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Home, Exile, and Negotiated Belonging: Reconstructing Diasporic Identity in Jhumpa 1
Lahiri's Fiction 2 3 Abstract 4 This study examines the reconstruction of diasporic identity
in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and
Unaccustomed Earth (2008). Drawing upon 6 Stuart Hall's formulation of cultural identity
as a "production" continuously in process, Avtar 7 Brah's theorization of "diaspora space,"
and postcolonial perspectives articulated by Bill 8 Ashcroft, this paper argues that Lahiri
reconceptualizes diaspora not as a fixed condition of 9 exile but as a negotiated and
relational mode of belonging shaped through domestic spaces, 10 intergenerational
memory, naming practices, and emotional inheritance. Employing 11 qualitative textual
analysis and comparative close reading, the study explores first-generation 12 exile,
second-generation hybridity, gendered displacement, culinary symbolism, narrative 13
minimalism, and the politics of naming. The analysis demonstrates that Lahiri domesticates
14 postcolonial theory by locating diasporic transformation within intimate spaces rather
than 15 overt political arenas. Ultimately, her fiction reframes diaspora as a liminal,
evolving 16 condition of identity formation marked by continuity, rupture, and negotiation.
This paper 17 contributes to contemporary diasporic literary studies by synthesizing
theoretical frameworks 18 with narrative strategy and by situating Lahiri within global
postcolonial discourse. 19 Keywords: diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri, cultural identity, hybridity,
postcolonialism, naming 20 politics, domestic space, transnationalism 21 Introduction 22
Diaspora has become a central paradigm in postcolonial literary studies, reflecting
migration, 23 displacement, and transnational belonging in a globalized world. Moving
beyond classical 24 notions of exile, contemporary diaspora emphasizes identity as fluid,
negotiated, and 25

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

paper argues that Lahiri reconceptualizes diaspora not as static exile but as an evolving 30 process of identity formation shaped by naming practices, intergenerational memory, 31 gendered experience, and everyday rituals. Diaspora in her works becomes a mode of 32 becoming rather than a condition of loss. 33 Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis and comparative close 34 reading across the three texts. It examines themes of hybridity, domestic space, naming 35 politics, and generational difference to explore how identity is reconstructed across contexts. 36 This study draws on three foundational thinkers. Stuart Hall conceptualizes identity as a 37 “production” always in process, emphasizing hybridity and becoming. Avtar Brah 38 introduces the idea of “diaspora space,” where identities intersect relationally within shared 39 social locations. Bill Ashcroft highlights displacement as transformative rather than purely 40 traumatic. 41 Together, these frameworks illuminate Lahiri’s diasporic imagination: identity is processual 42 (Hall), relational (Brah), and transformative (Ashcroft). Her fiction domesticates postcolonial 43 theory by locating cultural negotiation within everyday life, presenting diaspora as 44 provisional, evolving, and deeply human. 45 Literature Review 46 Since the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri has attracted 47 sustained attention in diasporic and postcolonial literary studies. Early critics mainly focused 48 Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 6. Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 113. Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 15.

on themes of immigrant loneliness, nostalgia, and cultural displacement. Stories such as 49 “Mrs. Sen’s” and “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” were read as sensitive portrayals of 50 emotional exile and generational distance. Scholars appreciated Lahiri’s quiet, restrained 51 style, seeing it as an honest depiction of middle-class Bengali immigrant life caught between 52 tradition and American modernity. 53 With the publication of *The Namesake* (2003), discussions expanded to questions of naming, 54 assimilation, and identity formation. Gogol’s decision to change his name became a powerful 55 symbol of

the immigrant child's struggle to balance inherited culture with the desire to 56 belong. Later, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) shifted attention to second-generation 57 experiences, portraying more subtle negotiations of identity within marriage, career, and 58 family relationships. Rather than dramatic alienation, Lahiri began to explore quieter forms of 59 adjustment and belonging. 60 Many scholars interpret her work through Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity, describing her 61 characters as living "in-between" cultures. Feminist critics further highlight how women such 62 as Ashima and Ruma carry the emotional weight of preserving culture within domestic 63 spaces. Food, memory, and home are often discussed as symbols of continuity between 64 homeland and hostland. At the same time, recent studies examine Lahiri's minimalist writing 65 style, noting how her calm and understated narration reflects the subtle tensions of diasporic 66 life. 67 However, much of this scholarship remains fragmented. Themes such as hybridity, gender, 68 memory, and narrative form are often studied separately rather than together. 69 Scholarly Debates and Research Gap 70

Lahiri's fiction has generated several important debates. One major discussion centers on 71 assimilation versus resistance. Some critics argue that characters like Gogol gradually 72 assimilate into American society, while others believe Lahiri quietly resists such narratives 73 by preserving cultural memory. Her work, however, seems to suggest something more 74 complex, identity is not simply lost or adopted, but continually negotiated. 75 Another debate concerns whether her focus on domestic life makes her fiction politically 76 silent. While some view her work as lacking overt political commentary, others argue that her 77 politics lie in everyday moments, mispronounced names, cultural misunderstandings, and 78 intimate silences. In this way, she brings postcolonial tensions into ordinary family life. 79 Hybridity is also debated: is it a sign of fragmentation or creative possibility? Drawing on 80 Homi K. Bhabha, some see identity crisis, while others see opportunity. Lahiri's narratives 81 suggest that hybridity is both unstable and productive. 82 Despite extensive research, important gaps remain. Few studies combine perspectives

such as 83 Stuart Hall's idea of identity as ongoing production, Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space, 84 and Bill Ashcroft's theory of postcolonial transformation within a single framework. 85 Comparative analysis across *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* is also limited. 87 This study responds to these gaps by offering a more connected and comparative reading of 88 Lahiri's works. By proposing the idea of "negotiated belonging," it moves beyond simple 89 binaries of assimilation and exile, presenting Lahiri not only as a storyteller of immigrant life 90 but as a thoughtful interpreter of evolving diasporic identity. 91 Critical Analysis 92 First Generation Exile and Emotional Displacement 93

In the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, exile unfolds quietly within the rhythms of ordinary life. Her 94 first generation characters are not portrayed as victims of visible political rupture. Instead, 95 their displacement is intimate and psychological. In *The Namesake*, Ashima's experience of 96 childbirth in a Cambridge hospital captures this condition. Surrounded by unfamiliar systems 97 and strangers, she feels the absence of shared cultural rituals and familial presence. America 98 does not appear hostile, yet it feels impersonal and emotionally distant. 99 As time passes, Ashima adapts by cooking Bengali food, organizing gatherings, and forming 100 community ties. Yet her belonging remains partial. She does not replace Calcutta with 101 America. Rather, she learns to inhabit both spaces. By the novel's conclusion, she divides her 102 time between India and the United States, embodying dual affiliation rather than complete 103 assimilation. 104 A similar emotional confinement appears in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mrs. Sen's inability to 105 drive reflects more than practical difficulty. It signals limited autonomy and dependence. Her 106 apartment becomes a recreated Bengali interior filled with letters, spices, and familiar kitchen 107 rituals. These gestures do not eliminate exile, but they render it livable. For Lahiri's first 108 generation, displacement evolves but does not disappear. 109 110 111 Naming and the Archive of Identity 112 Naming in *The Namesake* serves as a powerful site of identity formation. Gogol's name, 113 derived from the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol,

carries his father's survival story and literary 114 devotion. For Ashoke, the name represents memory and gratitude. For Gogol, it initially 115 signifies awkwardness and difference. 116

When he legally changes his name to Nikhil, he seeks agency over self representation. Yet 117 the original name continues to shape his sense of self. After his father's death, he returns to 118 the book of Gogol's stories and gradually recognizes the emotional inheritance embedded 119 within his name. Identity in Lahiri's fiction emerges as layered and retrospective. A name 120 becomes an archive of migration, memory, and relational history. 121 Hybridity and Hall's Identity as Becoming 122 Lahiri's characters are often discussed through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, yet in 123 her narratives hybridity feels lived rather than abstract. Gogol resists Bengali customs in 124 adolescence and seeks integration within American culture. Nevertheless, he never entirely 125 detaches from his heritage. Moushumi, despite her cosmopolitan aspirations, remains marked 126 by diasporic inheritance. 127 In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma represents a more integrated second generation. She is 128 professionally stable and linguistically confident, yet her father's visit and her mother's 129 absence expose unresolved emotional ties. Identity is neither confusion nor resolution. It is 130 constant recalibration shaped by memory and relationship. 131 Gendered Experience and Emotional Labor 132 Diaspora in Lahiri's fiction is distinctly gendered. Women often carry the responsibility of 133 sustaining cultural continuity. Ashima maintains ritual practices and community networks 134 while navigating isolation. Mrs. Sen's dependence underscores restricted autonomy within 135 domestic interiors. 136 In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma confronts expectations regarding care for her widowed father. 137 Her hesitation reflects inherited cultural norms intersecting with personal independence. 138

Lahiri portrays her female characters not as passive figures but as thoughtful negotiators 139 balancing autonomy and obligation. 140 Memory, Food, and Ritual Practice 141 Food

functions as embodied memory. Ashima's improvised mixture of Rice Krispies and 142 Bengali spices represents adaptation without erasure. The ingredients are American, yet the 143 flavor remains rooted in memory. Shared meals across generations signal affection, distance, 144 and transformation. 145 Rituals such as naming ceremonies and social gatherings sustain continuity within 146 displacement. However, these practices evolve. They are not static traditions but adaptive 147 responses to new environments. Memory in Lahiri's fiction remains dynamic rather than 148 fixed. 149 Domestic Space as Diaspora Space 150 Drawing upon Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space, Lahiri's homes function as layered 151 intersections of past and present. The Cambridge apartment in *The Namesake* transforms 152 from foreign setting into a space filled with familial memory. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, 153 Ruma's Seattle home becomes a site of generational negotiation. The garden symbolizes 154 transplantation and growth within unfamiliar soil. 155 Domestic interiors in Lahiri are not passive backgrounds. They hold the emotional traces of 156 migration and belonging. 157 Minimalism and the Aesthetic of Subtlety 158 Lahiri's restrained prose mirrors the quiet negotiations of diasporic life. Emotional tensions 159 unfold through silence and understated gesture rather than dramatic confrontation. Her 160

narrative economy reflects interior struggle and gradual recognition. The aesthetic form 161 reinforces the thematic focus on subtle belonging. 162 Negotiated Belonging 163 Across her works, Lahiri moves beyond simple binaries of exile and assimilation. Ashima 164 chooses circulation between nations. Gogol reconciles with the layered meaning of his name. 165 Ruma recognizes both independence and connection. 166 Belonging in Lahiri's fiction remains relational and evolving. It is shaped by memory, 167 intimacy, and time. Diaspora becomes neither loss nor triumph but an ongoing practice of 168 adjustment within lived experience. 169 Conclusion 170 Toward a Theory of Negotiated Belonging 171 The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri invites readers to reconsider what diaspora truly means. Rather 172 than presenting migration as dramatic rupture or permanent nostalgia, her

works locate 173 displacement within everyday life. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and 174 *Unaccustomed Earth*, the experience of migration unfolds in kitchens, hospital rooms, 175 suburban homes, and gardens. These intimate spaces become the settings where identity is 176 quietly shaped and reshaped. Lahiri moves the conversation about diaspora away from 177 political spectacle and toward emotional interiority. 178 Drawing on the insights of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Bill Ashcroft, this study highlights 179 the depth of Lahiri's contribution. Hall's idea of identity as an ongoing production helps 180 explain why her characters never arrive at a final sense of self. Gogol's changing relationship 181 with his name, Ashima's gradual adjustment to American life, and Ruma's struggle with 182

inherited responsibility all demonstrate that identity remains fluid. It develops over time, 183 shaped by memory and experience. Belonging is not achieved once and for all. It is 184 continually revised. 185 Brah's concept of diaspora space further clarifies how Lahiri's domestic interiors function as 186 meeting points of multiple histories. The Ganguli home in Cambridge brings together 187 immigrant memory and American upbringing. Ruma's Seattle house connects past and 188 present, India and the United States, as well as generational difference. These homes are not 189 merely backdrops. They are relational spaces where belonging is negotiated through everyday 190 interactions. 191 Ashcroft's emphasis on transformation rather than loss also resonates in Lahiri's work. 192 Displacement does not produce only absence. It also gives rise to new forms of expression. 193 Ashima's mixture of Rice Krispies and Bengali spices reflects creative adaptation rather than 194 cultural dilution. Naming practices, culinary improvisations, and subtle emotional exchanges 195 all demonstrate how migration can generate new identities rather than erase old ones. 196 Most importantly, Lahiri resists the simple opposition between exile and assimilation. Her 197 first generation characters do not remain frozen in longing, and her second generation 198 characters do not abandon their inheritance. Instead of choosing between origins and 199 destinations, her characters

learn to live within connection and movement. 200 What emerges from her fiction is a vision of negotiated belonging. Belonging is not a fixed 201 destination but a relational process shaped by memory, family, and time. Through quiet 202 narrative detail and emotional subtlety, Lahiri offers not only stories of immigrant life but a 203 thoughtful meditation on how identity continues to evolve within the spaces between 204 cultures. 205

Contribution to Diasporic Studies 206 This study makes several meaningful contributions to diasporic literary scholarship, 207 particularly in relation to the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. 208 To begin with, it offers a carefully integrated theoretical framework. Instead of applying 209 concepts such as hybridity, feminism, or nostalgia in isolation, the study brings together the 210 ideas of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Bill Ashcroft. Hall's understanding of identity as an 211 ongoing process, Brah's notion of diaspora space, and Ashcroft's emphasis on transformation 212 collectively provide a cohesive lens through which Lahiri's fiction can be examined. This 213 synthesis demonstrates that her narratives do not simply illustrate theory but actively deepen 214 and extend it. 215 The study also contributes through its comparative scope. By reading *Interpreter of Maladies*, 216 *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* together, it traces the movement from first 217 generation emotional displacement to second generation negotiation and recalibration. This 218 cross textual approach reveals the gradual evolution of Lahiri's diasporic imagination, 219 showing how her focus shifts from isolation toward relational complexity across generations. 220 Another significant contribution lies in its attention to form. Lahiri's restrained narrative style 221 is examined not merely as aesthetic preference but as a reflection of diasporic interiority. 222 Silence, understatement, and emotional subtlety mirror the quiet negotiations of belonging 223 experienced by her characters. By connecting narrative minimalism to diasporic experience, 224 the study moves beyond thematic discussion and engages with literary form as meaningful 225 expression. 226 The analysis further highlights naming as central to diasporic identity formation. In *The* 227

Namesake, Gogol's name becomes more than a source of personal discomfort. It functions as 228

an archive of migration, memory, and survival. Through this lens, naming is understood as a 229 site where literature, history, and family intersect. Such attention repositions naming politics 230 at the heart of diasporic discourse rather than at its margins. 231 Finally, this research introduces the idea of negotiated belonging as an alternative to rigid 232 binaries of exile and assimilation. Instead of viewing identity as a choice between origin and 233 destination, this framework recognizes belonging as relational, evolving, and shaped by 234 domestic life and generational change. It allows for multiplicity without demanding final 235 resolution. 236 Taken together, these contributions position Lahiri not only as a chronicler of immigrant 237 experience but as a writer whose work reshapes contemporary understanding of diaspora, 238 identity, and belonging. 239 Implications for Postcolonial Theory 240 The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri encourages a thoughtful reconsideration of postcolonial theory. 241 Much traditional postcolonial scholarship has focused on colonial trauma, resistance, and the 242 formation of national identity. While these concerns remain important, Lahiri's narratives 243 show that postcolonial experience also unfolds within ordinary domestic spaces. Her work 244 shifts attention from public confrontation to private negotiation. 245 In her novels and stories, displacement continues across generations, even within relatively 246 stable middle class immigrant families. Cultural negotiation takes place in conversations 247 between parents and children, in the silences between spouses, and in the emotional distance 248 between lovers and friends. These quiet interactions reveal that postcolonial transformation is 249 not confined to political arenas. It is lived daily within relationships. As a result, postcolonial 250

theory must expand its focus to include these micro relational dynamics as meaningful sites 251 of identity formation. 252 Lahiri's work also unsettles the traditional center and periphery model. Her characters move 253 between India, the United States, and Europe

with increasing fluidity. Migration does not 254 always signal marginalization. Instead, it reflects multidirectional belonging and global 255 mobility. This movement complicates rigid distinctions between colonizer and colonized, 256 suggesting a more interconnected and relational understanding of cultural exchange. 257 In this way, Lahiri brings postcolonial inquiry into the sphere of the intimate without 258 weakening its critical force. She demonstrates that global histories of displacement are 259 embedded in everyday life. Her fiction calls for a postcolonial theory attentive not only to 260 dramatic rupture but also to subtle negotiation, emotional continuity, and lived experience. 261 Future Research Trajectory 262 Several avenues for further investigation emerge from this study. 263 Comparative analysis could situate Lahiri alongside other transnational writers such as 264 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Mohsin Hamid, examining how negotiated belonging 265 manifests across different diasporic communities. 266 Additionally, Lahiri's later turn toward writing in Italian invites exploration of linguistic self 267 reinvention as diasporic extension. Language shift itself may constitute another layer of 268 negotiated belonging. 269 Finally, interdisciplinary approaches drawing from migration studies, sociology, and memory 270 studies could deepen understanding of domestic space as diaspora space. Lahiri's fiction 271 offers fertile ground for examining how globalization reshapes intimate identity formation. 272

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