

The Transnational Trajectory: Space, Hybridity, and the Evolution of the Hyphen in Jhumpa Lahiri's Early Fiction

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Abstract

This paper challenges reductive readings of Jhumpa Lahiri's early fiction as a static, melancholic chronicle of exile and intergenerational conflict. Instead, it proposes that her first three major publications, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), form a structured, chronological triad that maps a progressive spatial, psychological, and autobiographical evolution of the "hyphenated" immigrant identity. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's theory of the "Third Space," Stuart Hall's identity-as-production, and Avtar Brah's "diaspora space," this study argues that Lahiri systematically reconfigures the cultural hyphen from a site of painful division into an expansive horizon of global agency, mirroring her own evolving relationship with her identity as an American-born Indian.

A comparative textual analysis reveals a synchronized thematic and stylistic trajectory across character development, settings, and narrative tone. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, the hyphen manifests as an unbridgeable fracture line defined by fragmentation, the failure of cultural translation, and an anxiety-ridden "Otherness" externalized through material objects. *The Namesake* institutionalizes this struggle across a multi-generational arc, positioning the hyphen as a negotiable borderland where identity is actively contested and mediated through

renaming and shifting geographies. Finally, *Unaccustomed Earth* reflects a fully realized transnational orientation wherein mobile subjects internalize hybridity, moving past the trauma of displacement to claim a fluid, nuanced acceptance of an existence that is simultaneously rooted and uprooted. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates that Lahiri's early oeuvre operates as a dynamic archive of cultural synthesis, charting a definitive movement from the anxieties of geographic dislocation to the flexible, confident fluency of a normalized, creative diaspora consciousness.

Keywords: Diasporic identity, Third Space, Transnationalism, Hybridity, Hyphenated identity, Postcolonial literature.

1. Introduction

The literary landscape of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed a significant shift in postcolonial and diaspora studies. Scholars increasingly abandoned essentialist paradigms of uprooting in favour of more fluid, dynamic models of cultural synthesis. Central to this paradigm shift is the early fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri. Her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), her foundational novel *The Namesake* (2003), and her subsequent collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) garnered widespread critical acclaim. Yet, early critical reception frequently reduced her work to a melancholic chronicle of exile, loss, and the generational clash between first-generation Bengali parents and their American-born offspring.

This paper argues against such reductive readings by proposing instead that Lahiri's first three major works constitute a structured, chronological triad. This triad maps the author's own internal psychological and philosophical evolution regarding the "hyphenated" identity. Rather than presenting a static depiction of the Indian diaspora, Lahiri's oeuvre reflects a progressive trajectory of spatial and psychological reorientation. This journey moves from the fragmented, anxiety-ridden "in-betweenness" characteristic of *Interpreter of Maladies* to the

consciously negotiated, institutionalised hybridity of *The Namesake*, culminating in the fluid, confident transnationalism of *Unaccustomed Earth*.

To theorise this evolution, this study deploys Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space of enunciation". Bhabha posits that cultural identity emerges not from the preservation of pure origins or total assimilation into a host culture, but within an intermediate, ambivalent zone where cultural meanings are continuously negotiated and recontextualised (Bhabha 36). Complementing Bhabha, Stuart Hall's conceptualization of diaspora identity as a continuous process of "production" rather than an accomplished fact provides a vital framework for understanding Lahiri's characters (Hall 222). They do not merely look back to a lost homeland; they actively construct new modes of being. By close-reading these three texts in their order of publication, this paper demonstrates how Lahiri systematically transforms the typographical and cultural "hyphen" from a site of painful division into an expansive, generative space of creative synthesis.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Hyphen, the Third Space, and Transnationalism

To understand the trajectory of Lahiri's fiction, one must deconstruct the physics of the hyphenated identity. In early diaspora literature, the hyphen in labels such as "Bengali-American" was frequently theorised as a fracture line, a barrier separating two incompatible epistemologies. Improvised identities were often viewed through the lens of double consciousness, wherein the subject experiences a painful splitting of self (Du Bois 3). However, postcolonial theory has re-conceptualised this liminality. Bhabha argues that the recognition of cultural hybridity requires us to overcome the binary opposition of "self" and "other". Instead, we must explore the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (Bhabha 4). This "Third Space," though fraught with ambivalence and anxiety, constitutes the discursive site where new signs of identity are constructed.

Furthermore, Avtar Brah's concept of "diaspora space" expands this framework by emphasizing that diaspora is not merely about the movement of people. It is about the intersection of different histories, cultures, and subjectivities within a specific site (Brah 181). Lahiri's narratives explicitly trace how these diaspora spaces are domesticized over time. As the immigrant subject moves across generations, the nature of travel and settlement shifts. This evolution mirrors Salman Rushdie's observation that immigrants are "translated men" (Rushdie 17). Lahiri's work asks a fundamental question: what happens when the anxiety of translation gives way to the fluency of the bilingual, bicultural self? Through a systematic progression, Lahiri moves her characters away from what William Safran calls the classic diaspora consciousness, defined by a perpetual myth of return (Safran 83), toward a transnational orientation. In this state, multiple geographic and cultural spaces are inhabited simultaneously without existential dread (Vertovec 3).

3. *Interpreter of Maladies*: The Fragmented In-Between and the Trauma of Unbelonging

3.1 Ghostly Homes and Haunted Interiors

Lahiri's debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), operates within a paradigm of profound spatial and psychological fragmentation. The characters in these stories are haunted by a sense of displacement. They view their immediate American surroundings as temporary or fundamentally alien, while their memories of India have hardened into static, inaccessible icons.

In "A Temporary Matter," the marital breakdown between Shukumar and Shoba is exacerbated by their isolation within a darkened Boston suburb. The physical darkness induced by a rolling power outage mirrors their psychological blindness and inability to anchor themselves within either their ancestral heritage or their American reality (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 1-22). The miscarriage of their child symbolizes the failure to generate a viable future within this liminal state (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 3). As Deborah Brada-Williams notes, the collection

recurrently uses broken domestic spaces to signify the fragile foundations of early immigrant settlement (Brada-Williams 452).

3.2 The Failure of Translation

The title story, "Interpreter of Maladies," serves as the epistemological core of this first phase. Mr. Kapasi, a tour guide and translator in India, encounters the Das family, second-generation Indian-Americans visiting their ancestral land (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 43-69). The characters are profoundly alienated from one another. Mr. and Mrs. Das dress and behave like American tourists, yet their physical appearance binds them to India.

Mr. Kapasi's role as an interpreter highlights the profound breakdown in communication that occurs across the diaspora divide. When Mrs. Das confesses her infidelity to him, seeking a magical, therapeutic interpretation of her guilt, she mistakes his literal translation work for psychological absolution (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 62-65). The physical loss of Mrs. Das's slip of paper containing Mr. Kapasi's address at the end of the story signifies the impossibility of establishing a sustainable connection between the homeland and the diaspora at this stage of Lahiri's artistic development (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 69). The hyphen here is an unbridgeable chasm; translation results not in synthesis, but in misinterpretation and existential vertigo.

3.3 The Melancholy of the Domestic Sphere

This sense of alienation is further developed in "Mrs. Sen's," where the domestic sphere becomes a site of cultural resistance and psychological confinement. Mrs. Sen refuses to adapt to the American landscape, typified by her refusal to learn how to drive—a potent metaphor for her lack of agency and autonomy in the host nation (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 111-135). Instead, she invests her emotional energy in the ritualistic chopping of vegetables with a traditional Bengali *bonti* and the desperate accumulation of aerograms from Calcutta (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 114-115).

The *bonti* operates as what cultural theorists term a "fetish object" of the homeland (Woodward 32). It is a physical manifestation of a distant reality that disrupts the safety of her American apartment. When Mrs. Sen attempts to drive to the fish market to secure fresh mackerel, a sensory link to her past, she crashes the car (Lahiri, *Interpreter* 134). This event underscores the destructive consequences of trying to force the homeland's desires onto the host country's infrastructure. The hyphen in *Interpreter of Maladies* is thus marked by an intense vulnerability, where the subject is caught between a past they cannot return to and a present they cannot fully inhabit.

4. *The Namesake*: Negotiating the Borderlands of Hybridity

4.1 The Burden of Naming

If *Interpreter of Maladies* captures the initial, destabilizing shock of migration, *The Namesake* (2003) institutionalises this struggle by tracing it across a sustained temporal arc. The novel shifts the focus from first-generation exile to second-generation hybridity. The core conflict is externalised through the linguistic and cultural burden of the protagonist's name: Gogol Ganguli (Lahiri, *Namesake* 1-20). Named after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol by his father, Ashoke, during a moment of existential crisis, the protagonist's name is neither authentically Bengali nor standard American. It is an accidental signifier that places him within an eccentric, transnational literary lineage.

As Susan Koshy argues, the second-generation immigrant text frequently shifts from a geography of displacement to a topography of naming and self-definition (Koshy 154). Gogol's initial rejection of his name, and his subsequent adoption of the proper Bengali name Nikhil, represents an attempt to resolve the ambiguity of his identity by choosing one side of the cultural ledger over the other (Lahiri, *Namesake* 100-105).

4.2 Spatial Geographies of Assimilation

Gogol's movement through various geographic and social spaces—Yale, Columbia, Manhattan, and the aristocratic New England world of his lover, Maxine Ratliff—maps his shifting relationship with the hyphen (Lahiri, *Namesake* 120-150). His relationship with Maxine represents a desire for total cultural erasure. By immersing himself in her wealthy, secular American lifestyle, Gogol attempts to abandon the Bengali domestic rituals maintained by his mother, Ashima.

However, this absolute assimilation proves unsustainable. The sudden death of his father, Ashoke, acts as a structural turning point. It forces Gogol to confront the reality that his identity is irrevocably tied to the history of his parents' migration. The death of the patriarch requires a re-evaluation of the domestic space. Gogol shaves his head in accordance with traditional Bengali mourning rituals while standing in a modern American apartment, visually enacting the very hybridity he sought to escape (Lahiri, *Namesake* 179).

4.3 The Evolution of Ashima: From Exile to Conductor

Concurrently, the novel charts the transformation of Ashima from a weeping bride trapped in a cold Boston apartment into an autonomous, hybrid subject. By the conclusion of the novel, Ashima decides to spend six months of the year in Calcutta and six months in the United States (Lahiri, *Namesake* 275). She transforms her condition of homelessness into a dual residence. She no longer views the Atlantic Ocean as a barrier, but as a bridge.

As Susan Stanford Friedman notes in her theorization of "locational feminism," identity is shaped by the specific geographies an individual occupies (Friedman 3). Ashima's final status as a transnational commuter demonstrates that the hyphen has ceased to be a purely painful fracture. It has become a negotiable boundary. Gogol's final acceptance of his name, as he sits in his childhood bedroom reading Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," signifies a

reconciliation with his unique history (Lahiri, *Namesake* 290). He learns to inhabit a name that is itself a site of cultural translation.

5. Unaccustomed Earth: Fluid Transnationalism and the "Third Space"

5.1 Rooting in the Shifting Soil

The maturity of Lahiri's diaspora vision finds its ultimate expression in *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). The title, drawn from a passage in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House," explicitly links the immigrant experience to the act of transplantation. Hawthorne suggests that human nature flourishes when planted in new, unaccustomed soil. In this collection, Lahiri's characters are no longer paralyzed by the anxiety of unbelonging, nor are they exhaustively fighting the battles of assimilation. Instead, they possess a high degree of cultural, social, and economic capital. They operate as elite transnational subjects who move effortlessly across global cities like Boston, London, Seattle, and Rome.

In the title story, "Unaccustomed Earth," the protagonist Ruma is a second-generation lawyer who has relocated from Brooklyn to Seattle with her white American husband and young son (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 3-59). When her father, a retired first-generation immigrant, comes to visit, the traditional generational dynamic is unexpectedly reversed. The father has embraced a lifestyle of global travel following his wife's death, exploring Europe with a new companion (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 12). He is the one who demonstrates mobility and adaptability, while Ruma remains anxious about preserving her cultural roots.

The act of planting a garden together in the Seattle backyard becomes a profound metaphor for their evolved diaspora consciousness (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 40-45). The father does not plant traditional Bengali crops; instead, he cultivates American flowers and vegetables, teaching his grandson the English names for them (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 42). This shared domestic work creates a functional Third Space. Within it, ancestral heritage and

immediate American reality are synthesized without conflict. The soil is unaccustomed, yet it is fertile and capable of sustaining life.

5.2 Global Trajectories and the Normalized Diaspora

This normalization of the diaspora space is further illustrated in the complex architectural framework of "Hema and Kaushik," the three-part novella that concludes the collection (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 223-333). Hema and Kaushik are children of Bengali immigrants who first meet in Massachusetts, part ways, and reconnect years later in Rome. Their geographical movements are not dictated by the trauma of exile, but by professional choice and personal desire. Kaushik becomes an international photojournalist, documenting global conflicts, while Hema is an academic specializing in ancient Etruscan history (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 250, 290).

Their cultural identity is no longer bound to a specific home or national territory. Rome serves as an ideal backdrop for their final encounter. It is a city built upon layers of historical ruins and ancient migrations. By choosing Rome as the site of their adult intimacy, Lahiri moves her characters entirely outside the binary structure of the India-America dynamic. The hyphen has expanded to encompass the entire globe. As James Clifford observes in his analysis of travel and translation in the late twentieth century, the contemporary diaspora subject is increasingly defined by "routes" rather than "roots" (Clifford 251).

6. Comparative Analysis: Mapping the Structural and Stylistic Shifts

The thematic evolution across Lahiri's early fiction is mirrored by a structural and stylistic transformation. Her prose style shifts from the meticulous, object-oriented realism of *Interpreter of Maladies* to the expansive, fluid, and temporally complex narratives of *Unaccustomed Earth*.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri relies heavily on the description of material objects, such as spices, silk sarees, and aerograms, to externalise her characters' internal sense of

alienation. These objects function as metonymic fragments of a lost homeland, emphasizing the division between the character and their current environment (Srinivasan 114).

In *The Namesake*, the narrative structure expands to accommodate a wider temporal scale. This allows the author to trace how these objects lose their foreignness over time, becoming integrated into the fabric of American domestic life. The description of Ashima making a makeshift snack out of Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, and chopped red onions at the beginning of the novel (Lahiri, *Namesake* 1) contrasts sharply with her ability to seamlessly host large-scale parties for both American and Indian colleagues by the text's conclusion.

By the time Lahiri publishes *Unaccustomed Earth*, this focus on material objects gives way to an interiorized, psychologically complex prose style. The characters do not need to surround themselves with cultural artifacts to assert their identity. Their hybridity is internalised, effortless, and linguistic. The narrative focus shifts from the physical challenges of survival in a new country to the psychological nuances of grief, choice, and personal freedom within a globalized world. The structural design of her third book, moving from standalone stories to an interconnected novella, reflects this fluid consciousness. It demonstrates that the diaspora experience can no longer be contained within isolated snapshots ; it requires a more integrated narrative form.

Conclusion

Through her first three major works, Jhumpa Lahiri does not merely document the realities of the Bengali-American diaspora; she constructs a sophisticated, chronological philosophy of the modern hybrid self. *Interpreter of Maladies* captures the foundational anxieties of this journey. The hyphen functions as a dividing line, and characters find themselves trapped in an uncomfortable "in-betweenness," struggling with the failures of translation and the isolation of exile. *The Namesake* advances this trajectory by showing how the second generation wrestles with this inheritance. It illustrates how individuals negotiate the

borderlands of identity through naming and spatial mobility, ultimately reframing the hyphen as a bridge rather than a barrier.

Finally, *Unaccustomed Earth* presents the realization of Bhabha's Third Space. Here, the hyphenated identity is no longer an affliction or an ongoing struggle, but an expansive horizon of creative synthesis and global agency. Lahiri's artistic evolution mirrors her own personal transition from a writer seeking to interpret the maladies of displacement to one who comfortably charts the terrain of a transnational world. By tracing this development, this paper demonstrates that Lahiri's early fiction is a dynamic archive of cultural translation. It shows how the modern immigrant subject moves past the trauma of fragmentation to claim the entire world as their unaccustomed, yet welcoming, earth.

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