



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

HYPHENATED IDENTITIES AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE WORKS OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

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Abstract: This study examines the formation of hyphenated identities and the function of cultural memory in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. As a prominent voice in contemporary diasporic literature, Lahiri articulates the complexities of Indian-American subjectivity through narratives shaped by migration, displacement, intergenerational conflict and linguistic negotiation. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, diaspora studies and memory studies, particularly the works of Homi K. Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Jan Assmann, this paper argues that Lahiri's fiction constructs identity as an ongoing process of cultural translation rather than a stable essence. Through close readings of *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013), the article demonstrates how Lahiri situates her characters within liminal spaces where personal memory and collective history intersect. Ultimately, her narratives reveal that hyphenated identity is not a fractured condition but a dynamic site of negotiation where cultural memory becomes both burden and bridge.

Keywords: Hyphenated Identity, Cultural Memory, Indian Diaspora, Hybridity, Intergenerational Conflict, Migration and Identity, Communicative Memory.

INTRODUCTION

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of diasporic narratives that interrogate identity beyond national borders. Among these voices, Jhumpa Lahiri occupies a distinctive position in articulating the emotional and cultural intricacies of the Indian diaspora in the United States. Her fiction foregrounds what may be termed 'hyphenated identities', Indian-American, immigrant-native, insider-outsider, revealing identity as contingent, relational and historically mediated. Hyphenation in diasporic identity is neither merely linguistic nor bureaucratic; it symbolises the tension between inherited cultural memory and contemporary belonging. The hyphen signifies both connection and division. In Lahiri's works, this hyphen becomes a metaphorical site of negotiation where characters oscillate between ancestral memory and present reality. Cultural memory, comprising rituals, language, food, names and stories, operates as a medium through which diasporic subjects maintain continuity with their origins while adapting to new environments.

The concept of hyphenated identity intersects with postcolonial theories of hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha's notion of the 'Third Space' provides a foundational framework for understanding Lahiri's characters. According to Bhabha, cultural identity is produced in an in-between space where negotiation and translation occur (Bhabha 56). Identity, therefore, is not fixed but performative and relational. Lahiri's characters inhabit precisely such spaces, negotiating between Indian heritage and American modernity.

Stuart Hall further conceptualises cultural identity as a matter of 'becoming' rather than 'being' (Hall 225). For Hall, diaspora identities are continuously constructed through memory, narrative and difference. Lahiri's fiction exemplifies this dynamic process: her characters do not simply inherit Indianness or Americanness; they construct themselves through acts of remembrance, adaptation and reinterpretation.

Cultural memory theory also illuminates Lahiri's narrative preoccupations. Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory, everyday recollections transmitted across generations, and cultural memory; formalised traditions and rituals that preserve collective identity (Assmann 110). In Lahiri's texts, both forms of memory shape diasporic subjectivity. Family stories, culinary practices, religious ceremonies and naming rituals become vehicles through which cultural continuity is maintained in foreign spaces.

This paper argues that Lahiri's fiction constructs hyphenated identity as an evolving negotiation shaped by cultural memory. Through narrative strategies that emphasise silence, interiority and everyday domesticity, Lahiri demonstrates how diasporic consciousness emerges in liminal spaces. Rather than resolving identity into a stable synthesis, her works reveal the ongoing tension between assimilation and remembrance.

Naming And Identity In *The Namesake*

In *The Namesake* (2003), Jhumpa Lahiri constructs naming not merely as a cultural formality but as a profound existential marker through which questions of belonging, inheritance and selfhood are negotiated. The protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, embodies the burden and ambiguity of a name that is neither conventionally Indian nor comfortably American. Unlike traditional Bengali naming practices, where a child is given both a *daknam* (pet name) and a *bhalanam* (good name), Gogol's pet name becomes his official identity due to bureaucratic necessity and diasporic circumstance. This deviation from custom immediately signals the rupture migration creates in cultural continuity. The name 'Gogol', chosen by his father Ashoke in remembrance of a traumatic train accident and his subsequent spiritual rebirth through reading Nikolai Gogol's stories, functions as a private memorial rather than a socially legible marker. For Ashoke, the name signifies survival, gratitude and the transformative power of literature. For Gogol, however, it becomes a source of embarrassment and alienation, marking him as conspicuously different in American society while lacking authentic rootedness in Indian tradition. Thus, from childhood, his identity is inscribed within a paradox: his name connects him to a deeply personal family history yet isolates him from both cultural communities he inhabits.

The psychological weight of Gogol's name intensifies during adolescence, when the desire for conformity and self-definition becomes paramount. In the American social context, where names often signify ethnic background, Gogol's unfamiliar and difficult-to-pronounce name subjects him to curiosity and subtle othering. Unlike classmates whose names reflect recognisable cultural narratives, Gogol's name resists categorisation. It is Russian in origin, bestowed by Indian parents, and borne by an American-born child; an embodiment of transnational dislocation. His decision to legally change his name to Nikhil represents not simply a rejection of his given identity but an attempt to assert agency over self-definition. 'Nikhil' offers the possibility of reinvention: it sounds appropriately Indian within the diasporic community yet remains accessible within American society. The act of renaming marks a symbolic severance from childhood and paternal authority. However, Lahiri complicates this gesture by revealing that the past cannot be erased through nominal transformation. Gogol's internal consciousness remains divided; the legal change does not dissolve the memories, familial ties and emotional histories embedded in the name 'Gogol'. The tension between his two names reflects the broader dialectic of assimilation and remembrance that defines second-generation immigrant experience.

Moreover, naming in the novel operates as a vehicle of cultural memory and intergenerational transmission. Ashoke's attachment to the name Gogol is rooted in a specific historical moment: the train accident that nearly claimed his life in India. The crumpled pages of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* (1842) save him, literally and metaphorically, by inspiring his migration to the United States. In naming his son after the author, Ashoke inscribes that origin story onto the next generation. Yet he withholds the full narrative for many years, leaving Gogol unaware of the emotional significance behind his name. This silence underscores a central tension in diasporic families: the gap between lived memory and inherited identity. Thus, naming in the novel serves as a metaphor for the diasporic condition itself. The hyphen in 'Indian-American' parallels the gap between Gogol and Nikhil; a space of tension, translation and transformation. By the novel's conclusion, Gogol's quiet acceptance of his name signifies not a complete reconciliation but a mature acknowledgement of complexity. Lahiri thus redefines naming as an evolving process rather than a fixed label. Identity, like a name, accrues meaning over time through experience, narrative and remembrance. In presenting naming as both burden and inheritance, Lahiri underscores that the struggle to inhabit a name mirrors the broader diasporic struggle to inhabit a self shaped by multiple and sometimes conflicting cultural affiliations.

Domestic Spaces and Diasporic Memory in *Interpreter of Maladies*

In *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri situates diasporic experience within the intimate geography of domestic spaces, transforming kitchens, living rooms, apartments and temporary dwellings into sites where cultural memory is preserved, contested and reimaged. Rather than dramatising migration through overt political discourse, Lahiri foregrounds the quiet rituals of everyday life, suggesting that the true drama of diaspora unfolds in the private sphere. Domestic interiors in the collection function not merely as physical settings but as mnemonic landscapes where memory, longing and identity converge. These spaces become symbolic extensions of the immigrant psyche; enclosed, protective, yet permeable to the pressures of the surrounding culture. Through meticulous attention to detail, food preparation, furniture arrangement, clothing and conversational patterns, Lahiri reveals how the home becomes a repository of cultural continuity in an alien environment.

The motif of domestic isolation recurs in 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', where the narrator's family home becomes a site of transnational solidarity during the Bangladesh Liberation War. Each evening, Mr. Pirzada joins the family for dinner, and the dining table becomes a symbolic bridge between continents. News of political upheaval abroad infiltrates the American living room through television broadcasts and shared anxieties. For the child narrator Lilia, these gatherings blur geographical boundaries; the home becomes a liminal space where distant histories are emotionally immediate. The ritual of sharing meals reinforces collective identity, yet it also reveals the complexities of diasporic consciousness. The adults' discussions about borders and political divisions contrast with Lilia's initial inability to distinguish between India and Pakistan. The domestic sphere thus becomes an educational site where historical memory is transmitted across generations. In this way, Lahiri demonstrates that diasporic memory is not static but actively constructed within the routines of family life.

In the title story, Lahiri complicates the notion of domestic rootedness by depicting the Das family as culturally dislocated despite their shared Indian heritage. While visiting India, the family occupies hotel rooms and tourist spaces rather than ancestral homes, highlighting their estrangement from the homeland. Their domestic identity is firmly American, marked by casual intimacy and individualism that contrasts with traditional Indian social codes. Mr. Kapasi, who initially imagines a romantic connection with Mrs. Das based on perceived cultural affinity, becomes disillusioned when confronted with the superficiality of their nostalgia. The absence of a stable domestic anchor in India underscores the extent to which the Das family's identity is shaped by American suburban life rather than ancestral memory. Lahiri thereby exposes the illusion that diaspora guarantees an enduring connection to homeland; domestic belonging must be continuously negotiated rather than assumed.

Across the collection, Lahiri uses domestic interiors to highlight intergenerational tensions. First-generation immigrants often perceive the home as a bulwark against cultural erosion, meticulously maintaining linguistic and ritual practices. For the second generation, however, the same space can feel restrictive or outdated. This tension reflects broader questions of adaptation and continuity. The domestic sphere becomes a microcosm of cultural negotiation, where children learn to navigate dual expectations. Silence frequently permeates these spaces, signaling the emotional distances that migration produces. Conversations are marked by restraint, and unspoken disappointments accumulate within the walls of apartments and houses. Lahiri's restrained prose mirrors this atmosphere, emphasising the subtlety with which memory operates. Moreover, domestic spaces in the collection

often reveal the gendered dimensions of diasporic memory. Women, in particular, are tasked with sustaining cultural practices within the home. Cooking, childcare and social coordination become vehicles through which tradition is transmitted. Yet these responsibilities can also intensify feelings of confinement and displacement, as seen in Mrs. Sen's yearning for communal life. The home, while symbolizing cultural continuity, simultaneously circumscribes female autonomy. Lahiri's portrayal of domesticity thus resists romanticization; it is a site of both comfort and constraint.

In this way, Lahiri's representation of domestic spaces underscores the centrality of memory in shaping diasporic identity. The home functions as a symbolic threshold between past and present, homeland and host nation. Within its walls, cultural practices are rehearsed, revised, and sometimes abandoned. Domestic interiors hold the echoes of conversations, aromas and rituals that anchor individuals to ancestral histories. Yet they also expose the impossibility of fully replicating those histories in a new environment. By situating the complexities of migration within kitchens and living rooms rather than grand public arenas, Lahiri affirms that the emotional terrain of diaspora is mapped most vividly in the intimate spaces of everyday life.

Intergenerational Tension in *Unaccustomed Earth*

In *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), Jhumpa Lahiri shifts her focus from the immediate dislocation of first-generation immigrants to the more nuanced and often quieter tensions that shape relationships between immigrant parents and their American-born children. The collection examines how cultural memory, obligation, autonomy, and emotional reticence structure intergenerational dynamics within the Indian diaspora. Unlike *Interpreter of Maladies* (1998), where the drama of migration itself dominates, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) portrays a subtler phase of diasporic evolution: the moment when inherited traditions begin to loosen their hold and are renegotiated in the context of global mobility and individual desire. The tension between generations in this collection is not overtly confrontational but is expressed through silence, miscommunication, unspoken expectations and divergent understandings of belonging.

In the title story, the relationship between Ruma and her widowed father exemplifies the generational shift from preservation to adaptation. Ruma, a second-generation Bengali-American woman, lives in suburban Seattle with her American husband and child. Her life outwardly reflects assimilation: a cross-cultural marriage, a domestic routine shaped more by American norms than Bengali custom, and a sense of independence her mother never possessed. Yet her father's visit unsettles this carefully balanced existence. Ruma anticipates that he may wish to live with her permanently, replicating a traditional expectation in which adult children assume responsibility for aging parents. This assumption reveals the persistence of cultural memory within her consciousness, even as she inhabits a modern American framework. Her father, however, resists this expectation, having quietly embraced a more independent life after his wife's death. His travels, companionship with a new partner, and willingness to redefine himself in old age reflect a departure from rigid traditional roles. The tension between them arises not from overt conflict but from misaligned assumptions about duty and freedom. Lahiri thus portrays intergenerational tension as a negotiation between inherited obligation and reimagined autonomy.

Intergenerational tension becomes more complex and globalised in the linked stories Hema and Kaushik. Here, Lahiri traces the lives of two second-generation characters whose families share a Bengali immigrant background. As children, Hema and Kaushik experience the enforced intimacy typical of diasporic communities, where social networks are shaped by shared ethnicity rather than individual affinity. Their parents' expectations, academic excellence, professional success, and culturally appropriate marriages frame their upbringing. Yet as adults, both characters diverge from these prescribed paths in distinct ways. Hema seeks stability through an arranged marriage to a suitable Bengali partner, reflecting a partial return to communal norms. Kaushik, in contrast, embraces cosmopolitan rootlessness, moving across continents as a war photographer. His global mobility signifies the loosening grip of national and familial identity, yet it also underscores a profound emotional dislocation.

Throughout the novel, Lahiri underscores the role of silence as a defining feature of intergenerational relationships. Communication is frequently indirect; parents and children misinterpret one another's intentions, projecting expectations rather than articulating desires. This silence reflects broader cultural codes regarding emotional restraint within many immigrant families. The immigrant generation carries memories of displacement, scarcity, and cultural vulnerability. The second generation inherits the effects of these experiences without fully inhabiting their origins. The resulting gap produces subtle misunderstandings rather than overt rebellion. Gender further complicates intergenerational tension. Daughters, in particular, bear the weight of balancing familial expectations with self-determination. Hema's eventual acquiescence to an arranged marriage does not signify blind submission but rather a strategic negotiation between desire and duty. Ruma's hesitation about caring for her father reveals the intersection of cultural obligation and modern individualism. Lahiri avoids simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity; instead, she portrays each character as navigating a continuum shaped by both forces.

Thus, the novel suggests that intergenerational tension is an inevitable and even productive aspect of diasporic life. The friction between memory and reinvention enables identity to remain dynamic rather than ossified. The 'unaccustomed earth' of America becomes fertile precisely because it allows for reinterpretation across generations. Lahiri's nuanced portrayal affirms that diaspora is not a static inheritance but a living process, continually reshaped as children of immigrants redefine belonging on their own terms.

Political History and Personal Memory in *The Lowland*

In *The Lowland* (2013), Jhumpa Lahiri broadens the scope of diasporic fiction by situating intimate family narratives within the charged landscape of political upheaval. The novel intertwines the personal histories of two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, with the historical turbulence of the Naxalite movement in late-1960s and early-1970s West Bengal. Through this intersection, Lahiri demonstrates that diaspora is not solely a matter of cultural displacement but also a consequence of political rupture. The movement from Calcutta to Rhode Island is catalysed not by economic aspiration alone but by ideological conflict, violence and trauma. In tracing how political history infiltrates private lives, Lahiri reveals the enduring entanglement between collective memory and individual identity.

The Naxalite movement functions in the novel as both a historical backdrop and a catalytic force. Udayan's radicalisation embodies youthful idealism and a fervent belief in revolutionary justice. His political activism disrupts the quiet domesticity of the Mitra household and ultimately results in his execution by state authorities in the lowland near their family home. This event marks a turning point not only in the narrative but also in the psychic lives of the surviving characters. Political ideology here ceases to be abstract; it materialises violently within the intimate geography of home. The lowland itself becomes a mnemonic landscape, a

physical site saturated with memory. For Subhash, who witnesses his brother's body lying in the marshy terrain, the space becomes permanently inscribed with grief. The political history of the Naxalite insurgency thus enters the novel not as detached reportage but as embodied trauma.

Subhash's subsequent migration to the United States can be read as both escape and exile. His relocation to Rhode Island signifies a geographical and emotional distancing from the violence that has scarred his family. Yet migration does not dissolve memory. Instead, it reconfigures it. The quiet coastal landscape of Rhode Island contrasts sharply with the charged atmosphere of Calcutta, but the past remains latent within Subhash's consciousness. Lahiri's restrained prose captures how political trauma becomes internalised, surfacing intermittently in recollection and silence. Subhash's life in America, his academic pursuits, marriage to Gauri, and paternal devotion to Bela, is persistently shadowed by Udayan's absence. In this way, Lahiri underscores that diaspora often emerges not only from aspiration but from historical necessity, and that personal reinvention abroad cannot erase the imprint of political violence.

Gauri's trajectory further complicates the relationship between political history and personal memory. As Udayan's widow, she embodies the lingering presence of revolutionary ideology. Her early fascination with political theory and radical thought aligns her with Udayan's intellectual restlessness. However, after his death and her relocation to America through marriage to Subhash, Gauri becomes emotionally withdrawn, her interior life shaped by guilt and unresolved mourning. Political history in her case transforms into a burden of memory that inhibits intimacy. She distances herself from motherhood and marital attachment, immersing herself in academic philosophy. This retreat suggests that political trauma can produce detachment rather than overt nostalgia. Gauri's inability to fully inhabit her present life illustrates how unresolved historical memory fractures personal identity.

The novel's structure reinforces the interplay between public history and private memory. Lahiri alternates between India and America, past and present, demonstrating that diasporic identity unfolds across temporal and spatial boundaries. The political upheaval of the Naxalite movement is not confined to India; its repercussions extend into the American landscape through the characters' emotional lives. The lowland in Calcutta and the tidal marshes of Rhode Island form a symbolic parallel, linking disparate geographies through shared imagery of water and shifting terrain. These landscapes mirror the instability of memory itself; submerged at times, resurfacing unexpectedly.

Importantly, Lahiri refrains from romanticising revolutionary politics. Udayan's activism is portrayed with both empathy and critical distance. While his commitment reflects moral conviction, it also brings irreversible suffering to his family. By presenting political history as deeply ambivalent, Lahiri challenges simplistic narratives of heroism or victimhood. The novel suggests that ideological commitment cannot be disentangled from its human consequences. Political movements may aspire toward justice, but their impact reverberates unevenly across domestic spaces and intimate relationships.

Ultimately, the novel presents diaspora as a condition shaped as much by political rupture as by cultural negotiation. The movement from Calcutta to Rhode Island is propelled by historical forces that continue to shape the characters' emotional realities long after migration. Lahiri demonstrates that personal identity cannot be disentangled from the political contexts that produce displacement. The lowland remains both a literal and symbolic terrain; an enduring reminder that memory, like water, seeps into the foundations of the present. Through this intricate weaving of history and intimacy, Lahiri expands the scope of diasporic fiction, revealing that the hyphenated self is forged not only in cultural translation but also in the aftermath of political upheaval.

Conclusion

An examination of the above mentioned works reveals that Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction consistently situates identity at the intersection of naming, domestic space, intergenerational negotiation and political memory. Across these works, hyphenated identity is neither a static label nor a simple synthesis of Indian and American cultures; rather, it emerges as an evolving process shaped by memory, silence, adaptation and historical rupture. The act of naming in *The Namesake* (2003) establishes identity as an inheritance layered with private and collective memory, demonstrating how personal history is inscribed onto the body through language. Gogol's struggle to inhabit his name reflects the broader diasporic condition: the effort to reconcile self-fashioning with inherited narrative. Naming becomes an act of translation across generations, cultures and emotional landscapes.

In *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), domestic interiors transform into mnemonic spaces where diaspora is lived and negotiated daily. Kitchens, dining tables and apartments function as microcosms of cultural preservation and emotional isolation. Lahiri's emphasis on ritualised practices, cooking, letter writing, and communal dining reveals how memory is sustained not through grand historical declarations but through ordinary gestures. These domestic spaces, however, also expose fractures: generational misunderstandings, gendered confinement and the quiet ache of displacement. The home becomes both a sanctuary and a site of tension, illustrating that cultural continuity in diaspora is fragile and constantly renegotiated.

Unaccustomed Earth (2008) deepens this exploration by foregrounding intergenerational tension as the central dynamic of diasporic evolution. The immigrant generation, shaped by sacrifice and longing for stability, confronts a second generation oriented toward autonomy and global mobility. Yet Lahiri resists framing this tension as a simple clash between tradition and modernity. Instead, she portrays it as a subtle reconfiguration of memory and obligation. The 'unaccustomed earth' symbolises fertile ground for reinterpretation, suggesting that diaspora enables transformation rather than mere preservation. Silence, emotional restraint and selective inheritance become the mechanisms through which identity adapts across generations.

In *The Lowland* (2013), Lahiri expands the framework of diasporic identity by embedding it within political history. The Naxalite movement and its violent repercussions demonstrate that migration is often propelled by ideological conflict and trauma rather than voluntary aspiration alone. Political upheaval infiltrates domestic life, shaping relationships long after geographical relocation. Here, memory is not only cultural but historical and political, carried across oceans and transmitted, consciously or unconsciously, to subsequent generations. The lowland itself stands as a metaphor for submerged histories that resurface unpredictably, reminding characters that personal reinvention cannot erase collective pasts.

Taken together, these works affirm that Lahiri's literary project centres on the interplay between memory and becoming. Identity in her fiction is formed in liminal spaces—between names and selves, between kitchens and continents, between parents and children, between political history and private grief. The hyphen in Indian-American identity does not represent a clean bridge nor a permanent rupture; it marks a site of ongoing negotiation where cultural memory both sustains and complicates belonging. Lahiri ultimately suggests that diasporic identity is less about resolving difference than about inhabiting it with awareness. Through restrained prose and intimate characterisation, she reveals that the most profound negotiations of history, culture, and self occur not in public spectacle but within the quiet spaces of everyday life.

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