

A Feminist Exploration of Gender, Migration, and Cultural Negotiation in Jhumpa Lahiri's Select Novels

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Abstract

In her novels, Jhumpa Lahiri examines migration and cultural conflict extensively, and her works convey the silent voices of women. In both *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), she represents the struggles and negotiations of women living between their country of origin and the host country. Women are typically portrayed as carrying the emotional burden of being displaced and having to carry the memory and the nostalgia for their homeland, while also dealing with the shame of losing their cultural identity. In her writing, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays women as both guardians of tradition and facilitators of movement in their migrant homeland. Through the character of Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake* Jhumpa Lahiri illustrates that women must navigate feelings of estrangement, reconciliation, and disorientation within the familiar cultural landscape of their homeland, even as they integrate into American culture for the benefit of their family. Similarly, *The Lowland* illustrates how the female protagonists navigate not only geographical migration but also political and generational migration, showing how migration transforms not only personal relationships but also identities. Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's stories face internal conflicts related to arranged marriages and their own desires; individual freedoms and family obligations; and maintaining their cultural identity while assimilating into American culture. Through a woman-centred approach, Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes that migration is not only a physical move but also an existential transformation that reshapes womanhood, motherhood, and female agency. Her novels illustrate the

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unspoken challenges that immigrant women face as they construct hybrid identities within conflicting cultures. This paper will demonstrate that Jhumpa Lahiri's women are exemplary models of resilience, adaptation, and transformation, and that they offer a new lens for examining the intersection of gender, migration, and cultural conflict.

Keywords: *Displacement, assimilation, Dual identity, Migration, Cultural conflict.*

Introduction

Migration as a motif has been an important topic in postcolonial literature, but few writers explore its gendered, cultural, and emotional dimensions as deeply as Jhumpa Lahiri. As a writer, Lahiri offers a unique perspective on the intricacies of diaspora, drawing on her own experiences as a daughter of Indian immigrants in the US. Her works, such as *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland* reveal the difficulties and contradictions that migrants face in a transnational world.

"She will never be fully at home here... She will never be a true American."

-Lahiri, J. 2003, The Namesake, p. 116

Among the particularly significant characters in these stories are the female characters, who embody issues of cultural conflict and identity negotiation. Lahiri often transfers the emotional burden of transplantation onto the women who are forced to face the inner struggle of preserving the cultural memory, family and personal agency together with the external pressure of the assimilation process. A crossroads of cultures is a special place where female migrants feature in Lahiri's works: they preserve the traditions of their family, yet they also discover new opportunities, a sense of self, and freedoms in their new country. Characters such as Gauri in *The Lowland*, Ruma in *Unaccustomed Earth*, and Ashima in *The Namesake* demonstrate that the lives of women migrating to new worlds are distinct from those of men. Though men in the diasporas tend to adjust themselves due to their employment, academic activities, and social activities, women are forced to survive in homes, language obstacles, and loneliness. Through these characters, Lahiri shows how migration changes gender roles, placing women at the forefront of culture clash and culture continuum. Between tradition and change, duty and desire, homeland and host land, their lives are characterized by negotiation.

Cultural confrontation is a recurring theme in Lahiri's study of female subjectivity. In her female characters, the clash between Western social norms and Indian cultural expectations creates internal and external conflicts. All these conflicts are evident in their relationships, parenting styles, marriages, and their efforts to adjust to unfamiliar locations. Lahiri shows how loneliness,

resentment, adaptation, or transformation may result from the clash of traditions inherited from life in a new world.

“Nothing here feels permanent to her; nothing belongs to her.”

- Lahiri, 2013, The Lowland, p. 131.

Many of her female protagonists have chosen to view migration as an emotional process of self-definition instead of a simple move. Thus, a closer examination of female perspectives in Lahiri provides a better understanding of the role of gender in the process of migration. Her delicate illustrations are an insight into the implicit compromises, altruism, and courage of cross-cultural women. In their novels, Lahiri has gone to some great lengths to present the emotional depth of migration and the shifting identities of the women in the diaspora.

“He felt suspended between two worlds, unable to claim either as his own.”

-Lahiri, J. 2013, The Lowland, p. 95.

Jhumpa Lahiri offers a detailed and insightful analysis of how characters (especially women) construct their identities in cross-border situations. In Lahiri's imaginary world, identity isn't fixed or definitive; it operates through movement, memory, cultural transformation, and a constant balance between two worlds.

“The distance between the life she'd left and the life she lived was impossible to measure.”

- Lahiri, 2013, The Lowland, p. 164.

Her characters have no choice but to rethink their place in the environment, as they live on a changing terrain where the boundaries between their homeland and their new home are blurred. This negotiation becomes particularly difficult for migrants, who must reconcile their inherited cultural ways with the demands of a new social space.

“She inhabited a world she did not entirely understand.”

- Lahiri, J. 2013, The Lowland, p. 148.

Jhumpa Lahiri uses Ashima as one of the main characters in the novel *The Namesake*, which depicts the emotional and cultural challenges of identity formation in a diaspora. Ashima considers migration an important change to her identity, not merely a physical move. Her gradual embrace of American traditions brings out the clash between tradition and assimilation. In raising her children, she gradually assimilates aspects of American culture while holding on to Bengali traditions, cuisine, and language as reminders of her origins. Lahiri stresses to Ashima that diasporic identity is a process that continually evolves and does not represent a goal.

“She will never be a true American, and yet she will never again be a true Bengali, not in the way she was before.”

- Lahiri, J. 2003, *The Namesake*, p. 116.

This exploration is further extended in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* as other characters, such as Ruma and Sudha, also struggle with the notion of a hybrid identity. These second-generation immigrants, being both Indian and American, feel as though they do not belong to either culture. This can be seen as an example of what it means to have a transnational identity: reinventing oneself in a global, multicultural world while maintaining one's heritage. Lahiri is particularly interested in the internal conflict that arises when an individual is forced to assimilate into a certain culture, yet their internal desires remain. This is a struggle that is both liberating and exhausting, as the character creates an identity that is beyond any specific definition.

Gauri's journey can be seen as an example of a more negative, philosophical understanding of identity negotiation in *The Lowland*. She has to confront her former trauma in re-establishing her intellectual and personal identity due to her migration to the United States. Her academic activities, emotional alienation and restructured roles indicate the transformative potential of transnational movement. Gauri's identity is fluid, shifting between cultural and family demands and her desire for independence.

“She had no place she belonged to.”

- Lahiri, J. 2013, *The Lowland*, p. 252.

In all her writings, Lahiri demonstrates that negotiating identity across borders is dynamic, marked by conflict, adaptation, and self-discovery. Her characters depict the complexities of diasporic life by highlighting the reconstruction of identity through memories, cultural hybridity, and the realities of lived experience during migration.

The novels of Jhumpa Lahiri give a realistic and sensitive account of intergenerational tensions and cultural clashes between migrant families, especially Indian-origin families, living in the United States. Her characters are often forced to struggle with the host culture versus the expectations of their home country. The conflict is most apparent in the family, as Lahiri portrays the negotiations of first-generation immigrants and their children over differences in understanding identity, belonging, and cultural responsibility. The issue of migration is observed by the first-generation characters Ashoke and Ashima in the novel *The Namesake* as both a displacement and a source of deep emotional attachment to India. They struggle to retain their Bengali culture, language, and community in an environment that encourages individualism and cultural melting. Although they attempt to settle down in a foreign land, their home remains in India. Lahiri focuses on generational differences through their

experiences: they want to maintain tradition, but their children, born in America, are brought up in another cultural setting. *“Her children are strangers to her homeland.”*

- Lahiri, J. 2003, *The Namesake*, p. 276.

Gogol and Sonia, as second-generation immigrants, become representatives of the tensions arising from exposure to two cultures. Their American upbringing shapes their worldview, values, and way of life, and often contradicts their parents' expectations. Through these kids, Lahiri shows clashes between cultural commitment and personal choice. An example of a more serious struggle with inherited identity is the case when Gogol is uncomfortable with his own name. The failure to see each other through different cultural frameworks, rather than a lack of love, causes the conflict between generations.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, in which adult children such as Rahul and Ruma are trying to negotiate with their ageing parents, Lahiri explores the same themes. Rahul is totally opposed to cultural and family accountability, whereas Ruma is guilty of failing to conform to her customs, especially in supporting her widowed father. These conflicts illustrate how intergenerational miscommunication persists even as children become adults. *“Female characters in Unaccustomed Earth carry the burden of balancing inherited Bengali expectations with the individualism of American life.”*

- Mishra, S. 2015, p. 122

In *The Lowland*, the intergenerational conflict takes a political and emotional turn. The strained relationship between Gauri and her daughter, Bela, highlights the role of unresolved trauma, migration, and the reconstruction of personality in breaking down emotional relationships in the family. Gauri's failure to play her role as a mother points to the disorienting effect of migration on family relationships. Through her works, Lahiri shows that strife and generational cultural conflict are inherent to the migrant experience. Her works emphasise that these conflicts may give rise to new identities, mixed cultures, and evolving concepts of family, though they are also emotionally demanding.

Female subjectivity and emotional displacement in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri emerge as central thematic concerns that illuminate the complex intersections of gender, migration, and identity within diasporic contexts. Her female characters often occupy a precarious position between cultural preservation and cultural adjustment, suggesting that migration disrupts both the interior landscape and the body. *“For Lahiri's women, language becomes a medium through which displacement is both articulated and resisted.”*

- Chakraborty, S. 2018, p. 112.

Jhumpa Lahiri emphasises diaspora's gendered dimensions through subtle portrayals of women who contend with loneliness, fragmented identities, and

evolving family roles. When her characters seek a sense of belonging in unfamiliar cultural settings, emotional displacement is not merely a state of being in the world of migration; it is an essential part of the feminine experience.

“Through the Ganguli family’s journey, Lahiri delves into the emotional cost of immigration—loss, identity crises, and the ongoing process of redefining home and belonging in a foreign environment. The immigrant experience in Lahiri’s narrative is not just about geographical relocation, but also the internal voyage of understanding one’s self in the face of cultural divergence.
-Srinivasan. 2011, pp. 15-29.

Ashima Ganguli is an influential figure of emotional turmoil in *The Namesake*. She felt very lonely, had language problems, and needed family support, which she could not find upon arriving in the US as a young bride. Lahiri aptly reveals her sense of being out of place, torn between a new land she can hardly understand and a country she misses. Her isolation is further added to, as she is a woman performing the emotional labour of upholding cultural identity in the household. Ashima eventually transforms despite her challenges, blending traditions with new experiences to form a hybrid sense of self. Her experience demonstrates how female subjectivity in the diaspora is formed through resilience, flexibility, and the careful balancing act between memory and change.

“For Gogol’s parents, Ashoke and Ashima, the initial struggle is rooted in a profound sense of isolation from their homeland, compounded by language barriers, unfamiliar customs, and the absence of their extended family.”

-Ghosh, S. 2003, *The Namesake*, 119.

Lahiri explores emotional displacement in greater detail in *Unaccustomed Earth*, where various female characters navigate unarticulated inner conflicts. As a point of illustration, Ruma is lonely following her move to Seattle and the loss of employment. She is emotionally and physically displaced; she does not know whether she should be a mother or not, nor does she know whether she should find the American culture of independence or the Indian tradition of family obligation. Lahiri illustrates the inability of Ruma to articulate her desires to be an allegory of most of the diasporic women who internalise conflict even when assuming that they are stable. Other characters, such as Sudha and Hema, also struggle with longing, emotional absence and the difficulty of maintaining personal ambitions with inherited requirements. Even though these women demonstrate that emotional displacement is possible even for those who appear settled externally by working through romantic uncertainty, loss and unfulfilled attachments, they do it.

Lahiri explores emotional displacement in greater detail in *Unaccustomed Earth*, where various female characters grapple with unarticulated inner conflicts. As an illustration, Ruma is lonely following her move to Seattle and the loss of her job. She is emotionally and physically displaced; she does not know whether she should be a mother or not, nor does she know whether she should find the American culture of independence or the Indian tradition of family obligation. Lahiri uses Ruma's inability to articulate her desire to allegorize many diasporic women who internalize conflict even when they believe they are stable. Other characters, such as Sudha and Hema, also struggle with longing, emotional absence, and the difficulty of balancing personal ambitions with inherited obligations. Even though these women demonstrate that emotional displacement is possible even for those who appear settled externally by working through romantic uncertainty, loss and unfulfilled attachments, they do it.

The character of Gauri in the novel *The Lowland* expands the idea of female subjectivity in Lahiri as her female character is presented as a woman who is not submissive to traditional emotional roles. Gauri feels deeply disassociated with her marital and motherly roles due to experiencing being displaced out of her safe environment and being traumatized by political violence. Due to emotional displacement, she takes academic objectives to shape herself at the expense of intimacy and family relationships. Lahiri portrays Gauri's emotional detachment not as coldness but as a survival strategy shaped by trauma, migration, and self-defence. She challenges traditional notions of motherhood and femininity through her story, even as she brings out the multiplicity of the female experience in the diaspora. "*She had no place she belonged to.*"

- Lahiri, 2013, *The Lowland*, p. 252.

One of the most important aspects of womanhood in a diasporic community is emotional displacement. This has been a common thread throughout Lahiri's novels. However, rather than mere victims of cultural clash, the female characters in Lahiri's novels navigate this difficult emotional landscape with rationality, observation, and insight. This journey of life also reflects the constant struggle between memory and reinvention, obligation and aspiration, a sense of belonging and a sense of alienation. Through her stories, Lahiri has shown that the experience of being between two cultures is so fractured, so transformational, that it creates a female self-image that is both dynamic and reflective.

Marriage, gender roles, and adaptation in diaspora in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri constitute a critical framework through which the complexities of diasporic life are articulated and interrogate. Diasporic identities are discussed as negotiated, contested, and reconstituted in the context of marriage and gender roles in Jhumpa Lahiri's novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* and in

her collections of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Through her Bengali American characters, Lahiri explores how migration transforms family expectations and intimate relationships and breaks the cultural beliefs that govern men and women in India and America. Marriage is no longer a personal choice but a cultural contract between tradition and modernity, and assimilation forces a clash between the two.

“Lahiri often uses marriage to illustrate the emotional estrangement felt by immigrants attempting to reconcile two cultural worlds.”

- Heinze, R. 2007, p. 197.

In *The Namesake*, through the marriage of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, Lahiri illustrates how first-generation immigrants adopt the American lifestyle while simultaneously preserving their Indian cultural values. These ideals are evident in the gender-based role expectations inherent in their arranged marriage, wherein Ashoke assumes the role of the breadwinner and Ashima that of the caregiver—roles that constitute an integral part of the cultural norms of their country of origin. Yet, Ashima is compelled to confront this reality largely on her own, as she must independently navigate all interactions with American grocery stores, hospitals, and institutions; she fulfils the roles to which she is accustomed, yet the experience of migration has fundamentally transformed these prescribed roles. This situation serves as an example of the rigorous testing to which gender identity is subjected during the migratory experience, and it highlights the perpetual tension that immigrant women constantly endure between independence and dependence. Conversely, Ashoke—despite being fully committed to his role as the breadwinner helps to illuminate the gender-based displacement experienced by men, while also revealing his own emotional vulnerability amidst an unfamiliar environment.

Lahiri offers a more nuanced definition of marriage for the second generation. The tension between the expectations fostered by an American upbringing and personal desires is clearly evident in the relationship between Gogol and Moushumi. Moushumi seeks intellectual and sexual liberation, and rebels against the stereotypical gender norms she associates with her Bengali community. Yet, her very attempts to liberate herself ultimately undermine her marriage. Lahiri portrays this not as a moral failing, but rather as an inevitable consequence of living between two cultures; a space where neither traditional nor Western gender norms can fully accommodate these hybrid identities.

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri further extends her analysis of marriages impacted by migration. Driven by social obligations, Gauri and Subhash are compelled to marry following the death of Subhash's brother, Uday. Upon moving to the United States, Gauri finds herself caught between two conflicting demands: to become an independent thinker (in keeping with the American academic

environment) and to be a dutiful wife and mother (in accordance with Indian tradition). Lahiri portrays Gauri as rejecting traditional motherhood; she does so because she resists the oppressive gendered expectations; and the responsibilities attached to them; that clash with her own sense of identity. This is not a selfish act on her part, but rather an attempt to preserve her own identity. Her eventual estrangement from her family offers a powerful analysis of the heavy psychological burden a woman must bear when she fails to meet the prescribed norms of the *ideal mother* or *ideal wife*.

Through her works, Lahiri demonstrates that the concept of diaspora not only challenges gender stereotypes but also opens the door to new forms of intimacy and cooperation. The cultural losses, intergenerational rifts, and quests for identity experienced by diasporic men and women are examined through the lens of marriage. Through her characters, Lahiri often portrays a dynamic in which social norms are at times adhered to, and at other times resisted; this serves as an indication that the process of adjustment for the diasporic community is a never ending, profound, and arduous undertaking—characterized primarily by the continuous re-evaluation of relationships, identity, and the sense of belonging.

“For Lahiri’s women, adaptation is not merely survival but a continual reshaping of identity within marital and cultural boundaries.”

-Bhardwaj, R. 2014, p. 11-14.

In the works of Jhumpa Lahiri, language, belonging, and the female voice function as interconnected dimensions through which the complexities of identity, displacement, and gendered expression are critically articulated within diasporic contexts. Her novels like *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, Lahiri describes female figures whose voices are conditioned and, in many instances, limited by cultural exile, language change, and the constant tug-of-war between their native country and the host country they inhabit. According to Lahiri, language not only serves a communicative purpose but also represents a powerful symbol of social status and emotional life, especially for immigrant women, whose migratory lives are characterized by silence, fragmentation, and the ongoing nature of adjusting to the situation.

“Lahiri often presents women whose silences speak as powerfully as their words, revealing the depth of their inner conflicts about belonging”

- Bhardwaj. 2014, p. 11-14.

Language becomes a barrier and a refuge to first-generation women such as Ashima in *The Namesake*. First, Ashima struggles with English when she is disconnected from the comfortable world in Calcutta, a constant reminder of her outsider status. Her identity is sustained through her Bengali, which allows her to relate to memories, traditions, and a society, as well as to find emotional

stability. The essence of this linguistic comfort, however, is that she is also shut out of the larger American community. The fact that Ashima speaks only limited English, according to Lahiri, is to stress the silent persistence of immigrant women making ends meet in a hostile new environment, not to imply frailty. The fact that Ashima can incorporate English into her life without relinquishing her grasp of Bengali over time indicates her evolving hybrid belonging.

Nevertheless, second-generation femininity views language differently. Moushumi, along with other bilingual characters in *The Namesake*, is caught in a dilemma between their mother tongue and their assimilation language. Moushumi's interest in French and desire to escape Bengali culture reveal how language can serve as an instrument of rebellion and reinvention. Lahiri uses language both as a weapon of empowerment and as a means of distancing herself from her community, showing how complicated it is for women to assert themselves in the diaspora. Nevertheless, Moushumi's language autonomy raises another concern about the relationship between inherited cultural identity and personal identity.

The way Gauri responds to language in *The Lowland* mirrors her indifferent feelings and her ambition for intellect. Her voice will flourish beyond the conventional domestic life through her academic studies in philosophy in the United States. The silence in her marriage, nevertheless, reveals her emotional traumas that words can never repair. Lahiri stresses the emotional price that women pay when they go against cultural norms by depicting Gauri as a woman whose utterances were free when out of her home but in prison when at home. Her silence becomes its own language, a rejection not only of the roles dictated by diasporic demands but also of Indian tradition.

“Gauri’s intellectual voice flourishes only when she steps into a space not bound by traditional expectations of Indian womanhood”.

- Kavitha and Hariharasudan. 2019, *The Lowland*, p. 44.

The female voice is also present in Lahiri's works implicitly through the tension between spoken and unspoken words. Women also express their sense of belonging through their daily routines such as reading, writing, naming, mourning, and remembering. According to Lahiri's works, diasporic women's sense of belonging is constructed through several linguistic worlds that coexist, clash, and entwine.

“Lahiri’s narratives foreground female characters whose voices emerge from the tension between inherited cultural scripts and new linguistic environments.”

- Dhingra, L. p. 87.

Finally, Lahiri asserts that language plays a crucial part in shaping the lives of female immigrants. It becomes a place where women define their identities, claim their independence, resist cultural confinement, and rebuild their relationships in strange places. Besides learning how to communicate, the women characters in Lahiri's novels also acquire a sense of belonging, independence, and self-definition through language.

“Lahiri uses naming and language to dramatize the immigrant’s emotional distance from a stable sense of home”.

–Heinze, R. p. 194.

Conclusion

Lahiri’s works reveal that migration is not just a geographical movement but a deeply gendered experience, where women often bear the emotional and cultural burden of adaptation. Her female characters across novels like *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* navigate dual expectations: preserving cultural traditions while simultaneously negotiating autonomy in a new sociocultural space. This tension exposes how patriarchy is not left behind in the homeland but is instead reshaped within diasporic contexts. From a feminist perspective, Lahiri subtly critiques traditional gender roles by portraying women who evolve from silence and compliance toward self-awareness and agency. However, this transformation is often quiet and internal rather than overtly rebellious, reflecting the complexities of cultural negotiation rather than a complete rejection of heritage.

Ultimately, on the basis of a careful readings of *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, Lahiri suggests that identity for migrant women is not fixed but continuously reconstructed at the intersection of gender, culture, and displacement. Her narratives affirm that while migration can reinforce structures of marginalization, it also opens up spaces for resistance, self-definition, and reimagining womanhood beyond rigid cultural binaries. Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of women's perspectives on migration and cultural conflict provides an insightful perspective on the concept of diaspora. The emotional, cultural, and psychological struggles faced by leaving one's home country and adjusting to a new environment are represented through her female characters. Women face challenges as they adjust to new roles, navigate intergenerational struggles, and redefine their identities in an international context. Lahiri presents the women in her novels as flexible and resilient through their struggles and transformations, which are essential to the discussion of migration.

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