

# Transformation of Identity in Diaspora: A study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *The Interpreter of Maladies*

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## Abstract

Globalisation has made the world into a more connected and interdependent place. Jhumpa Lahiri provides a literary voice to the global Indian Diaspora, being herself the daughter of immigrants. Most of her literary works explore diasporic conflicts. One of the main themes evident in her writing is identity transformation. Identity is not a static entity. It is something that is under constant transformation. Lahiri's fiction reflects this in the immigration context.

Migrants are often caught in between their roots and the ways of their foreign land and hosts. Many get caught in a web of confusion that can result in an identity crisis. This short communication explores identity transformation in the characters of two of Lahiri's renowned works. Migration results in a fracture of identity in homes and individuals are expected to build new personalities on new foundations in their host culture.

**Key Words:** Jhumpa Lahiri, Diaspora, Immigration, Identity

## Introduction

The word Identity is defined as 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is' as per the Oxford Languages Dictionary (21). Identity provides essence to an individual. The environment and surroundings are often crucial contributors to a person's identity. It is multifaceted and involves the family upbringing, culture, education, job etc. Identity is not static but undergoes constant transformation based on experiences and influences. One of the key drivers today in identity transformation is globalisation. The world over the years has become increasingly interconnected with the increase in trade and cultural exchanges fuelled by people movement.

Identity is the priority for any individual. It is so important that theorists have dedicated much time and space in the attempt to understand the nuances of the subject. Most theorists believe in the multiplicity of identities. Amartya Sen writes 'We belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectivities can give a person a potentially important identity' (Sen 24). In the contemporary world, particularly in the multicultural world that is inhabited by immigrants, it is not possible to accept the idea of a single identity. When people become aware of their relation to different aspects of life, the multiplicity of their identities only becomes more and more defined.

Globalisation results in diasporic populations. The word diaspora refers to the movement of people from their homelands to other foreign places. Hence, it basically means to disperse. Immigrants form the largest diasporic populations across the globe. Most individuals migrate to better quality of life, social status, in search of better pastures etc. Associated with this is the phenomenon of identity crisis or identity transformation. Any individual in a foreign or an

unfamiliar environment will undergo changes in identity. It is part of the process of adaptation and a coping mechanism.

NilanjanaSudeshnaLahiri, familiarly known as JhumpaLahiri is an American author of Indian origin who is well known for her English short stories and novels.Lahiri was born in London to Bengali parents who had migrated from the Indian subcontinent. They then relocated to the United States of America. Lahiri grew up and is settled in the United States. Most of her writings reflect diasporic identity conflicts. She attempts to draw from her own personal experiences of having grown up in an immigrant household and from what sheobserved around her.

Her first collection of short – stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Award. Her debut novel four years later, *The Namesake* (2003) was adapted into the popular film of the same name. *The Interpreter of Maladies* is an anthology of nine short stories – *A Temporary Matter*, *When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine*, *Interpreter of Maladies*, *A Real Durwan*, *Sexy*, *Mrs. Sen’s*, *This Blessed House*, *The Treatment of BibiHaldar* and *The Third and Final Continent*.In both literary works, Lahiri explores the identity transformations of Bengali diasporic populations. Various aspects of the cultural clashes are brought to light. Though, these are works of fiction, Lahiri’s voice is particularly powerful as she herself is part of the Indian diaspora.

Diasporic individuals often shuttle between the two dimensions that they belong to. They feel intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new (3). For immigrants, conforming into a new culture is a complex process in which they try to integrate into a new country while simultaneously losing aspects of and perhaps even entire pieces of their heritage. This assimilation takes place on various levels includingalteration in socioeconomic status to second language attainment and construction of families through marriage and building of new homes in the foreign land.

Lahiri’s collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* , “captures the humanity of ordinary people” (Katrak 6). Humans struggling with traditions, arranged marriage, food preparation, helping the destitute and people who take diasporic leaps to create new lives. ‘*A Real Durwan*’ and ‘*The Treatment of BibiHaldar*’ are stories about individual women in Calcutta that reflect characteristics and societal prejudices of the local culture. ‘*Sexy*’ centres on Miranda, an American who has a relationship with a married Indian man in the United States of America. The other six stories voice out the cry of individuals caught in Bengali diasporic populations.

### **Discussion:**

In ‘*A Temporary Matter*’, the first story in the collection, the protagonists are Shukumar and Shoba. The young couple are second – generation immigrant Americans. It explores their relationship, their expectations, and the resulting identity changes within marriage. The loss of their child at birth had strained their bond. Shoba had certain expectations that Shukumar should have been there with her and supported her through it. She compares the scenario with her native culture where family would have been available. In this foreign land, though she grew up in America, she feels totally lost. However, Shoba becomes a work horse and seeks independence to the extent of a separate apartment where as Shukumar is the opposite. He seems to be drowning and losing interest in his work. The power cut that the couple experience is like an allegory to how their bond has been snuffed out as well. Shukumar uses this as an

opportunity more to confess, whereas Shobha reminisces of her homeland. The loss of a child is traumatic to any couple. Here we are given a glimpse of it in an immigrant household and the resulting distress. Difficult times end up transforming people. The end reveals a new, bold, and independent Shoba and a remorseful Shukumar both reflecting on what happened.' They wept together, for the things they now knew' (page 22)

The second story in the collection 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine' helps us to look at the world through the eyes of a child caught in between cultures. Laila is the daughter of Bengali immigrants in the United States of America. The story reveals the relationships and bonding in foreign lands between immigrants of similar origin. Mr. Pirzada, a research scholar from West Pakistan (current day Pakistan) is in the United States for a year for his studies. The Bangladesh Liberation War sets the stage for the story. The visit of Mr. Pirzada piques the curiosity of Laila and opens her up to the history of her roots and background. Lahiri spins into the tale the resulting inquisitiveness and yearning of the child to know more about an unfamiliar homeland. 'But I could not concentrate. I returned to the blond-wood shelves, to a section I had noticed labelled "Asia." I saw books about China, India, Indonesia, Korea. Eventually I found a book titled Pakistan: A Land and Its People. I sat on a footstool and opened the book. The laminated jacket crackled in my grip. I began turning the pages, filled with photos of rivers and rice fields and men in military uniforms. There was a chapter about Dacca, and I began to read about its rainfall, and its jute production. ' Page33 May be Lahiri is drawing from her personal experiences as a child in a foreign land. "Then I see no reason to consult it," she said, replacing it in the slim gap on the shelf. "Do you?" Page33 In an increasingly global world, effort and consideration must be given to immigrant children to satiate their thirst for their native cultures and lands as part of the main stream curriculum. Lahiri also explores upon cultural differences such as when Mr. Pirzada volunteers to accompany the children on their Halloween outing. Laila is hesitant to expound on this to her American friend Dora. All in all by the end of the story, Laila realises the rich history of her background including the political and the cultural. Most second-generation immigrants end up being aware of themselves being a part of the community they live in as well as the culture from which they have descended. They must reside between the two societies and construct an identity for themselves.

The next story 'Interpreter of Maladies' has Mr. Kapasi as the central character. He works as a translator at the Hospital and during his free time is a translator for tourists. Mr. & Mrs. Das are second generation Americans bringing their children to India for a visit. It is interesting to note though they are of Indian Origin that they have a guide book from the US. 'He glanced up from his paperback tour book, which said "INDIA" in yellow letters and looked as if it had been published abroad.' Page44 Mr. Kapasi's eyes are opened to the American way of life as he watches the Das family in action. Second generation immigrants often are not completely part of the culture that they have assimilated into nor are they completely accepted in their native lands where they are considered as oddities.

Mrs. Sen's is interesting as here we get a glimpse into the life of Bengali immigrants through the eyes of Eliot, an American boy. Mrs. Sen is the Wife of a college Math's professor who has agreed to babysit. The story begins with Eliot reminiscing on the babysitters he has had in the past. He elaborates on his experiences with Mrs. Sen. Mrs Sen though she is physically present in America, her heart appears to be back in her native land India. 'Eliot's mother nodded, too, looking around

the room. "And that's all ... in India?"

"Yes," Mrs. Sen replied. The mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. "Everything is there." Page113 Lahiri goes into much detail and describes vividly the kitchen here. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. The blade was hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base. Page114 She captures the essence of the Indian kitchen in her description. Mrs. Sen seems to be constantly reminiscing and in Eliot she has found an outlet. "At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements." Page 116 On her identity, she seems to be caught between the life she had in India where she would have had a chauffeur to this foreign land where she must do the driving by herself. Her inability to drive affects her assimilation into the foreign space. This also makes her dependant on her husband for her everyday needs. In addition, we note the expectations of her family in India and here she is doing the cleaning by herself. Mrs. Sen's heart longs for home as she tries to hold fast to her traditions in a foreign land.

In the 'Blessed House' we again come across a young couple just four months into their relationship. Sanjeev the husband grew up in India, while the wife Twinkle grew up in the United States. The disparity between the couple reveals the hazardous terrain of arranged marriage. Twinkle is on the threshold of becoming an American, while Sanjeev is desperate to retain his grip on his Indian identity. Lahiri portrays their sense of identity in the context of them setting up a new home. There are repetitions where Sanjeev tries to reiterate 'We're not Christian' page137 regarding the Christian paraphilia that they find in the house. Twinkle, unlike her husband, not only accepts the culture of the other but is also able to approach it with a great deal of positivity. She seems to be happy with her existence as an American of Indian heritage. Despite quarrelling over their different ways of navigating their cultural identity, Sanjeev and Twinkle do not seek to end their marriage. Lahiri is hopeful that the character Sanjeev will eventually move into the hybrid space, to ensure the crafting of a new and dynamic identity. Lahiri also exposes the need for those like Twinkle to resist the resistance of their fellow diaspora as well as the host community in their struggle to craft or discover their identity.

The final story 'The third and Final Continent' sums it all up together rather nicely. It is written as a first person narrative. The narrator lives in India, then moves to London, then finally to America. The title of this story tells us that the narrator has lived in three different continents and chooses to stay in the third, North America. He ends up boarding with a hundred and three year old lady in America. The narrator's eyes are opened to the identity crises faced by the old lady who has lived over a hundred years. Time has passed by around her and she was yet to find a niche in the new world around her. "The woman bellowed, "A flag on the moon, boy! I heard it on the radio! Isn't that splendid?" Page179 "It is improper for a lady and gentleman who are not married to one another to hold a private conversation without a chaperone!" Helen said she was sixty-eight years old, old enough to be my mother, but Mrs. Croft insisted that Helen and I speak to each other downstairs, in the parlor. She added that it was also improper for a lady of Helen's station to reveal her age, and to wear a dress so high above the ankle.' Page 186The narrator draws parallel with this woman who has lived in America all her life. He can

note her resistance to the change that is happening all around her. Her example probably provided the narrator with the resilience that he needed to survive thirty years in America.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *'The Namesake'* deals with the process of transformation in diasporic populations. The novel describes the story of a Bengali couple who go to the United States. When the lady fixes herself a meal and tastes the food from the bowl, she realises that there is "something missing" (The Namesake 1). This is the struggle that immigrants of the diaspora face - the inability to form a wholesome identity in the new place. There is always something missing and what is available is only a "humble approximation" (The Namesake 1 of what was left behind in the homeland. The novel points out the social customs and habits which were part of the characters cultural heritage in India within the rituals of America. At the end of the novel, the character Ashima comes to terms with her reality and evolves an unique identity as a result of her struggles to negotiate her native cultural identity in the space of an alien culture. Ashoke is willing to adapt to America despite "a continuous feeling of out of sorts" (Lahiri 1), while Ashima continues to yearn for home. It is she who keeps a firm grip on the traditional values, and thus preserves the cultural identity amid the materialistic realities of American life. She does eventually understand the need to adapt and steps out into the new world that must become her home.

The novel vividly portrays how Ashima feels lonely and depressed during her initial stay in the foreign land. After the death of her husband, she somehow manages to negotiate between the two different cultures, thus surviving instead of collapsing. One can say that she has constructed a new identity for herself in the foreign land.

In the novel, Lahiri goes on to explore the next generation ie. the second generation. There is an identity split evident with parents being Indian in origin and the child Indian American. The notions and cultural identity of the two vary enormously. The children in the novel Gogol and Sonali have confusions regarding their identities. This is depicted through the changes they make in their names and their unwillingness to accompany their parents to visit relatives in Kolkata. In the process, Gogol is alienated from his family. It is the death of his father that reconciles him to his sense of identity. The return to his home is not a mere physical return but a return to a consciousness of who he is and where he has come from. Gogol ultimately understands the value of community in an Indian society, but he also recognises the difficult truth that he is probably neither American nor Indian. He eventually comes to recognize and accept 'Gogol' as his name - neither American nor Indian but something else altogether.

Transnationalism increases the degree of connection between individuals, communities and societies across political borders, bringing change in the social, cultural, economic and political landscapes of societies both in the homeland and the country of residence. Although the immigrants are dissociated physically and geographically from their homelands, they remain attached to their memories of the culture they have left behind. The resultant personal cultural identity that they end up developing is often unique to themselves.

In the 'Namesake' we note that the characters metamorphose through a variety of identity during the fiction. In the 'Interpreter of Maladies' we come across two couples from diasporic backgrounds. It is interesting to note how Sanjeev and Twinkle's story seems to end more on a positive note compared to that of Shukumar and Shoba. Again, Lahiri provides us a glimpse of

diasporic life through the eyes of children. It is evident that even though Laila is a foreigner in America, her sense of curiosity, interest and fascination in her homeland is like that of Eliot, an American. Of note is also the fact that all transnationals in Lahiri's fictions have a similar habit – that is they all tend to reminisce of their native roots. None seem to let go of it completely. Even Twinkle, with her optimistic attitude to the American culture says "No, we're not Christian. We're good little Hindus." Page 137 A person's inherited sense of identity shadows a person's life. In short, despite the appearance of the adoption of the host culture, the roots remain.

Lahiri's works reveal the processes by which individuals of diasporic populations have their identities shattered. It does not end there. These very same individuals go on to recreate a new identity from their old fragments interlaced with something new. The blended identity that is like a bridge between the past and the present does not end there. In fact, as any one's identity does, it is also under constant transformation – with older fragments becoming smaller but ever present.

Lahiri's stories underscore the multiplicity of identities. She, herself a part of the Indian diaspora, has the experience of having lived in England, America and Italy. Her personal life thus has a significant impact on the characters in her stories. Using relationships such as marriage and family, Lahiri makes a case for the complexity of identity. Even the best foundations built in the host culture cannot at times make up for the loss of connection with home. This sense of loss limits migrants as they attempt to preserve their connection to the culture and identity that they had brought from beyond the seas. Marriages break and relationships between parents and children can sour because of the difficulty that immigrants face in dealing with the strange space they occupy.

### **Conclusion:**

Ultimately, we believe that the author is trying to convey the notion that no matter who an individual might be, wherever they might have been born, even if displaced to foreign lands or there is change happening all around them – the human spirit can and will triumph. As the narrator concludes in the 'The Third and Final Continent' - "In my son's eyes I see the ambition that had first hurled me across the world. In a few years he will graduate and pave his way, alone and unprotected. But I remind myself that he has a father who is still living, a mother who is happy and strong. Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination." Page 198 This is a message that all immigrants and diasporic populations across the globe will be able to relate to.

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