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Finding Home, Losing Home: The Heart of Identity in Mukherjee and Lahiri's Immigrant Stories

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, through their deeply individual stories, take us into the lives of Indian immigrants trying to foster a new existence in the West. However, it goes beyond geography to the very essence of their identity. Characters by Mukherjee frequently march forward, welcoming change as if it were an opportunity to live fully. Even if it means changing their own soil, they decide to plant new roots. Conversely, Lahiri depicts the silent suffering of people who hold onto their history like a priceless, delicate object. Like a melody that never quite ends, her characters struggle with the sensation of being torn between two worlds. Their desire for a place where they can live with their past and present together and truly belong is evident. The understanding of the human heart, the bravery to adapt, the anguish of loss, and the never-ending quest for a sense of home, however that may manifest—is what this comparison is about, not merely literary styles. Through the hardships of their characters, Mukherjee and Lahiri remind us that immigration is fundamentally a very human experience of self-discovery in the face of significant change.

Keywords: Immigrant, displacement, adoption, cultural, traditional etc

Introduction: Although the idea of "home" is a poignant and important motif in both Bharati Mukherjee's and Jhumpa Lahiri's works, their interpretations differ greatly, reflecting their divergent views on what it means to be an immigrant. Self-described "expatriate," Mukherjee supports the idea of establishing a new life in the West and sees immigration as a life-changing process of self-discovery. Lahiri, a second-generation Indian American, on the other hand, explores the lingering sense of displacement and the recurring yearning for a lost or fragmented home.

This idea of accepting change and creating a new identity in their adopted country is embodied by Mukherjee's characters, like Jasmine in her book of the same name. For Jasmine, America is more than just a place; it's a place of freedom where she can let go of the past and create a new future. Seeing assimilation as a means of empowerment, she actively destroys her former life by taking on new identities, roles, and even personas. According to Mukherjee, "home" is a flexible concept that is determined by individual agency and adaptability rather than being a fixed entity. She places high value on the here and now, highlighting the opportunity for development and contentment in the new environment. This viewpoint reflects the conviction that identity is flexible and that active engagement in the host culture can lead to a sense of belonging. She promotes the notion that one can create a home instead of merely finding one. In contrast, even when Lahiri's characters have established physical homes in the West, they frequently struggle with a deep sense of rootlessness. In tales such as "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Interpreter of Maladies," her characters are constantly torn between two worlds and plagued by the ghost of their cultural background. For them, "home" is inextricably bound up with family ties, customs, and memories, frequently connoting an idealized or lost India. In addition to physical distance, the emotional and cultural divide that keeps them from their ancestors is another factor contributing to their sense of displacement. Their desire for a sense of belonging, which is heightened by the difficulties in communicating across generations and the decline of cultural customs, seems to be unattainable.

The difficulties of managing a hybrid identity are highlighted by Lahiri's emphasis on the emotional burden of cultural memory. Her characters are never completely at home in either world and frequently find themselves straddling two. They struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage with their Western upbringing, which causes them to feel deeply alienated, even within their own families. For them, "home" is a source of stress and longing rather than a place of solace and belonging. Their sense of displacement is exacerbated by the imperceptible barriers created by the finer points of language, customs, and social expectations.

Lahiri examines the lingering sense of loss and the unfulfilled desire for a cultural connection, while Mukherjee extols the transformative potential of immigration and the prospect of starting a new life. Their divergent viewpoints illustrate the intricate relationship between cultural heritage and individual identity, reflecting the varied realities of the immigrant experience. In the end, despite having different ideas about what "home" actually means, both writers shed light on the deep human need for belonging.

Mukherjee: Defying Tradition through Transformation

Characters by Mukherjee are frequently characterized by their proactive approach to challenging conventional roles. In her book of the same name, Jasmine embodies this spirit of change. She exhibits a strong sense of agency as she moves from rural India to the United States, shedding her previous identities and embracing new ones. She expresses a fluid sense of identity when reflecting on her past and future selves: "Watch me re-position myself, watch me invent my future." Her dedication to self-reinvention, a major theme in Mukherjee's work, is emphasized by this declaration.

Jasmine's relationships and decisions further demonstrate her willingness to defy cultural expectations. She embraces a sense of autonomy in place of the passivity that is expected of traditional Indian women. She understands that survival requires change and adjusts to life in America with a zeal that verges on brutality. "Survival is an act of imagination," she asserts. This quotation demonstrates how Jasmine views survival as a mental exercise in forging a new identity as well as a physical one.

In "Wife," Dimple Dasgupta also questions conventional wisdom. She longs for freedom and escape from her oppressive marriage. In sharp contrast to the stereotypical portrayal of the obedient Indian wife, her increasing dissatisfaction with her home life leads to a violent act. Dimple's internal monologue reveals her growing indifference and distraction: *"I am not Dimple Dasgupta. I am not Mrs. Amit Dasgupta. I am an American woman."* This statement emphasizes her desire to shed her past identity and embrace a new, liberated self.

Lahiri: Grappling with the Weight of Cultural Expectations

In contrast, Lahiri's characters frequently struggle to balance their own desires with their familial responsibilities because of the weight of cultural expectations. Mrs. Das is emotionally distant in "Interpreter of Maladies," despite being physically in India. She is burdened by the secret of her past and her inability to make sense of it considering her present. When she shares her secret, it's not a liberating moment but rather a painful, stark revelation that highlights the significance of cultural norms and unspoken expectations. She says of her child, *"It happened only once. That doesn't make you a mother."* This quote reveals her profound internal struggle and the burden of her guiltiness, a burden inflicted by societal and personal prospects. Moushumi Mazoomdar captures the intricacies of second-generation identity in "The Namesake." She finds it difficult to reconcile the demands of her Bengali heritage with her Western upbringing. Her eventual discontent with her marriage to Gogol reflects her need for independence, but she is still bound by the social mores that influence her life. She exhibits a sense of being constrained by her situation when she talks about her personal desires. She says, *"We were only pretending to be husband and wife, anyway."* This quote highlights the emotional distance and the sense of inauthenticity that filter through her life, an outcome of her struggle to reconcile her conflicting uniqueness.

Likewise, in "Unaccustomed Earth," the characters travel through the delicate balance between familial obligations and personal longings. The tension between parents and children, particularly the second generation, is intense. As a father reflects on his daughters' yearning to move away, he thinks, *"He had always imagined that his daughters would live near him, that they would never leave him. But he had been wrong."* The sense of loss and disappointment that results from the conflict between conventional expectations and the reality of contemporary life is encapsulated in this quote. These roles are actively contested and dismantled by Mukherjee's characters, who embrace change as a path to freedom. In contrast, Lahiri's characters struggle with the constant pressure of cultural norms, underscoring the difficulties of maintaining cultural identity and the psychological costs of doing so.

Imagine entering a busy city marketplace. When you read Bharati Mukherjee, you get that feeling. Her writing is a rush, a push, a colorful explosion of words rather than a slow, methodical walk. Sentences hit you with a burst of energy, like sharp, fast breaths. Similar to how her characters jump right into new lives, she immerses you in the action rather than lingering on formalities or meticulously crafted narratives. She seems to be saying, "There's no room for restraint, no time for hesitation."

There is no consistent point of view in Mukherjee's stories. Rather, she creates a mosaic of voices and viewpoints that capture the tumultuous beauty of the immigrant experience. As if you were listening to a conversation in a crowded room, you are continuously switching between the thoughts of different characters. This dynamic, swirling style evokes the sense of being torn between two worlds of negotiating a terrain where boundaries are blurred, and identities are malleable. It's unquestionably real, even though it's not always comfortable. She also doesn't sugarcoat anything. Mukherjee's language is honest, unvarnished, and unafraid to face life's messy, unsettling realities. Her candor for ambition, desire, and the harsh realities of survival can be both disconcerting and freeing. She seems to be breaking down the barriers of civil discourse and allowing you to see her characters' unadulterated feelings. These individuals are flawed, driven, and fiercely determined to make a name for themselves in a world that frequently feels hostile; they are neither polished nor perfect.

It's like entering a tornado when you read Mukherjee. The intensity of her writing and the immediacy of her characters' journeys captivate you. It's a visceral experience that leaves you feeling both elated and breathless. Her writing is a testimony to the power of transformation, a reminder that identity is not fixed but fluid, constantly evolving, and that reinvention isn't just a possibility; it's a necessity for survival.

The Echo of Elsewhere: Longing and the Fragmented Home in Lahiri and Mukherjee

To migrate is to divide oneself. Home is rarely a single thing in Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee's stories; rather, it is broken, remembered, reimagined, and grieved. The act of migration causes their characters to yearn for a wholeness that may no longer be achievable, in addition to that of place.

Lahiri's Quiet Ache

The pain of displacement is depicted in minor keys in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction—quiet, exact, and eerie. Ashima Ganguli's yearning for Calcutta in *The Namesake* goes beyond simple nostalgia. It is a multi-layered grief that quietly builds up over the years in the nooks and crannies of everyday existence. Her American kitchen is never quite home, but it does smell of memory and mustard seeds. The "home left behind" for Ashima and other first-generation immigrants in Lahiri's writing is not only physical; it is also cultural, linguistic, and emotional. Even when their bodies are in different places, that place remains inside of them.

This fragmentation is passed down to her characters of the second generation. Despite not wanting to return to India, Gogol Ganguli, who was born in the United States, is nevertheless influenced by the specter of India in his family's customs, names, and silences. He yearns for coherence—for a self that can connect the dots between his American present and his parents' past—rather than Calcutta.

Mukherjee's Restless Reinvention

In contrast, Bharati Mukherjee presents us with characters who face displacement with a strong, occasionally unnerving desire to reinvent themselves. As though shedding skins, the title character in *Jasmine* alternates between several personas, including Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, and Jane. She yearns for change rather than a comeback, even if it means erasing some aspects of her past. The fragmentation is still present, though. The new self is never fully realized or at peace.

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Because holding onto a static idea of home feels like death, Mukherjee's immigrants frequently embrace the violence of reinvention. The characters in *The Management of Grief* are caught in a transitional state, straddling the line between movement and mourning. Letting go becomes the only way to move on because home can be both comfort and a trap.

Desire as a Legacy

The enduring desire is what unites Lahiri and Mukherjee. Whether spoken aloud or in whispers, it reverberates throughout the lives of their characters, influencing identities, names, marriages, and languages. However, they don't always write about longing for a specific location. It's frequently for a former, whole version of the self. Before migration broke certainty, a wish to fit in without compromising the past.

However, their tales imply that this kind of desire might be necessary. It preserves memory. It leaves a gentle mark on the soul. It serves as a reminder that identity is a journey rather than a destination, constantly developing between the shores of what was and what may be.

Conclusion

The idea of "home" is never a static concept in Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic narratives; rather, it is a place of conflict, change, and intense emotional resonance. In order to reinvent themselves in the furnace of migration, Mukherjee's characters cut off all connections to the past. She celebrates adaptability as survival through characters like Dimple and Jasmine, where homes are created from scratch rather than inherited. Lahiri, on the other hand, lingers in the silent places of longing and memory. Her characters attempt to bridge two worlds without completely belonging to either, navigating inherited silences. In Lahiri's writing, there is a longing for coherence—a house that can support the weight of duality without collapsing. In the end, both writers provide varied but incredibly human depictions of identity in transition, revealing the brittleness and tenacity of the immigrant self. Through Lahiri's reflective mourning or Mukherjee's joyful metamorphosis, they serve as a reminder that yearning—for self, connection, and place—is a characteristic of the immigrant experience rather than a sign of weakness.

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