



Women between Worlds: Gender and Diaspora in Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri powerfully captures the emotional and cultural complexities of diasporic life, especially for women. Her female figures often dwell in marginal or transitional spaces, suspended between the values of their origin and the norms of their adopted world. The study analyzes Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and *The Lowland* to reveal how her female characters confront and reshape their identities in the context of diaspora. It analyzes how Lahiri represents women's subjectivity amid the challenges of cultural uprooting, familial tensions across generations, and traditional gender expectations. The research emphasizes the themes of silence, adjustment, defiance, and grief, framing them within the emotional and cultural landscape of diaspora in Lahiri's fiction. Lahiri's female characters emerge as central figures in negotiating the tension between cultural tradition and personal autonomy. Ultimately, the paper contends that these women are not passive sufferers of displacement but active participants who navigate the complexities of diaspora and reshape their identities within liminal spaces.

Keywords - Diaspora, womanhood, gender and identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri vividly captures the struggles and realities of the Bengali diaspora following migration. Unlike first-generation migrants, Lahiri belongs to the second generation and does not possess firsthand knowledge of her motherland; her bond with India is primarily emotional, shaped by her parents. Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

portrays emotions of displacement, alienation, and the search for personal identity across diverse narratives. Some stories highlight the struggles of first-generation immigrants, perspectives she absorbed from her parents' experiences. Lahiri's stories depict individuals suspended between two conflicting directions, enduring both psychological and bodily

struggles. Her debut work, *The Namesake*, Themes such as modern dilemmas, feelings of rootlessness, emotional emptiness, and a sense of isolation also find frequent expression in her works. reflects the immigrants' struggles with bewilderment, homesickness, alienation, sleeplessness, and the challenges of cultural change. Her second collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, mirrors the pattern of her previous writings, exploring the dilemmas of the diaspora caught between migration, identity negotiation, cultural adjustment, and emotional dislocation.

Lahiri powerfully illustrates the sense of confinement and isolation that troubles both first- and second-generation immigrants. Yet, while the immigrant experience forms the core of her writing, it is not her sole preoccupation. In the world of nostalgia and memory, Lahiri's characters often struggle with crises of identity, rooted in their inability to reconcile their American lives with their Indian heritage. Characters such as Mr. Pirzada, Mr. Sen, and Ashima feel a deep sense of isolation from their surroundings and yearn for the comfort of home. Women like Mrs. Sen, Aparna, Ashima, and Hema's mother cling to cultural traditions by wearing Indian attire and marking their foreheads with vermilion as symbols of belonging. Similarly, Mr. Pirzada expresses his emotional attachment to his homeland by setting his watch according to Decca time. In these stories, Lahiri portrays a variety of dilemmas that shape the lives of Indians and Indian immigrants, engaging with themes such as miscarriages, marital discord, extramarital affairs, and gender disparities. Her narratives capture not only the struggles of second-generation immigrants negotiating their place in foreign lands but also the enduring conflicts faced by first-generation immigrants, who struggle with the paradox of preserving their cultural identities while simultaneously attempting to shed them. In *The Namesake*, the Ganguli parents particularly Ashima struggle to adapt to a culture vastly different from their

own, while their children grapple with balancing respect for their roots and the demands of American society. The novel highlights the series of difficult choices they are compelled to make each day in their efforts to avoid feeling like misfits in a foreign land. Jhumpa Lahiri's depictions of gender align with the experiences of the second generation of the Indian diaspora. Most of these depictions center on women, where the protagonists embody the characteristics of the modern Indian woman. This generation also undergoes cultural displacement, grappling with hybridity and a sense of in-betweenness. Yet, the defining element of their identity lies in the cultural assimilation they achieve within the land of their birth and adoption.

Older female figures, such as Ashima in *The Namesake* and Mrs. Parul Choudhary in *Once in a Lifetime*, experience the early struggles of displacement but eventually adjust and embrace their emerging identities as Indian Americans. The younger women characters, such as Shobha in *A Temporary Matter* from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Moushumi in *The Namesake*, Ruma in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Sudha in *Only Goodness*, Usha in *Hell-Heaven*, and Hema in *Going Ashore*, are portrayed as independent and educated individuals who are clear about their choices and desires. Each of them possesses a distinct identity, embodying the image of the modern woman of a new generation. Their representations highlight strength and demonstrate a tendency toward assimilation and self-acceptance within an unfamiliar cultural environment. Unlike their predecessors, they have not directly endured the hardships of migration, yet their identities remain fluid, leaning toward integration with the land where they reside. Mrs. Sen, Ashima, Leela, and Usha's mother slowly begin to embrace the lifestyle of the country they have settled in. The second generation, however, feels more comfortable with the foreign culture and eventually learns to balance it while negotiating with their parents' traditions. In *A Temporary*

Matter, the writer highlights how, for the modern generation, the meaning of marriage is undergoing change, shaped by a growing emphasis on individuality and personal freedom. In Mrs. Sen's, Lahiri portrays the difficulties of adjusting to an unfamiliar cultural environment, while also highlighting the husband's indifference toward his nostalgic wife. The emotional struggles of immigrants often revolve around balancing their inherited culture with the one they embrace in their new homeland. They grapple with a persistent yearning for familiar surroundings while adapting to neighborhoods and workplaces that differ from those back home. Over time, they gradually come to terms with new experiences and realities. Through her narratives, the author vividly takes readers on a journey spanning Bengal, Boston, and beyond, skillfully portraying themes of identity, alienation, adaptation, and exile. The feelings of identity crisis, displacement, and alienation are shared experiences that mark the lives of both first-generation and second-generation immigrants. They continue to regard India as their true homeland, remaining deeply tied to its cultural values and traditions. For women, this often involves negotiating and adjusting between the contrasting demands of two different worlds. Migration was often a voluntary choice made in pursuit of better material opportunities. However, whether undertaken willingly or under compulsion, immigration inevitably brings with it feelings of dissatisfaction, nostalgia, rootlessness, alienation, and a deep yearning for the homeland. Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is deeply rooted in her personal experiences as an immigrant and those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and the wider Bengali community. Her works delve into the complexities of immigration, addressing themes such as cultural dislocation, the pursuit of the American dream, the shock of adapting to a foreign culture, and the identity crisis faced by second-generation children who struggle to connect fully either with their Indian heritage or with the culture of their birth country. Lahiri

skillfully portrays the struggles, anxieties, and psychological patterns of immigrant life. In her narratives, parents strive to keep their children connected to Indian traditions, while the second generation gradually assimilates into Western culture.

Her art often focuses on the backstories of the previous generation, narrated or understood from the perspective of their children. When Mr. Pirzada comes to dine, his longing for his homeland finds expression, as the story reflects the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 and the unrest it causes in him as a native of East Pakistan. While Lilia observes the turmoil at home, her school education remains limited to the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The struggle of East Pakistan for independence is, therefore, ironically ignored. In *Once in a Lifetime*, Hema's parents are unsettled by the Westernized lifestyle of their friends. Their preference for Johnny Walker serves as a symbol of cultural dissent, while the adoption of Western makeup and clothing reflects their inclination toward assimilation. In *Hell-Heaven*, Usha's mother is portrayed as a traditional housewife who has accepted her fate, while her husband, a dedicated scientist, remains absorbed in his work. Her only source of emotional comfort comes from Pranab, a young Bengali student who becomes a brother-like figure in their lives. Although Usha, as a teenager, often rebels against her mother's authority, she is not entirely unaware of her mother's solitude and silent suffering. This displacement and disempowerment of mothers often trickles down into the lives of their daughters as well. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma reflects this pattern, as she struggles to cope with the sudden and unexpected death of her mother, who passed away due to complications from anesthesia. It is often women who struggle the most to adapt to American life. For instance, in *Mrs. Sen's*, the protagonist finds it difficult to adjust to the fast-paced lifestyle of the West, which is symbolized by her inability to learn driving quickly and her

reliance on traditional methods, such as using a large blade to chop vegetables. Similarly, in *The Namesake*, Ashima, despite spending most of her life in the United States, raising her children there, and establishing a household, never feels at home in America. Her sentiments remain deeply Indian, and her repeated visits to India reflect her nostalgic attachment to her roots. Jhumpa Lahiri's characters often move across countries, continents, and professions with relative ease, yet the psychological bonds of family and culture remain difficult to sever.

One of the foremost difficulties encountered by diasporic communities is the quest for identity, a matter of profound importance to every individual. Through imagined characters and situations, some authors confront established conventions, examine issues of race and culture, and bring attention to the experiences of marginalized groups. India embodies a wide range of social systems, traditions, values, and practices. The authors explore universal themes that resonate with individuals across cultures. Diaspora theory, with its varied dimensions and attributes, has profoundly shaped world literature across languages and continues to influence it today. This form of writing, often referred to as diasporic or experimental literature, has gained global recognition and appreciation. Examining its role and significance becomes especially relevant in the field of Indian writing in English, which in recent decades has made remarkable contributions and earned international acclaim, leaving a lasting impact on readers worldwide. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* narrates the story of two brothers with sharply contrasting personalities. The younger brother becomes involved in the Naxalite movement and is eventually killed near Calcutta, leaving behind his pregnant wife, Gauri. After his death, Gauri marries the elder brother and moves with him to the United States, where they settle down. However, in America, Gauri gradually distances herself from domestic responsibilities,

leading a detached and introspective life that contrasts starkly with her earlier role as a wife and mother. The novel questions Gauri's neglect of family responsibilities in her quest for personal freedom, while simultaneously highlighting the essential human desire for love and companionship as a foundation for a meaningful life. In portraying the diasporic experience, Lahiri engages with themes of language, identity, place, and home, underscoring the complexities of belonging and alienation. *The Lowland* marks a shift in her narrative focus, as much of the story is set in Calcutta during the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting the characters' lasting connections to their homeland despite geographical separation. Through her lyrical prose and layered storytelling, Lahiri offers deep reflections on family relationships, cultural identity, and the enduring influence of historical circumstances.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novels address the seemingly ordinary challenges of daily life, which often evoke deeper questions about cultural identity and the immigrant condition in an Americanized, neo-colonial world. Her narratives navigate the space between two cultures, where characters belong fully to neither, mirroring the diasporic experiences frequently examined within postcolonial discourse. Lahiri's careful rendering of everyday details underscores the cultural and generational rift within migrant families, as children grapple with the complexities of their dual heritage. This pervasive sense of displacement embodies the continual quest for identity in a world where they belong neither entirely to India nor to America. In *The Lowland*, Lahiri employs a non-linear narrative structure to trace the lives of her characters and their search for identity. Unlike the more linear plot of *The Namesake*, *The Lowland* shifts across time and perspectives, presenting a multi-layered exploration of identity and belonging. Overall, Lahiri is known for offering poignant insights into the complexities of immigrant life and the search for identity in a

multicultural world. Through her meticulous attention to detail and nuanced characterization, she captures the universal human longing for belonging and the struggles of negotiating multiple cultural identities. At the core of these dynamics lies the emotional dislocation that accompanies migration. Lahiri portrays Ashima's response to her unfamiliar surroundings as a powerful illustration of this displacement. For Ashima, being a foreigner feels like a lifelong pregnancy an enduring weight, a constant burden, and an unending sense of being out of place.

Lahiri demonstrates that identity is neither fixed nor singular, but rather an evolving amalgamation of influences, memories, and personal choices. Her work underscores that cultural memory does not demand choosing one identity over another; instead, it involves embracing the contradictions and complexities that define diasporic existence. Themes such as identity, nostalgia, longing, and the search for home are central to diasporic literature, where language, culture, and history play vital roles in shaping diasporic identity. Much of Indian diaspora writing engages with these concerns, often presenting a redefined identity grounded in humanism, tolerance, and intellectual openness. This paper seeks to examine the ways in which women experience suffering at the intersection of gender and diaspora. This study vividly portrays the struggles, experiences, and challenges of diasporic individuals, tracing the journeys of Indian immigrants as they negotiate their successes, hardships, and conflicts while building new lives in America. In Lahiri's fiction, women emerge as central figures negotiating the fragile space between cultures, identities, and expectations. Their lives reflect the constant tension between gendered responsibilities and the challenges of diasporic displacement. Characters such as Ashima, Gauri, and others embody both resilience and vulnerability, illustrating how the search for belonging is often compounded by the weight of

patriarchal norms and cultural dislocation. Ultimately, Lahiri presents women as living 'between worlds,' where the struggle for selfhood is not merely about survival in a foreign land but also about redefining identity, autonomy, and belonging within the layered realities of diaspora.

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