to them across generations.

Coconut Dreams engages with broader historical and cultural forces that are deeply intertwined with the characters' personal journeys, directly shaping the contours of the identity crises that Mascarenhas so sensitively portrays. For example, the siblings' Catholic upbringing functions not merely as a religious backdrop but as a formative influence that shapes values, familial tensions, and self-perception. Also, the very presence of Roman Catholicism in the Goan community and its constant conflict with traditional Indian beliefs hints at the displacement people of the community perceive. Similarly, the lingering presence of Portuguese colonialism in the family's Goan heritage informs the complexity of their cultural identity. The collection's interconnected story format allows these tensions to unfold over time and from multiple perspectives, portraying the immigrant identity not as a fixed category but as a lived and evolving experience.

Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "Third Space of Enunciation," this paper examines how *Coconut Dreams* portrays the second-generation South Asian immigrant experience in Canada as existing in a liminal zone where meaning and representation are constantly negotiated (Bhabha 211). Bhabha's theory suggests that immigrants do not simply assimilate or retain their ancestral culture but rather inhabit a fluid, evolving space where identities are continually redefined. By analyzing how the second-generation South Asian immigrants Aiden and Ally navigate cultural duality, this study highlights the complexities of identity formation, the persistent challenges of bicultural existence, and the potential for negotiation within this liminal space.

To ground this analysis, the paper engages with scholarship on immigrant identity crisis and racialization. The study aims to explore the following questions:

- How do second-generation immigrants navigate and manage their sense of dual identities differently than first-generation immigrants, and how is this difference portrayed in *Coconut Dreams*?
- How do racial issues add an additional layer of complexity to the South Asian immigrant experience in *Coconut Dreams*, and how do these experiences contribute to a heightened sense of alienation and disconnection?

By analyzing how Aiden and Ally navigate their identity struggles, this paper argues that *Coconut Dreams* provides a nuanced exploration of the bicultural experience of second-generation South Asian immigrants in Canada, while illustrating the ongoing negotiation of identity in response to cultural expectations, racialization, and the complexities of belonging. Through this analysis, the paper aims to contribute to broader discussions on South Asian diasporic literature, cultural hybridity, and the evolving nature of immigrant identities in Canada.