

1 Home, Exile, and Negotiated Belonging: Reconstructing Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa

2 Lahiri's Fiction

4 Abstract

5 This study examines the reconstruction of diasporic identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of*
6 *Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Drawing upon
7 Stuart Hall's formulation of cultural identity as a "production" continuously in process, Avtar
8 Brah's theorization of "diaspora space," and postcolonial perspectives articulated by Bill
9 Ashcroft, this paper argues that Lahiri reconceptualizes diaspora not as a fixed condition of
10 exile but as a negotiated and relational mode of belonging shaped through domestic spaces,
11 intergenerational memory, naming practices, and emotional inheritance. Employing
12 qualitative textual analysis and comparative close reading, the study explores first-generation
13 exile, second-generation hybridity, gendered displacement, culinary symbolism, narrative
14 minimalism, and the politics of naming. The analysis demonstrates that Lahiri domesticates
15 postcolonial theory by locating diasporic transformation within intimate spaces rather than
16 overt political arenas. Ultimately, her fiction reframes diaspora as a liminal, evolving
17 condition of identity formation marked by continuity, rupture, and negotiation. This paper
18 contributes to contemporary diasporic literary studies by synthesizing theoretical frameworks
19 with narrative strategy and by situating Lahiri within global postcolonial discourse.

20 **Keywords:** diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, cultural identity, hybridity, postcolonialism, naming
21 politics, domestic space, transnationalism

22 Introduction

23 Diaspora has become a central paradigm in postcolonial literary studies, reflecting migration,
24 displacement, and transnational belonging in a globalized world. Moving beyond classical
25 notions of exile, contemporary diaspora emphasizes identity as fluid, negotiated, and

26 relational. Within Indian-American literature, **Jhumpa Lahiri** offers a nuanced exploration
27 of these dynamics in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Her
28 fiction situates diasporic experience within intimate domestic spaces homes, kitchens, and
29 family relationships, where belonging is continuously negotiated.

30 This paper argues that Lahiri reconceptualizes diaspora not as static exile but as an evolving
31 process of identity formation shaped by naming practices, intergenerational memory,
32 gendered experience, and everyday rituals. Diaspora in her works becomes a mode of
33 becoming rather than a condition of loss.

34 Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis and comparative close
35 reading across the three texts. It examines themes of hybridity, domestic space, naming
36 politics, and generational difference to explore how identity is reconstructed across contexts.

37 This study draws on three foundational thinkers. **Stuart Hall** conceptualizes identity as a
38 “production” always in process, emphasizing hybridity and becoming. **Avtar Brah**
39 introduces the idea of “diaspora space,” where identities intersect relationally within shared
40 social locations. **Bill Ashcroft** highlights displacement as transformative rather than purely
41 traumatic.

42 Together, these frameworks illuminate Lahiri’s diasporic imagination: identity is processual
43 (Hall), relational (Brah), and transformative (Ashcroft). Her fiction domesticates postcolonial

44 theory by locating cultural negotiation within everyday life, presenting diaspora as
45 provisional, evolving, and deeply human.

46 **Literature Review**

47 Since the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri has attracted
48 sustained attention in diasporic and postcolonial literary studies. Early critics mainly focused

49 on themes of immigrant loneliness, nostalgia, and cultural displacement. Stories such as
50 “Mrs. Sen’s” and “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” were read as sensitive portrayals of
51 emotional exile and generational distance. Scholars appreciated Lahiri’s quiet, restrained
52 style, seeing it as an honest depiction of middle-class Bengali immigrant life caught between
53 tradition and American modernity.

54 With the publication of *The Namesake* (2003), discussions expanded to questions of naming,
55 assimilation, and identity formation. Gogol’s decision to change his name became a powerful
56 symbol of the immigrant child’s struggle to balance inherited culture with the desire to
57 belong. Later, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) shifted attention to second-generation
58 experiences, portraying more subtle negotiations of identity within marriage, career, and
59 family relationships. Rather than dramatic alienation, Lahiri began to explore quieter forms of
60 adjustment and belonging.

61 Many scholars interpret her work through Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of hybridity, describing her
62 characters as living “in-between” cultures. Feminist critics further highlight how women such
63 as Ashima and Ruma carry the emotional weight of preserving culture within domestic
64 spaces. Food, memory, and home are often discussed as symbols of continuity between
65 homeland and hostland. At the same time, recent studies examine Lahiri’s minimalist writing
66 style, noting how her calm and understated narration reflects the subtle tensions of diasporic
67 life.

68 However, much of this scholarship remains fragmented. Themes such as hybridity, gender,
69 memory, and narrative form are often studied separately rather than together.

70 **Scholarly Debates and Research Gap**

71 Lahiri's fiction has generated several important debates. One major discussion centers on
72 assimilation versus resistance. Some critics argue that characters like Gogol gradually
73 assimilate into American society, while others believe Lahiri quietly resists such narratives
74 by preserving cultural memory. Her work, however, seems to suggest something more
75 complex, identity is not simply lost or adopted, but continually negotiated.

76 Another debate concerns whether her focus on domestic life makes her fiction politically
77 silent. While some view her work as lacking overt political commentary, others argue that her
78 politics lie in everyday moments, mispronounced names, cultural misunderstandings, and
79 intimate silences. In this way, she brings postcolonial tensions into ordinary family life.

80 Hybridity is also debated: is it a sign of fragmentation or creative possibility? Drawing on
81 Homi K. Bhabha, some see identity crisis, while others see opportunity. Lahiri's narratives
82 suggest that hybridity is both unstable and productive.

83 Despite extensive research, important gaps remain. Few studies combine perspectives such as
84 Stuart Hall's idea of identity as ongoing production, Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space,
85 and Bill Ashcroft's theory of postcolonial transformation within a single framework.

86 Comparative analysis across *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed*
87 *Earth* is also limited.

88 This study responds to these gaps by offering a more connected and comparative reading of
89 Lahiri's works. By proposing the idea of "negotiated belonging," it moves beyond simple
90 binaries of assimilation and exile, presenting Lahiri not only as a storyteller of immigrant life
91 but as a thoughtful interpreter of evolving diasporic identity.

92 **Critical Analysis**

93 **First Generation Exile and Emotional Displacement**

94 In the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, exile unfolds quietly within the rhythms of ordinary life. Her
95 first generation characters are not portrayed as victims of visible political rupture. Instead,
96 their displacement is intimate and psychological. In *The Namesake*, Ashima's experience of
97 childbirth in a Cambridge hospital captures this condition. Surrounded by unfamiliar systems
98 and strangers, she feels the absence of shared cultural rituals and familial presence. America
99 does not appear hostile, yet it feels impersonal and emotionally distant.

100 As time passes, Ashima adapts by cooking Bengali food, organizing gatherings, and forming
101 community ties. Yet her belonging remains partial. She does not replace Calcutta with
102 America. Rather, she learns to inhabit both spaces. By the novel's conclusion, she divides her
103 time between India and the United States, embodying dual affiliation rather than complete
104 assimilation.

105 A similar emotional confinement appears in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mrs. Sen's inability to
106 drive reflects more than practical difficulty. It signals limited autonomy and dependence. Her
107 apartment becomes a recreated Bengali interior filled with letters, spices, and familiar kitchen
108 rituals. These gestures do not eliminate exile, but they render it livable. For Lahiri's first
109 generation, displacement evolves but does not disappear.

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112 **Naming and the Archive of Identity**

113 Naming in *The Namesake* serves as a powerful site of identity formation. Gogol's name,
114 derived from the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, carries his father's survival story and literary
115 devotion. For Ashoke, the name represents memory and gratitude. For Gogol, it initially
116 signifies awkwardness and difference.

117 When he legally changes his name to Nikhil, he seeks agency over self representation. Yet
118 the original name continues to shape his sense of self. After his father's death, he returns to
119 the book of Gogol's stories and gradually recognizes the emotional inheritance embedded
120 within his name. Identity in Lahiri's fiction emerges as layered and retrospective. A name
121 becomes an archive of migration, memory, and relational history.

122 **Hybridity and Hall's Identity as Becoming**

123 Lahiri's characters are often discussed through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, yet in
124 her narratives hybridity feels lived rather than abstract. Gogol resists Bengali customs in
125 adolescence and seeks integration within American culture. Nevertheless, he never entirely
126 detaches from his heritage. Moushumi, despite her cosmopolitan aspirations, remains marked
127 by diasporic inheritance.

128 In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma represents a more integrated second generation. She is
129 professionally stable and linguistically confident, yet her father's visit and her mother's
130 absence expose unresolved emotional ties. Identity is neither confusion nor resolution. It is
131 constant recalibration shaped by memory and relationship.

132 **Gendered Experience and Emotional Labor**

133 Diaspora in Lahiri's fiction is distinctly gendered. Women often carry the responsibility of
134 sustaining cultural continuity. Ashima maintains ritual practices and community networks
135 while navigating isolation. Mrs. Sen's dependence underscores restricted autonomy within
136 domestic interiors.

137 In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma confronts expectations regarding care for her widowed father.
138 Her hesitation reflects inherited cultural norms intersecting with personal independence.

139 Lahiri portrays her female characters not as passive figures but as thoughtful negotiators
140 balancing autonomy and obligation.

141 **Memory, Food, and Ritual Practice**

142 Food functions as embodied memory. Ashima's improvised mixture of Rice Krispies and
143 Bengali spices represents adaptation without erasure. The ingredients are American, yet the
144 flavor remains rooted in memory. Shared meals across generations signal affection, distance,
145 and transformation.

146 Rituals such as naming ceremonies and social gatherings sustain continuity within
147 displacement. However, these practices evolve. They are not static traditions but adaptive
148 responses to new environments. Memory in Lahiri's fiction remains dynamic rather than
149 fixed.

150 **Domestic Space as Diaspora Space**

151 Drawing upon Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space, Lahiri's homes function as layered
152 intersections of past and present. The Cambridge apartment in *The Namesake* transforms
153 from foreign setting into a space filled with familial memory. In *Unaccustomed Earth*,
154 Ruma's Seattle home becomes a site of generational negotiation. The garden symbolizes
155 transplantation and growth within unfamiliar soil.

156 Domestic interiors in Lahiri are not passive backgrounds. They hold the emotional traces of
157 migration and belonging.

158 **Minimalism and the Aesthetic of Subtlety**

159 Lahiri's restrained prose mirrors the quiet negotiations of diasporic life. Emotional tensions
160 unfold through silence and understated gesture rather than dramatic confrontation. Her

161 narrative economy reflects interior struggle and gradual recognition. The aesthetic form
162 reinforces the thematic focus on subtle belonging.

163 **Negotiated Belonging**

164 Across her works, Lahiri moves beyond simple binaries of exile and assimilation. Ashima
165 chooses circulation between nations. Gogol reconciles with the layered meaning of his name.
166 Ruma recognizes both independence and connection.

167 Belonging in Lahiri's fiction remains relational and evolving. It is shaped by memory,
168 intimacy, and time. Diaspora becomes neither loss nor triumph but an ongoing practice of
169 adjustment within lived experience.

170 **Conclusion**

171 **Toward a Theory of Negotiated Belonging**

172 The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri invites readers to reconsider what diaspora truly means. Rather
173 than presenting migration as dramatic rupture or permanent nostalgia, her works locate
174 displacement within everyday life. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and
175 *Unaccustomed Earth*, the experience of migration unfolds in kitchens, hospital rooms,
176 suburban homes, and gardens. These intimate spaces become the settings where identity is
177 quietly shaped and reshaped. Lahiri moves the conversation about diaspora away from
178 political spectacle and toward emotional interiority.

179 Drawing on the insights of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Bill Ashcroft, this study highlights
180 the depth of Lahiri's contribution. Hall's idea of identity as an ongoing production helps
181 explain why her characters never arrive at a final sense of self. Gogol's changing relationship
182 with his name, Ashima's gradual adjustment to American life, and Ruma's struggle with

183 inherited responsibility all demonstrate that identity remains fluid. It develops over time,
184 shaped by memory and experience. Belonging is not achieved once and for all. It is
185 continually revised.

186 Brah's concept of diaspora space further clarifies how Lahiri's domestic interiors function as
187 meeting points of multiple histories. The Ganguli home in Cambridge brings together
188 immigrant memory and American upbringing. Ruma's Seattle house connects past and
189 present, India and the United States, as well as generational difference. These homes are not
190 merely backdrops. They are relational spaces where belonging is negotiated through everyday
191 interactions.

192 Ashcroft's emphasis on transformation rather than loss also resonates in Lahiri's work.
193 Displacement does not produce only absence. It also gives rise to new forms of expression.
194 Ashima's mixture of Rice Krispies and Bengali spices reflects creative adaptation rather than
195 cultural dilution. Naming practices, culinary improvisations, and subtle emotional exchanges
196 all demonstrate how migration can generate new identities rather than erase old ones.

197 Most importantly, Lahiri resists the simple opposition between exile and assimilation. Her
198 first generation characters do not remain frozen in longing, and her second generation
199 characters do not abandon their inheritance. Instead of choosing between origins and
200 destinations, her characters learn to live within connection and movement.

201 What emerges from her fiction is a vision of negotiated belonging. Belonging is not a fixed
202 destination but a relational process shaped by memory, family, and time. Through quiet
203 narrative detail and emotional subtlety, Lahiri offers not only stories of immigrant life but a
204 thoughtful meditation on how identity continues to evolve within the spaces between
205 cultures.

206 **Contribution to Diasporic Studies**

207 This study makes several meaningful contributions to diasporic literary scholarship,
208 particularly in relation to the works of Jhumpa Lahiri.

209 To begin with, it offers a carefully integrated theoretical framework. Instead of applying
210 concepts such as hybridity, feminism, or nostalgia in isolation, the study brings together the
211 ideas of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Bill Ashcroft. Hall's understanding of identity as an
212 ongoing process, Brah's notion of diaspora space, and Ashcroft's emphasis on transformation
213 collectively provide a cohesive lens through which Lahiri's fiction can be examined. This
214 synthesis demonstrates that her narratives do not simply illustrate theory but actively deepen
215 and extend it.

216 The study also contributes through its comparative scope. By reading *Interpreter of Maladies*,
217 *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* together, it traces the movement from first
218 generation emotional displacement to second generation negotiation and recalibration. This
219 cross textual approach reveals the gradual evolution of Lahiri's diasporic imagination,
220 showing how her focus shifts from isolation toward relational complexity across generations.

221 Another significant contribution lies in its attention to form. Lahiri's restrained narrative style
222 is examined not merely as aesthetic preference but as a reflection of diasporic interiority.
223 Silence, understatement, and emotional subtlety mirror the quiet negotiations of belonging
224 experienced by her characters. By connecting narrative minimalism to diasporic experience,
225 the study moves beyond thematic discussion and engages with literary form as meaningful
226 expression.

227 The analysis further highlights naming as central to diasporic identity formation. In *The*
228 *Namesake*, Gogol's name becomes more than a source of personal discomfort. It functions as

229 an archive of migration, memory, and survival. Through this lens, naming is understood as a
230 site where literature, history, and family intersect. Such attention repositions naming politics
231 at the heart of diasporic discourse rather than at its margins.

232 Finally, this research introduces the idea of negotiated belonging as an alternative to rigid
233 binaries of exile and assimilation. Instead of viewing identity as a choice between origin and
234 destination, this framework recognizes belonging as relational, evolving, and shaped by
235 domestic life and generational change. It allows for multiplicity without demanding final
236 resolution.

237 Taken together, these contributions position Lahiri not only as a chronicler of immigrant
238 experience but as a writer whose work reshapes contemporary understanding of diaspora,
239 identity, and belonging.

240 **Implications for Postcolonial Theory**

241 The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri encourages a thoughtful reconsideration of postcolonial theory.
242 Much traditional postcolonial scholarship has focused on colonial trauma, resistance, and the
243 formation of national identity. While these concerns remain important, Lahiri's narratives
244 show that postcolonial experience also unfolds within ordinary domestic spaces. Her work
245 shifts attention from public confrontation to private negotiation.

246 In her novels and stories, displacement continues across generations, even within relatively
247 stable middle class immigrant families. Cultural negotiation takes place in conversations
248 between parents and children, in the silences between spouses, and in the emotional distance
249 between lovers and friends. These quiet interactions reveal that postcolonial transformation is
250 not confined to political arenas. It is lived daily within relationships. As a result, postcolonial

251 theory must expand its focus to include these micro relational dynamics as meaningful sites
252 of identity formation.

253 Lahiri's work also unsettles the traditional center and periphery model. Her characters move
254 between India, the United States, and Europe with increasing fluidity. Migration does not
255 always signal marginalization. Instead, it reflects multidirectional belonging and global
256 mobility. This movement complicates rigid distinctions between colonizer and colonized,
257 suggesting a more interconnected and relational understanding of cultural exchange.

258 In this way, Lahiri brings postcolonial inquiry into the sphere of the intimate without
259 weakening its critical force. She demonstrates that global histories of displacement are
260 embedded in everyday life. Her fiction calls for a postcolonial theory attentive not only to
261 dramatic rupture but also to subtle negotiation, emotional continuity, and lived experience.

262 **Future Research Trajectory**

263 Several avenues for further investigation emerge from this study.

264 Comparative analysis could situate Lahiri alongside other transnational writers such as
265 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Mohsin Hamid, examining how negotiated belonging
266 manifests across different diasporic communities.

267 Additionally, Lahiri's later turn toward writing in Italian invites exploration of linguistic self-
268 reinvention as diasporic extension. Language shift itself may constitute another layer of
269 negotiated belonging.

270 Finally, interdisciplinary approaches drawing from migration studies, sociology, and memory
271 studies could deepen understanding of domestic space as diaspora space. Lahiri's fiction
272 offers fertile ground for examining how globalization reshapes intimate identity formation.

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