



## Hybridity and Identity- Diasporic Voices in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the thematic interplay of hybridity and identity in selected short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's fiction, focused on the Indian diasporic experience in the United States, explores how migration, cultural dislocation, intergenerational tensions, and bilingual/bicultural existence shape subjectivity. Drawing on postcolonial theories of hybridity and cultural identity (Bhabha, Hall), the study conducts close readings of five short stories to analyse how Lahiri represents identity as negotiated, fractured, and performative. The paper argues that Lahiri's narratives offer nuanced portrayals of diasporic subjectivity: identity emerges as static belonging and an ongoing negotiation between memory and adaptation, tradition and modernity, private longing and public assimilation. The conclusion discusses the ethical and emotional dimensions of diasporic belonging in Lahiri's oeuvre and suggests directions for future research into narrative form and language as sites of hybridity.

**Keywords:** Jhumpa Lahiri, hybridity, diaspora, cultural identity, postcolonial theory, short stories etc.

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**Introduction:** Jhumpa Lahiri's short fiction has become central to contemporary explorations of diasporic literature, occupying a prominent place in discussions of transnational identity and postcolonial narrative. Her stories are populated by characters who dwell in the liminal spaces of migration — individuals who exist “in-between” cultures, unable to claim absolute belonging either to the homeland they have left behind or to the hostland in which they now reside. This in-betweenness manifests in everyday negotiations with language, the retention or transformation of cultural memory, and the delicate navigation of domestic intimacy. Through these intimate portrayals, Lahiri reveals the psychological complexities and subtle emotional tensions that arise from displacement, voluntary or otherwise.

While a substantial body of critical work on Lahiri emphasizes recurrent themes such as loss, assimilation, nostalgia, and intergenerational conflict, the present paper directs its focus toward the intertwined concepts of **hybridity** and **identity** — investigating how these notions are enacted, narrated, and problematized in selected short stories. The approach here is both thematic and formal: Lahiri's narratives depict hybrid cultural realities and structurally embody the very logic of hybridity through shifts in perspective, restrained prose, and layered temporalities.

In this framework, hybridity is understood in two interconnected senses as:

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- I. **Cultural condition:** First, as a **cultural condition**, hybridity refers to the intermingling of traditions, languages, and subject positions that inevitably occurs in diasporic lives. Lahiri's characters often participate in rituals from their homeland while adapting to the customs and idioms of their adopted country, creating new, syncretic cultural practices.
- II. **Narrative strategy:** Second, hybridity operates as a **narrative strategy**, wherein Lahiri's use of subtle irony, fragmented memory, and dual focalizations mirrors the ambivalence and negotiation that define the diasporic condition. Her narrative spaces themselves become "third spaces" in Homi Bhabha's sense, sites where meaning is constantly renegotiated and cultural fixity is disrupted. Identity, in this analysis, is approached as a static possession and a dynamic process which shaped by personal memory, evolving interpersonal relationships, and the institutional or social contexts in which individuals find themselves. Lahiri's fiction repeatedly demonstrates that identity is both relational and contingent: it is formed and reformed through encounters, both intimate and collective, across temporal and spatial boundaries. Such identities are never fully resolved; rather, they are in perpetual motion, responding to shifts in language use, generational expectations, and political realities.

**Objectives of the Study:**

1. To analyze how Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories represent hybridity as a cultural and narrative condition in diasporic lives.
2. To examine the construction of identity as both static belonging and a dynamic process shaped by migration, memory, and adaptation.
3. To apply postcolonial theories of hybridity (Bhabha) and cultural identity (Hall) in interpreting Lahiri's nuanced portrayals of diasporic subjectivity.

**Literature Review:**

Scholarly attention to Jhumpa Lahiri's work has often centered on her depiction of immigrant loneliness, cultural belonging, and the preservation of tradition. Critics have widely praised Lahiri's restrained prose style and her keen psychological insight, which illuminate the interior lives of diasporic subjects. At the same time, scholars interrogate the politics of representation in her diasporic fiction, questioning how narratives of migration engage with issues of cultural identity and power dynamics.

Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of hybridity has been particularly influential in framing diasporic literature as a site where cultural differences are negotiated and new subjectivities emerge. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" problematizes rigid binaries between colonizer and colonized, home and host, allowing for a more fluid understanding of identity formation (Bhabha 37-38). In relation to Lahiri, hybridity helps explain how characters inhabit interstitial cultural positions shaped by overlapping languages, customs, and values.

Similarly, Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity offers a vital framework for analyzing Lahiri's narratives. Hall argues that identity is a fixed essence and a continuous "production," always in process and shaped by historical and social contexts (Hall 222). This perspective is useful for understanding Lahiri's shifting and often ambivalent portrayals of diasporic subjectivity, where identities are constructed through memory, language, and relational dynamics.

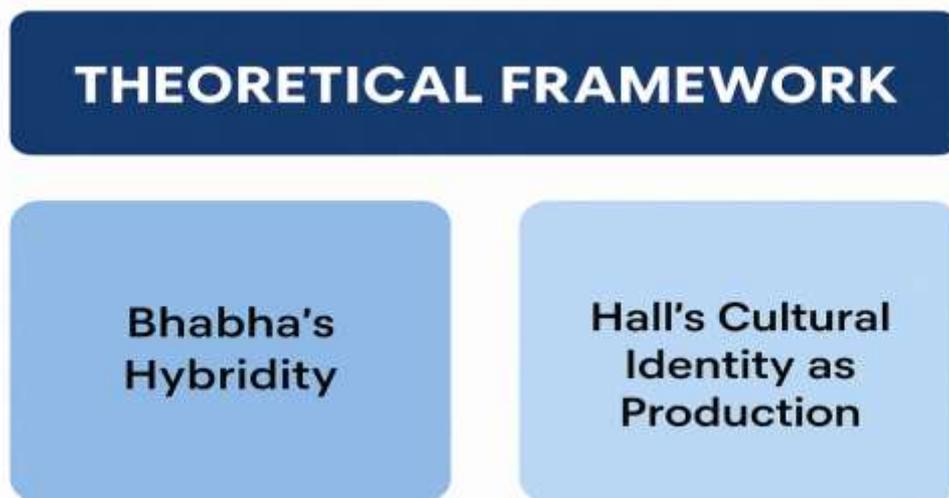
Other scholars have foregrounded the role of language, particularly narrative voice and code-switching—as important sites where diasporic identity is performed and negotiated. The interplay between English and native languages in Lahiri's fiction reflects the tensions of

assimilation and cultural preservation faced by immigrant characters (Gupta 45). This linguistic hybridity becomes a marker of both belonging and alienation.

Building on these critical perspectives, this study integrates formal analysing and focusing on narrative focalization, temporal structure, and stylistic choices with postcolonial theoretical concepts. It demonstrates how Lahiri's narrative craft embodies hybridity and negotiates identities at both personal and communal levels, enriching our understanding of diasporic literature's complex engagement with culture and selfhood.

**Theoretical Framework:**

Two theoretical strands guide this paper which are given in the below image:



**Image 1 Theoretical Framework of the Study**

As given in the above image 1, the theoretical framework of the study is based on two parts as:

1. **Bhabha's Hybridity:** Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity emphasizes the "third space" where cultural translation and new identities are produced. Hybridity challenges binary constructs (colonizer/colonized, home/host) and highlights ambivalence as a productive site for identity formation. Applying this to Lahiri, hybridity helps explain characters' liminal states and the cultural syncretism evident in domestic rituals, food, and language.
2. **Hall's Cultural Identity as Production:** Stuart Hall frames identity as an essence and a continuous process of becoming, composed of narratives and representations. This view allows for attention to the internalized narratives through which Lahiri's characters construct selves—through memory, storytelling, and the negotiation of social roles.

Combining these concepts allows analysis of identity as both culturally hybrid and narratively produced.

**Methodology**

This study employs **close reading** of five representative short stories by Jhumpa Lahiri. Close reading focuses on language, imagery, point of view, and narrative structure to interpret how identity and hybridity are thematized and enacted. The selected stories are examined for

recurring motifs — food, domestic spaces, language, and ritual — and for how interpersonal dynamics (marriage, parent-child relationships, friendships) surface diasporic tensions. The analysis also considers narrative voice and perspective shifts as formal devices that mirror hybrid subjectivity.

### **Textual Analysis**

#### **1. “*A Temporary Matter*” — Private Intimacy and the Erosion of Shared Narrative**

Lahiri’s portrayal of a couple estranged after a personal tragedy showcases identity as both relational and fragile. The couple’s nightly ritual of confessing secrets during scheduled blackouts is a spatial and temporal liminal zone: darkness becomes a “third space” where truth-telling dissolves superficial roles. Hybridity here is less about cultural mixture and more about the hybrid subjectivity produced within intimate exchanges — spouses who are both lovers and strangers, parents and bereaved individuals. Lahiri’s minimalistic narration focuses on the tension between what is spoken and what is withheld; identity is a stable category and an emergent product of shared memory and its loss. The story suggests that the possibility of reconstituting identity depends on shared narratives — when those narratives fracture, identities unravel.

#### **2. “*Mrs. Sen’s*” — Cultural Practice, Isolation, and Language as Boundary**

Mrs. Sen, an immigrant who longs for her homeland, centres the story’s exploration of cultural maintenance versus isolation. Her ritualized cooking, insistence on traditional dress, and attachment to objects from home form a cultural repertoire that both asserts identity and alienates. Mrs. Sen’s limited English marks language as boundary and bridge: it isolates her from the broader society while strengthening intimate ties with those who share or respect her practices. The story captures hybridity as a contested space — Mrs. Sen adopts certain American conveniences but remains anchored in the affective landscape of Bengal. Her identity, then, is a hybrid of adaptation and fidelity: she performs domestic rituals belonging to another place while living in a new physical context. The narrative perspective, sympathetic and observational which allows readers to witness the ethics of hospitality and exclusion operating in everyday domestic life.

#### **3. “*When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*” — National Conflict and Transnational Attachments**

This story foregrounds political diasporic consciousness. Mr. Pirzada, a visitor from Pakistan in the United States during the 1971 Bangladesh War, becomes a figure through whom the young narrator learns about divided homelands and shifting national identities. The narrator’s childhood vantage point offers an intimate look at diasporic empathy: domestic routines (sharing candy, watching educational programs) become sites of cross-border concern. The hybridity present here is political and affective — the narrator learns to hold simultaneous allegiances (to host-country routines and to distant kin caught in conflict). The story shows identity as layered: personal loyalties are shaped by global events, and the diasporic subject inhabits overlapping emotional geographies.

#### **4. “*This Blessed House*” — Religious Difference, Performance, and Domestic Hybridity**

In this story, the discovery of Christian paraphernalia in a newly purchased house challenges a couple’s differing responses to cultural difference. Twinkle, the wife, delights in the objects and their performative potential, while the husband is embarrassed, feeling they threaten his identity as an immigrant of a particular cultural-religious background. Lahiri stages hybridity within the domestic sphere: the house becomes a metonym for cultural intrusion and syncretism. Twinkle’s playful appropriation of the objects and enchantment with the new rituals indicate a hybrid subjectivity that is more fluid and performative; contrastively, her husband’s discomfort reflects anxieties about authenticity and community belonging. Narrative irony

operates here, exposing how small domestic acts reveal larger negotiations of identity in diasporic households.

**5. “The Third and Final Continent” — Temporal Hybridity and the Making of a New Self**

This story’s narrator recounts immigration, early struggles, and eventual domestic settlement in the U.S. The narrative’s temporal layering — memory refracted through later stability — emphasizes identity as a cumulative, hybrid formation. Encounters with a landlady, an elderly immigrant attendant, and domestic rituals (tea, arranged marriage) weave old-world sensibilities with new-world agency. Language plays a crucial role: the narrator’s voice, measured and reflective, incorporates cultural memory and English idiom, signifying a self shaped by both origin and destination. The story suggests hybridity as reconciliation rather than rupture: identity here is a narrative achievement formed through endurance, accommodation, and affection for cross-cultural intimacies.

**Findings:**

Across these stories Lahiri stages several recurrent motifs that articulate hybridity and identity:

1. **Domestic Space as Liminal Site:** Homes, kitchens, and dinner tables recurrently serve as places where cultural practices are preserved, contested, or recombined. The domestic sphere becomes a microcosm of diasporic negotiation where tradition and assimilation meet.
2. **Language and Silence:** Language — proficiency, code-switching, accent, and silence — signals belonging or exclusion. Characters’ linguistic performances reveal social mobility, intimacy dynamics, and affective distance. Silence, too, functions as a communicative practice, often more revealing than speech.
3. **Ritual and Food:** Culinary practice and ritual serve as markers of continuity with the homeland and as means for negotiating identity in the diaspora. Food becomes a tangible expression of belonging and memory.
4. **Generational Tensions:** Second-generation or younger characters navigate hybrid identity differently from first-generation immigrants. Their identity-making often involves linguistic nimbleness and cultural hybridity that privilege practical belonging over nostalgic fidelity.
5. **Narrative Form Mirrors Hybridity:** Lahiri’s restrained prose, shifting focalizations, and measured tonal contrasts operate formally to reflect hybrid subjectivities. The understated narrative voice allows interior complexity to emerge without melodrama, thereby producing a literary third space analogous to Bhabha’s theoretical one.

These elements show that Lahiri’s work does not present hybridity as purely celebratory or purely traumatically disorienting; instead, hybridity is ambivalent and a site of possibility and loss. Identity is portrayed as negotiated: it may be stabilizing for some characters (through adaptation) and fragmenting for others (through grief, language loss, or social exclusion).

**Conclusion:** Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories render diasporic identity as a lived, ongoing negotiation of an experience of hybridity that is emotional, linguistic, domestic, and temporal. Her narratives invite readers into the private work of identity-making: the small, ordinary acts through which people preserve what matters, adapt what must be adapted, and invent new forms of belonging. Hybridity in Lahiri’s fiction is a theoretical label and an embodied set of practices and relational dynamics that shape subjectivity. Future research could further examine Lahiri’s use of bilingualism (her later move to writing in Italian) as a performative act of linguistic hybridity or compare her narratives with other South Asian diasporic writers to highlight transnational patterns in contemporary diasporic literature.

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