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Negotiating Borders: Transnationalism In Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth And Whereabouts

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Abstract: This paper offers a critical analysis of transnationalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's works, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Whereabouts*, emphasizing how her characters manage fluid and evolving identities within cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical frameworks. By engaging with theoretical perspectives on diaspora, postcolonial subjectivity, and transnational identity, the study delves into Lahiri's depiction of the transitional spaces inhabited by migrants and their descendants—areas characterized by displacement, hybridity, and continuous negotiation. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri delves into the emotional and psychological strains within diasporic families, particularly highlighting the generational gap between immigrant parents and their children, through themes of rootlessness, cultural disconnection, and familial discord. Conversely, *Whereabouts*—initially penned in Italian and later self-translated into English—presents a minimalist, introspective narrative set in an unnamed European city, focusing on themes of solitude, alienation, and self-reflection. Through this sparse and contemplative prose, Lahiri challenges traditional ideas of national, linguistic, and cultural belonging, offering a nuanced perspective on hybridity and voluntary exile. The paper ultimately argues that Lahiri's transnational literary approach questions fixed or essentialist identities, portraying subjectivity as dynamic, influenced by translingual movement, global interconnectedness, and evolving cultural affiliations.

Index Terms - Transnationalism, Diaspora, Cultural identity, Jhumpa Lahiri, Displacement, Border negotiation.

Jhumpa Lahiri's body of work consistently engages with themes of diaspora, identity, and cultural displacement, earning her a significant place within the Indian-American and broader diasporic literary canon. Scholars have long recognized her contribution to representing immigrant experiences, especially in early works like *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*.

While earlier scholarly discussions highlighted themes of loss, nostalgia, and cultural preservation in Lahiri's fiction, more recent interpretations emphasize her thematic shift towards mobility, linguistic alienation, and the breakdown of stable identities. This evolving academic focus is particularly pertinent when analyzing *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Whereabouts* together, as these works represent distinct stages in Lahiri's literary development—from stories rooted in diaspora to those embracing linguistic and cultural dislocation. This paper thus adds to a growing body of research that views Lahiri not only as a chronicler of diaspora but as a

transnational author whose work transcends borders, languages, and fixed notions of home. By engaging with both foundational and emerging scholarship, this study seeks to further illuminate how Lahiri's fiction expresses a post national subjectivity that resonates with the complexities of contemporary global identity.

While often used within similar discursive contexts, the notions of diaspora and transnationalism differ greatly in their theoretical meanings. The term diaspora, originating from the Greek word for "to scatter," initially described the movement of people away from their homelands, whether through force or voluntary migration. In modern cultural and literary studies, however, it has come to include the emotional, psychological, and cultural impacts of such displacement. These impacts involve a persistent sense of nostalgia, fragmented identity, and the creation of hybrid cultural expressions that connect the place of origin with the place of settlement. In contrast, transnationalism emphasizes the ongoing and dynamic connections that migrants maintain across national borders. It challenges the idea of complete separation from one's homeland, suggesting instead that individuals and communities often remain actively involved in multiple cultural, social, and political spheres at the same time (Vertovec, 2009). Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction serves as an excellent example for exploring these dual frameworks, as her characters often find themselves in transitional spaces where identity is negotiated at the crossroads of belonging and alienation.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri presents a collection of stories that delve into the experiences of Indian-American individuals, particularly concerning identity formation, inherited memory, and the transmission of culture across generations. The narratives do not simply recount the act of migration but rather focus on its lasting emotional and psychological effects, especially as they manifest in the lives of second-generation characters.

The story "Unaccustomed Earth" focuses on Ruma, the American-born daughter of Bengali immigrants, who faces a deep internal conflict as she tries to balance familial obligations with personal freedom. Her father's visit after her mother's death becomes a pivotal moment, leading her to contemplate the responsibilities tied to cultural continuity and the expectations of daughterhood within diasporic families. Ruma's hesitation to invite her father to live with her is not due to a lack of love but rather her desire to embrace American values of individualism and domestic independence. This narrative highlights the diasporic condition as an internal struggle rather than a matter of physical relocation. Ruma's conflict represents the broader generational discord that many diasporic families experience, where the children of immigrants must navigate inherited cultural frameworks while forming their own identities. The story illustrates transnational awareness by portraying hybrid identity formations, where characters fluctuate between cultural preservation and assimilation.

The theme of internalized displacement is further examined in "Only Goodness," which contrasts the different paths of siblings Sudha and Rahul. Raised in the same bicultural environment, Sudha embraces responsibility and social conformity, while Rahul falls into emotional turmoil and substance abuse, unable to reconcile the conflicting demands of his dual heritage. The narrative demonstrates how the psychological effects of migration can persist even without physical movement, manifesting as emotional dislocation and instability. Lahiri's depiction of second-generation characters reveals the lingering resonance of their parents' migratory experiences. Although geographically rooted in the host culture, these individuals remain emotionally tethered to the ancestral past and the cultural burdens it entails. The stories underscore the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, duty and selfhood, and continuity and rupture. Through these nuanced portrayals, Lahiri maps a layered understanding of transnational identity, shaped as much by inherited memories as by contemporary realities.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *Whereabouts*, initially penned in Italian and later translated into English by the author herself, signifies a significant shift in her literary path, both in terms of narrative style and thematic focus. The story's unnamed main character resides in an unspecified European city, with her identity intentionally lacking distinct cultural, national, or geographical identifiers. This narrative vagueness abstracts the protagonist's journey, enabling themes of solitude, dislocation, and existential uncertainty to resonate more universally. By removing the narrative from traditional diaspora references, Lahiri encourages a reconsideration of displacement beyond geographical or ethnic boundaries.

Lahiri's choice to write *Whereabouts* in Italian represents a conscious linguistic and aesthetic boundary-crossing. As she explains in her memoir *In Other Words*, using a foreign language allowed her to step outside the constraints and expectations associated with her identity as a diasporic, Indian-American writer. In this context, translation is not merely a linguistic task but an act of self-creation—a process that reshapes authorship and identity beyond culturally defined categories. The novel's protagonist embodies this threshold perspective. Her sense of dislocation stems not from migratory movement or social alienation but from a persistent feeling of otherness in familiar, everyday settings. Her navigation through dim, impersonal, temporary spaces—such as museums, cafés, and public promenades—emphasizes a deeper existential disconnect. This disconnect signals a form of dislocation rooted not in geographic displacement but in a

conscious rejection of rootedness, suggesting a boundary that is epistemic and emotional rather than cartographic.

The protagonist of *Whereabouts* embodies a transnational awareness that surpasses traditional notions of citizenship, geography, or kinship. Her identity is unmoored, formed instead through introspection, fluidity, and a deliberate detachment from societal anchors. This way of being reflects Lahiri's own literary progression—from depicting diasporic family life within specific ethnic contexts to embracing a wider, more fluid exploration of identity and selfhood. In *Whereabouts*, transnationalism is not grounded in cultural hybridity or physical displacement. Instead, it is expressed as an inward stance—a solitary, reflective state where attachment and affiliation are questioned. The narrator's withdrawal from sociocultural frameworks through introspection underscores how transnational identity can emerge from personal estrangement rather than external migration. Lahiri thus broadens the concept of transnationalism to include internal, self-aware identity negotiations occurring within the individual's inner space.

Despite their differences in narrative techniques and thematic interests, both *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Whereabouts* explore transnationalism as a mode of identity negotiation, albeit in distinct ways.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the concept of borders is mainly expressed through familial relations and cultural inheritance. Characters move across intergenerational tensions, the lingering effect of migration, and the tension between cultural continuity and the pressures of assimilation. Their identities are formed by relational entanglements within and between diasporic communities, and they express the intricate emotional landscape etched by migration's legacy.

Conversely, in *Whereabouts*, boundaries are internal, linguistic. The detachment of the protagonist is not the result of physical mobility but is the product of a voluntary alienation from frameworks of belonging—national, familial, or relational. Her identity develops in isolation, described by sparse social interaction and a non-generic narrative voice that evades categorization.

Both works counter the simplistic idea of borders as purely geopolitical. Whether in the subdued tension between a daughter and father negotiating unspoken bereavement in *Unaccustomed Earth*, or through the wordless, repetitive ceremonies of a woman who roams through nameless cityscapes in *Whereabouts*, Lahiri describes identity as an ongoing negotiation. Belonging, in her fiction, is not an attainment but a dynamic process characterized by ambivalence and multiplicity. These stories put forward the inner topography of dislocation, implying that identity is constructed as much in the mind as it is across boundaries.

Jhumpa Lahiri's works, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Whereabouts*, offer intricate yet interconnected examinations of transnationalism, showcasing the diverse ways individuals manage their identities, languages, and cultures amid changing geographical and emotional settings. *Unaccustomed Earth* explores the impact of diaspora through the lens of generational and familial relationships, while *Whereabouts* focuses on the introspective journey of a woman who is not bound by specific ties to place, language, or community. Both narratives question singular views of identity, highlighting the fluidity and hybridity that are intrinsic to experiences of crossing borders. Lahiri's body of work provides a fascinating perspective on the intersections of migration, memory, and self-awareness in transnational settings. Her characters—whether rooted in ancestral stories or engaged in solitary linguistic explorations—embody the contradictions of modern life: being both disconnected and connected, caught between a sense of belonging and alienation.

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