



## International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

# “Displacement And The Quest For Identity: A Study Of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Select Novels”

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### ABSTRACT :

Diaspora writers often deal with themes of Identity, cultural differences, assimilation, acculturation well displacement, nostalgia memory and luminal existence. Jhumpa Lahiri, a prominent Indian American Diaspora writer, has depicted the ambivalence in attitude towards the native land as well as the settled land in her works. Though the first generation settlers cling on to the nostalgic memories of their homeland, even in the evening of their lives, the young generation characters find it relatively easy to strip their connections and forge hybrid identities in the foreign soil. “Most of Lahiri’s characters are of Indian origin, and lead a simultaneous existence in two cultures. Lahiri deals with the experiences of a migrant life in a Diaspora community in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *The Lowland* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Her characters struggle with identity issues, feeling of alienation torn between two cultures. She dwells on what it feels like to be an immigrant with the accompanying sense of displacement and search to forge new identities in the new territory. Lahiri brings in the interesting concept of home which is more or less a mental construct created from memory. The migrant occupies a displaced position and the home becomes more and more rooted in his imagination.

**Keywords:** Hybridity, displacement, Diaspora, alienation rootlessness, culture, identity, filiations and affiliation, memory and nostalgia.

### Introduction :

Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary works delve deeply into themes of displacement, cultural dislocation, and the search for identity. Her characters, often immigrants or children of immigrants, grapple with the challenges of navigating two worlds—the one they come from and the one they inhabit. Through her nuanced storytelling, Lahiri captures the complexities of belonging and the enduring struggle to define oneself amidst conflicting cultural expectations.

A recurring theme in Lahiri’s works is the sense of being uprooted. Characters often find themselves caught between two cultures, struggling to reconcile their heritage with their present reality. This displacement is not merely geographical but also emotional and psychological. Lahiri’s narratives explore the alienation and loss that come with leaving behind one’s homeland while trying to assimilate into an unfamiliar society. This duality creates a space where characters constantly question where they truly belong.

Lahiri’s characters frequently embark on a journey of self-discovery, attempting to forge an identity that balances their cultural heritage with their adopted surroundings. This quest for identity often involves intergenerational tensions, as younger characters seek to assert their individuality while grappling with the expectations of their immigrant parents. Lahiri vividly portrays the negotiation between tradition and modernity, highlighting the struggles and triumphs of redefining identity in a globalized world.

Lahiri skillfully explores the generational differences within immigrant families. Parents, who often cling to the customs and traditions of their homeland, struggle to understand the evolving identities of their children, who are shaped by the culture of their adopted country. These conflicts, while deeply personal, reflect broader questions of identity, belonging, and the preservation of cultural roots in an increasingly globalized environment.

Memory and nostalgia play a significant role in Lahiri’s works, serving as both a source of comfort and a reminder of what has been lost. Her characters often grapple with fragmented memories of their homeland, which shape their present experiences and inform their understanding of who they are. Lahiri’s evocative descriptions of food, language, and familial rituals underscore the ways in which cultural heritage is preserved and transmitted, even in the face of displacement.

While Lahiri’s stories are rooted in the immigrant experience, their themes transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Her exploration of identity, belonging, and the human condition resonates with readers from diverse backgrounds. Lahiri’s works invite us to reflect on our own experiences of self-discovery and the ways in which our identities are shaped by the worlds we inhabit.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s exploration of displacement and identity offers a poignant commentary on the complexities of the immigrant experience. Through her richly drawn characters and evocative prose, she illuminates the universal human desire for connection, belonging, and self-understanding. Her works stand as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring quest for identity in an ever-changing world.

Homi K. Bhabha challenges the idea of a fixed identity through the notion of ‘hybridity’. His critical writings attempt to question notions of identity, nation and culture as stable, coherent and unified entities. Hybridity refers to a position of “inbetweenness” where an individual is positioned between two cultures.

Colonialism may be viewed as an encounter between different cultures, people, systems of thought and languages where the power balance is always tilted to the side of the Western imperialists. Colonial incursions and settlements in various parts of Asia and Africa succeeded in introducing Western culture, language, religion and way of life to the Orient. This resulted in the creation of the hybrid colonized native as theorized by Bhabha and other postcolonial thinkers. V.S. Naipaul succinctly captures the hybridized natives of Caribbean lands thus:

A peasant-minded, money-minded community spiritually cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy set in a materialistic colonial society: a combination of historical accidents and national temperament has turned the Trinidad Indian into a complete colonial, even more Philistine than the White. (Naipaul 89)

Naipaul depicts the erasure of the Caribbean identity and the sprouting of hybrid identities as a result of the colonial encounter. What Naipaul says about the Caribbean is applicable to other territories also and is faithfully depicted in Diaspora literature. Diaspora literature written by authors residing outside their homelands often deal with themes of identity, cultural differences, assimilation, displacement, nostalgia, memory and liminal existence. Indian Diaspora writers offer rich insights into the questions of identity and cross-cultural experiences of Indians stationed abroad. These writings depict the lives of families struggling to negotiate the pressure of dual identities. Diaspora narratives often highlight themes of displacement, identity and cultural hybridity through tales of migrant communities faced with the dilemma of balancing their traditional native culture and the modern ways of life in the Western environments. Indian Diaspora narratives also address issues of racism, filiations, and affiliation and social and economic issues faced by the immigrant population. In their struggle to accustom themselves to the realities of the Western culture, they frequently wander down memory lane and yearn nostalgically for their homelands. This sense of in-between's or liminal existence is a recurring element in the emotional lives of at least the first-generation immigrants.

Lahiri is a prominent Indian American author who settled in New York city. The author's life was punctuated by a series of uprooting and migrations. Born on 11 July 1967, as Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri in London, the story teller of the Indian diaspora was brought up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Her parents had migrated from West Bengal initially and her family shifted to the United States when Lahiri was just two years old. Though stationed in the United States, her mother was particular that her children should grow up retaining their ties to the Bengali heritage. Visits to their relatives in Calcutta was an integral part of their family vacations.

As a writer from the Indian diaspora, she has also made substantial contributions to European literature through her forays into Italian language. *In Other Words* (2016) her memoir in Italian, *Dove mi trovo* (2018) her maiden Italian novel and *Racconti Romani* a short story collection shows her prowess in the Italian language. A discerning reader cannot fail to notice the parallels and similarities between the author's life situations and the lives of the characters essayed by her in works like *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and *The Lowland*. A probe into the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* reveals the ambivalence inherent in the attitudes to India, between the first-generation migrants and the second and the third generation born of Indian parents in foreign soil. Though the first-generation settlers cling on to the nostalgic memories of their homeland, even late in their lives, the new generation characters mostly ignore such nostalgic pulls and easily forget their hybrid identities in the foreign soil.

Most of the characters penned by Lahiri in her novels and short stories are of Indian origin, stationed in America, who leads a simultaneous existence in two cultures. As a second-generation Indian American writer, Lahiri speaks of her personal experience of negotiating two cultures thus:

When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, "loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with another. (Wikipedia.org)

Lahiri often speaks of the diaspora, hybridized state of migrant communities. Diaspora or the displacement of a community or culture into a different geographical and cultural region has been the thematic concern of many writers. Chroniclers of diaspora, like Lahiri, have depicted how such diasporic movements developed their own distinctive cultures in the settled land, by retaining, preserving, extending or developing their original cultures.

Lahiri's works may be seen as a representation of the diasporic predicament of Indians stationed abroad. Robin Cohen has defined the term 'diaspora' tentatively "... as communities of people living together in one country, who acknowledge that 'the old country' – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions." (Cohen ix) McLeod comments that the emphasis on collectivity and community here is very important, as is the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another (McLeod 207)

Cohen adds that an individual's loyalty and bonding with the diasporic community is revealed by his acknowledgement of "an inescapable link with their past migration history and sense of coethnicity with others of a similar background". (Cohen ix)

Though many people belonging to the diaspora are migrants, it is naive to think that all share the label of migrants. Generational differences need to be considered before naively assuming that diasporic communities are largely migrants. Children or grandchildren of migrants would automatically qualify for the passport of the nation they have settled in by virtue of their being born there. Their identity would however carry traces of shared experiences, acquired from living in a diasporic community. It would be prudent to talk about 'diaspora identities' rather than 'migrant identities'. As a matter of fact, not all who live in a diaspora, or even all who share emotional bonds with 'their parent country' have experienced migration.

The experiences of migrant and the realities of life in a diasporic community have been the staple theme of much recent postcolonial literature, theory and criticism. The new possibilities and problems generated by the experience of migrancy and diaspora life have been explored by various diaspora writers, critics and academics alike.

In the title story, 'Interpreter of Maladies' from her debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) Lahiri presents the couple, Mr and Mrs Das, whose idea of India is largely gathered from cheap paperback tour books. To the Das family, India is nothing short of a show, a spectacle which is to be devoured by the Indian American gaze. Not only the Konark temple, but "... the shirtless men worked at the tea stall" (*The Lowland*, 46), the monkeys, a bullock cart – almost everything comes under the Indian American gaze as a show. The representations of India, however, do not turn out to be inauthentic or misrepresentations.

Ashima in *The Namesake*, is a diasporic character to the core, who is torn between identities. The struggles she goes through to come to terms with the American reality as she reaches the United States after her marriage with Ashoke is well documented by Lahiri. Lahiri has always delved into the processes which shape the evolution of the characters in her works. The myriad forces that shape the nature, perspectives and consciousness of a character. Often it is the surroundings they live in that mould their perspectives and identity. Lahiri as a diaspora writer can speak from her personal

experiences with conviction. She says: the question of identity, is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. ("An interview with Jhumpa Lahiri", BookBrowse)

The immigrant Indian families are seen observing all the Bengali rituals and ceremonies even in the foreign soil. It is with intense yearning and nostalgic feelings that the first-generation immigrants observe the Bengali rituals and ceremonies. The hold of the rituals and celebrations of the motherland seem to exercise less control over the next generation of immigrants. The younger generation celebrate festivals like Christmas with more enthusiasm than 'Pujo'. Even in the case of the first-generation immigrants, a considerable change in attitude towards the host country is perceptible, as they remain there over the years. They tend to forge stronger ties to the new place with the passage of time. Towards the beginning of the first chapter, we see Ashima pondering over the difference in the ways childbirth is in America and in India. In America, the mother is necessarily rushed to a hospital, whereas in India, "... women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives". (4) The native home is a distant but vivid memory to those in a diasporic existence. The home, they left can only be reached through memory, nostalgia and imagination. McLeod succinctly remarks that:

This disjunction between the past and present, between here and there, makes 'home' seem far removed in time and space, available for return only through an act of imagination. Speaking of Indian migrants, Rushdie writes that "our physical alienation from India", almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands. (McLeod 211)

Home here becomes a mental construct, created from memory that intrudes from the past. The migrant occupies a displaced position and the home becomes more and more rooted in his imagination. McLeod poses a pertinent question, "If imagining home brings fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement for the migrant, can new homes be secured in the host country? In migrating from one country to another, migrants inevitably become involved in the process of setting up home in a new land" (McLeod, 211). It is interesting to note that, towards the end of the novel *The Namesake*, Ashima undergoes a radical change in her outlook to America, her new home land:

For thirty years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband. Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind. (*The Namesake*, 279)

The sentimental longing expressed by Ashima at this stage is starkly different from her earlier stance towards the then strange territory of America when she first reached there after her marriage. Lahiri quite realistically projects the apprehensions and uncertainties in the minds of an immigrant thus:

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge nothing has felt normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land... that it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she valued, had made it miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little and where life seems so tentative and spare... (*The Namesake* 5, 6)

Ashima's son, Gogol, represents the typical experience of a new-generation individual caught between two worlds. He must navigate the cultural and social differences he faces daily. At home, he is immersed in Bengali traditions, language, and customs, while outside, he is surrounded by American culture. His efforts to connect with his American friends are often met with resistance from his parents, who work hard to uphold Bengali customs. This tension creates a sense of alienation and estrangement, as reflected in the observation: "In so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another" (*The Namesake*, 264).

This internal struggle leads Gogol to distance himself from anything that highlights his cultural 'otherness.' His discomfort with his heritage becomes a defense mechanism against the alienation he feels in both American and Indian contexts. In an attempt to forge a new identity, he changes his name and distances himself from his Indian roots. However, this change does not free him from his cultural background or the expectations of his family. Instead, it leaves him living a double life, which intensifies his sense of disconnection. It is only after his father's death that Gogol reconciles the duality of his identity, embracing both his American upbringing and Indian heritage. This acceptance brings him a deeper sense of self-awareness, contentment, and belonging.

The challenges faced by second-generation immigrants differ from those of their parents. Unlike their parents, who often view themselves as exiles, the younger generation sees themselves as part of a minority community. As Ramraj notes, they rarely consider "... themselves exiles like the early immigrants" (*Interpreter of Maladies*, 221). Jhumpa Lahiri's characters reflect different stages of acculturation. New immigrants, such as Mrs. Sen in *Mrs. Sen's*, cling to their native culture even in a foreign land, while characters like Shoba and Shukumar in *A Temporary Matter* or the Das family in *Interpreter of Maladies* have adapted to and assimilated into a hybrid culture.

In the novel, *The Lowland*, Subhash Mitra migrates to the United States to pursue academic and professional opportunities, seeking refuge from the stifling presence of his brother Udayan, a Naxalite rebel. For Subhash, the United States represents a sanctuary where he can realize his talents and aspirations. However, his new environment makes him feel like an outsider. Despite his efforts to adapt to the cultural differences, he struggles with feelings of isolation and disconnection. Unlike his homeland, where he was surrounded by family, friends, and a close-knit community, Subhash now faces an entirely new set of challenges.

Subhash was the only foreigner in his academic setting, with no other students from Asia present. He reflects on the stark contrast to Calcutta, where "it was nothing like the demonstrations that erupted now in Calcutta. Disorganized mobs representing rival communist parties, mrunning helter-skelter through the streets. Chanting, unrelenting. There were demonstrations that almost always turned violent" (*The Lowland*. 42).

His sense of isolation is further intensified by cultural and linguistic barriers. In contrast, Gauri adapts to American life with relative ease, viewing it as an opportunity to escape the monotony of her previous existence. Lahiri's works consistently explore themes of identity and displacement, shedding light on the immigrant experience. Her characters grapple with a sense of dislocation and the quest for self-understanding, often feeling torn between two worlds.

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