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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HOME, EXILE, AND NEGOTIATED BELONGING: RECONSTRUCTING DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION

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Abstract

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 Stuart Hall's formulation of cultural identity as a "production" continuously in process, Avtar Brah's theorization of "diaspora space," and postcolonial perspectives articulated by Bill Ashcroft, this paper argues that Lahiri reconceptualizes diaspora not as a fixed condition of exile but as a negotiated and relational mode of belonging shaped through domestic spaces, intergenerational memory, naming practices, and emotional inheritance. Employing qualitative textual analysis and comparative close reading, the study explores first generation exile, second generation hybridity, gendered displacement, culinary symbolism, narrative minimalism, and the politics of naming. The analysis demonstrates that Lahiri domesticates postcolonial theory by locating diasporic transformation within intimate spaces rather than overt political arenas. Ultimately, her fiction reframes diaspora as a liminal, evolving condition of identity formation marked by continuity, rupture, and negotiation. This paper contributes to contemporary diasporic literary studies by synthesizing theoretical frameworks with narrative strategy and by situating Lahiri within global postcolonial discourse.

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Introduction:-

Diaspora has become a central paradigm in postcolonial literary studies, reflecting migration, displacement, and transnational belonging in a globalized world. Moving beyond classical notions of exile, contemporary diaspora emphasizes identity as fluid, negotiated, and relational. Within Indian-American literature, Jhumpa Lahiri offers a nuanced exploration of these dynamics in *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Her fiction situates diasporic experience within intimate domestic spaces homes, kitchens, and family relationships, where belonging is continuously negotiated. This paper argues that Lahiri reconceptualizes diaspora not as static exile but as an evolving process of identity formation shaped by naming practices, intergenerational memory, gendered experience, and everyday rituals. Diaspora in her works becomes a mode of becoming rather than a condition of loss. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis and comparative close reading across the three texts. It examines themes of hybridity, domestic space, naming politics, and generational difference

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to explore how identity is reconstructed across contexts. This study draws on three foundational thinkers. Stuart Hall conceptualizes identity as a “production” always in process, emphasizing hybridity and becoming. Avtar Brah introduces the idea of “diaspora space,” where identities intersect relationally within shared social locations. Bill Ashcroft highlights displacement as transformative rather than purely traumatic. Together, these frameworks illuminate Lahiri’s diasporic imagination: identity is processual (Hall), relational (Brah), and transformative (Ashcroft). Her fiction domesticates postcolonial theory by locating cultural negotiation within everyday life, presenting diaspora as provisional, evolving, and deeply human.

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.

Literature Review:-

Since the publication of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri has attracted sustained attention in diasporic and postcolonial literary studies. Early critics mainly focused on themes of immigrant loneliness, nostalgia, and cultural displacement. Stories such as “Mrs. Sen’s” and “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” were read as sensitive portrayals of emotional exile and generational distance. Scholars appreciated Lahiri’s quiet, restrained style, seeing it as an honest depiction of middle-class Bengali immigrant life caught between tradition and American modernity. With the publication of *The Namesake* (2003), discussions expanded to questions of naming, assimilation, and identity formation. Gogol’s decision to change his name became a powerful symbol of the immigrant child’s struggle to balance inherited culture with the desire to belong. Later, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) shifted attention to second-generation experiences, portraying more subtle negotiations of identity within marriage, career, and family relationships. Rather than dramatic alienation, Lahiri began to explore quieter forms of adjustment and belonging. Many scholars interpret her work through Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of hybridity, describing her characters as living “in-between” cultures. Feminist critics further highlight how women such as Ashima and Ruma carry the emotional weight of preserving culture within domestic spaces. Food, memory, and home are often discussed as symbols of continuity between homeland and hostland. At the same time, recent studies examine Lahiri’s minimalist writing style, noting how her calm and understated narration reflects the subtle tensions of diasporic life. However, much of this scholarship remains fragmented. Themes such as hybridity, gender, memory, and narrative form are often studied separately rather than together.

Scholarly Debates and Research Gap:-

Lahiri’s fiction has generated several important debates. One major discussion centers on assimilation versus resistance. Some critics argue that characters like Gogol gradually assimilate into American society, while others believe Lahiri quietly resists such narratives by preserving cultural memory. Her work, however, seems to suggest something more complex, identity is not simply lost or adopted, but continually negotiated. Another debate concerns whether her focus on domestic life makes her fiction politically silent. While some view her work as lacking overt political commentary, others argue that her politics lie in everyday moments, mispronounced names, cultural misunderstandings, and intimate silences. In this way, she brings postcolonial tensions into ordinary family life. Hybridity is also debated: is it a sign of fragmentation or creative possibility? Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha, some see identity crisis, while others see opportunity. Lahiri’s narratives suggest that hybridity is both unstable and productive. Despite extensive research, important gaps remain. Few studies combine perspectives such as Stuart Hall’s idea of identity as ongoing production, Avtar Brah’s concept of diaspora space, and Bill Ashcroft’s theory of postcolonial transformation within a single framework. Comparative analysis across *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* is also limited. This study responds to these gaps by offering a more connected and comparative reading of Lahiri’s works. By proposing the idea of “negotiated belonging,” it moves beyond simple binaries of assimilation and exile, presenting Lahiri not only as a storyteller of immigrant life but as a thoughtful interpreter of evolving diasporic identity.

Critical Analysis:-

First Generation Exile and Emotional Displacement:-

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

adapts by cooking Bengali food, organizing gatherings, and forming community ties. Yet her belonging remains partial. She does not replace Calcutta with America. Rather, she learns to inhabit both spaces. By the novel's conclusion, she divides her time between India and the United States, embodying dual affiliation rather than complete assimilation. A similar emotional confinement appears in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mrs. Sen's inability to drive reflects more than practical difficulty. It signals limited autonomy and dependence. Her apartment becomes a recreated Bengali interior filled with letters, spices, and familiar kitchen rituals. These gestures do not eliminate exile, but they render it livable. For Lahiri's first generation, displacement evolves but does not disappear.

Naming and the Archive of Identity:-

Naming in *The Namesake* serves as a powerful site of identity formation. Gogol's name, derived from the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, carries his father's survival story and literary devotion. For Ashoke, the name represents memory and gratitude. For Gogol, it initially signifies awkwardness and difference. When he legally changes his name to Nikhil, he seeks agency over self representation. Yet the original name continues to shape his sense of self. After his father's death, he returns to the book of Gogol's stories and gradually recognizes the emotional inheritance embedded within his name. Identity in Lahiri's fiction emerges as layered and retrospective. A name becomes an archive of migration, memory, and relational history.

Hybridity and Hall's Identity as Becoming:-

Lahiri's characters are often discussed through Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, yet in her narratives hybridity feels lived rather than abstract. Gogol resists Bengali customs in adolescence and seeks integration within American culture. Nevertheless, he never entirely detaches from his heritage. Moushumi, despite her cosmopolitan aspirations, remains marked by diasporic inheritance. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma represents a more integrated second generation. She is professionally stable and linguistically confident, yet her father's visit and her mother's absence expose unresolved emotional ties. Identity is neither confusion nor resolution. It is constant recalibration shaped by memory and relationship.

Gendered Experience and Emotional Labor:-

Diaspora in Lahiri's fiction is distinctly gendered. Women often carry the responsibility of sustaining cultural continuity. Ashima maintains ritual practices and community networks while navigating isolation. Mrs. Sen's dependence underscores restricted autonomy within domestic interiors. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma confronts expectations regarding care for her widowed father. Her hesitation reflects inherited cultural norms intersecting with personal independence. Lahiri portrays her female characters not as passive figures but as thoughtful negotiators balancing autonomy and obligation.

Memory, Food, and Ritual Practice:-

Food functions as embodied memory. Ashima's improvised mixture of Rice Krispies and Bengali spices represents adaptation without erasure. The ingredients are American, yet the flavor remains rooted in memory. Shared meals across generations signal affection, distance, and transformation. Rituals such as naming ceremonies and social gatherings sustain continuity within displacement. However, these practices evolve. They are not static traditions but adaptive responses to new environments. Memory in Lahiri's fiction remains dynamic rather than fixed.

Domestic Space as Diaspora Space:-

Drawing upon Avtar Brah's notion of diaspora space, Lahiri's homes function as layered intersections of past and present. The Cambridge apartment in *The Namesake* transforms from foreign setting into a space filled with familial memory. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma's Seattle home becomes a site of generational negotiation. The garden symbolizes transplantation and growth within unfamiliar soil. Domestic interiors in Lahiri are not passive backgrounds. They hold the emotional traces of migration and belonging.

Minimalism and the Aesthetic of Subtlety:-

Lahiri's restrained prose mirrors the quiet negotiations of diasporic life. Emotional tensions unfold through silence and understated gesture rather than dramatic confrontation. Her narrative economy reflects interior struggle and gradual recognition. The aesthetic form reinforces the thematic focus on subtle belonging.

Negotiated Belonging:-

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

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

Conclusion:-

Toward a Theory of Negotiated Belonging

The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri invites readers to reconsider what diaspora truly means. Rather than presenting migration as dramatic rupture or permanent nostalgia, her works locate displacement within everyday life. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth*, the experience of migration unfolds in kitchens, hospital rooms, suburban homes, and gardens. These intimate spaces become the settings where identity is quietly shaped and reshaped. Lahiri moves the conversation about diaspora away from political spectacle and toward emotional interiority. Drawing on the insights of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Bill Ashcroft, this study highlights the depth of Lahiri's contribution. Hall's idea of identity as an ongoing production helps explain why her characters never arrive at a final sense of self. Gogol's changing relationship with his name, Ashima's gradual adjustment to American life, and Ruma's struggle with inherited responsibility all demonstrate that identity remains fluid. It develops over time, shaped by memory and experience. Belonging is not achieved once and for all. It is continually revised.

Brah's concept of diaspora space further clarifies how Lahiri's domestic interiors function as meeting points of multiple histories. The Ganguli home in Cambridge brings together immigrant memory and American upbringing. Ruma's Seattle house connects past and present, India and the United States, as well as generational difference. These homes are not merely backdrops. They are relational spaces where belonging is negotiated through everyday interactions. Ashcroft's emphasis on transformation rather than loss also resonates in Lahiri's work. Displacement does not produce only absence. It also gives rise to new forms of expression. Ashima's mixture of Rice Krispies and Bengali spices reflects creative adaptation rather than cultural dilution. Naming practices, culinary improvisations, and subtle emotional exchanges all demonstrate how migration can generate new identities rather than erase old ones.

Most importantly, Lahiri resists the simple opposition between exile and assimilation. Her first generation characters do not remain frozen in longing, and her second generation characters do not abandon their inheritance. Instead of choosing between origins and destinations, her characters learn to live within connection and movement. What emerges from her fiction is a vision of negotiated belonging. Belonging is not a fixed destination but a relational process shaped by memory, family, and time. Through quiet narrative detail and emotional subtlety, Lahiri offers not only stories of immigrant life but a thoughtful meditation on how identity continues to evolve within the spaces between cultures.

Contribution to Diasporic Studies:-

This study makes several meaningful contributions to diasporic literary scholarship, particularly in relation to the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. To begin with, it offers a carefully integrated theoretical framework. Instead of applying concepts such as hybridity, feminism, or nostalgia in isolation, the study brings together the ideas of Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Bill Ashcroft. Hall's understanding of identity as an ongoing process, Brah's notion of diaspora space, and Ashcroft's emphasis on transformation collectively provide a cohesive lens through which Lahiri's fiction can be examined. This synthesis demonstrates that her narratives do not simply illustrate theory but actively deepen and extend it.

The study also contributes through its comparative scope. By reading *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* together, it traces the movement from first generation emotional displacement to second generation negotiation and recalibration. This cross-textual approach reveals the gradual evolution of Lahiri's diasporic imagination, showing how her focus shifts from isolation toward relational complexity across generations. Another significant contribution lies in its attention to form. Lahiri's restrained narrative style is examined not merely as aesthetic preference but as a reflection of diasporic interiority. Silence, understatement, and emotional subtlety mirror the quiet negotiations of belonging experienced by her characters. By connecting narrative minimalism to diasporic experience, the study moves beyond thematic discussion and engages with literary form as meaningful expression. The analysis further highlights naming as central to diasporic identity formation. In *The Namesake*, Gogol's name becomes more than a source of personal discomfort. It functions as an archive of migration, memory, and survival. Through this lens, naming is understood as a site where literature, history, and

family intersect. Such attention repositions naming politics at the heart of diasporic discourse rather than at its margins. Finally, this research introduces the idea of negotiated belonging as an alternative to rigid binaries of exile and assimilation. Instead of viewing identity as a choice between origin and destination, this framework recognizes belonging as relational, evolving, and shaped by domestic life and generational change. It allows for multiplicity without demanding final resolution. Taken together, these contributions position Lahiri not only as a chronicler of immigrant experience but as a writer whose work reshapes contemporary understanding of diaspora, identity, and belonging.

Implications for Postcolonial Theory:-

The fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri encourages a thoughtful reconsideration of postcolonial theory. Much traditional postcolonial scholarship has focused on colonial trauma, resistance, and the formation of national identity. While these concerns remain important, Lahiri's narratives show that postcolonial experience also unfolds within ordinary domestic spaces. Her work shifts attention from public confrontation to private negotiation. In her novels and stories, displacement continues across generations, even within relatively stable middle class immigrant families. Cultural negotiation takes place in conversations between parents and children, in the silences between spouses, and in the emotional distance between lovers and friends. These quiet interactions reveal that postcolonial transformation is not confined to political arenas. It is lived daily within relationships. As a result, postcolonial theory must expand its focus to include these micro relational dynamics as meaningful sites of identity formation.

Lahiri's work also unsettles the traditional center and periphery model. Her characters move between India, the United States, and Europe with increasing fluidity. Migration does not always signal marginalization. Instead, it reflects multidirectional belonging and global mobility. This movement complicates rigid distinctions between colonizer and colonized, suggesting a more interconnected and relational understanding of cultural exchange. In this way, Lahiri brings postcolonial inquiry into the sphere of the intimate without weakening its critical force. She demonstrates that global histories of displacement are embedded in everyday life. Her fiction calls for a postcolonial theory attentive not only to dramatic rupture but also to subtle negotiation, emotional continuity, and lived experience.

Future Research Trajectory:-

Several avenues for further investigation emerge from this study:-

Comparative analysis could situate Lahiri alongside other transnational writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or Mohsin Hamid, examining how negotiated belonging manifests across different diasporic communities. Additionally, Lahiri's later turn toward writing in Italian invites exploration of linguistic self-reinvention as diasporic extension. Language shift itself may constitute another layer of negotiated belonging. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches drawing from migration studies, sociology, and memory studies could deepen understanding of domestic space as diaspora space. Lahiri's fiction offers fertile ground for examining how globalization reshapes intimate identity formation.

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