

## TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S FICTION

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### **Abstract:**

*Transnationalism generates connections between people, societies, and nations, as well as changes in the social, economic, and cultural lives of both the origin and destination countries. The purpose of this article is to look at the impact of people movement, technology, and trade on modern life, society, culture, and literature. It focuses on experiences that transcend national, racial, and linguistic borders. "Someone who expands and goes beyond national limits," Merriam Webster defines transnational as "someone who extends and goes beyond national boundaries" (Webster). The prefix Trans, which means "across," "beyond," and "outside of," is a Latin preposition. As a result, transnational refers to something that exists outside of a nation. Nation is a word that comes from the Latin word natio and refers to an imagined polity that exists inside a defined territory. The modern-nation notion, according to Tölölyan, is unquestionably a product of the Enlightenment era, and it has now transformed due to population dispersal.*

**Keywords:** *Transnational, identities, fiction, culture, nation.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The end of the twentieth century gave birth to a new world that rejects any one concept of home, nation, boundaries, or culture. We have now entered an era of globalisation and transnationalism, following the demise of extreme nationalism. The concept of Earth's fragility, finitude, and ecological interdependence was born out of "Pale blue dot (7)," a satellite photograph taken by American astronomer Carl Sagan in the 1990s. Transnationalism is a term that refers to the interdependence of countries all over the world. It is not only a political term in this century, but it is also widely used in literature. Literature is thought to have no limits, and this view fosters a link between literature and transnationalism. Writers from industrialised countries, as well as individuals who have personally experienced migration, have written extensively about the experiences of people leaving their native country in search of a better life, which is now referred to as transnational studies. These studies have become more important as people migrate from their native countries to other countries in quest of better prospects. Postcolonial emigration, war, employment, education, tourism, technology, and the growth of cross-border trade are just a few of the factors that drive migration. In today's society, transnationalism has become as popular as globalisation. Transnationalism is a research agenda and a social practise due to the increasing interconnectivity between people living beyond national boundaries. Whereas in globalisation, business and non-business organisations create international influence on business on an international scale, transnationalism is a research agenda and a social practise due to the increasing interconnectivity between people living beyond national boundaries. In the twentieth century, the word "transnationalism" has grown in popularity. Globalization has

arrived as a fresh wave of transformation following the second phase of post colonialism. Globalization appears to have given the stale colonial world a new lease on life. India was battling colonialism until 1947, when the entire situation for India and the rest of the globe abruptly shifted after three decades. People battling for their ethnicities and cultures realised that they needed to be connected to the rest of the world in order to be progressive. They also believed that there could be no such thing as a pure race or culture because colonisation altered both the colonised and the coloniser. Migration to industrialised countries for education, a better life, and money has been a common occurrence, and it is still happening. Though migrants used to feel physically distanced from their home country, the technological advancements of the twenty-first century have changed the picture completely. Transnationalism is the term for this new perspective. Transnationalism has given migrants a sense of freedom, and they now contribute to the culture and economics of both their home country and their destination country. Transnationalism has spawned a new social class that transcends borders, culture, and religion. This unique feature of this newly formed society has piqued the interest of experts who specialise in transnational studies.

## 2. INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

Migration has become an unavoidable part of modern life in the age of liberalisation and globalisation. People are dispersed across the globe due to trade, wars, unemployment, job possibilities, poverty, social, and political factors. Globalization has gained more influence as a result of the dispersion of people from one country to another. Transnational ties are an important component of globalisation in the twenty-first century since immigrants all around the world maintain contact with their nation countries. India's dispersion to industrialised countries is regarded as the world's third largest and most dispersed. The beauty of the Indian Diaspora is that they bring a small piece of India with them wherever they go. They maintain their local culture at home, but their adaptation is noticeable since they prioritise economic integration over cultural integration. All the while, they keep the myth of return alive. The appeal of Indian cuisine, film, yoga, and cultural festivals has grown around the world. The presence of Indian eateries in cosmopolitan cities demonstrates the size of the Indian Diaspora and the world's Indianization. After WWII, America modified its immigration policy, and big waves of Indians and South Asians flooded the US in the 1960s. These Indian Diasporas are regarded as model minorities because they have contributed to the development of both their host and native countries. They have made significant contributions to trade, industry, fine arts, science, technology, politics, and literature. The creation of space for South Asians in their host countries has been aided by diasporic literature. It has enriched both the host nation's and the native nation's experiences because it is a new type of encounter for both. These diasporic writers speak about the loss of their homelands while simultaneously discussing the acquisition of new ones. They link the process of deterritorialization to the process of reterritorialization. Diasporic fiction explores the transition between home and a foreign nation, the old and the new, the familiar and the strange. It illustrates a contrast between these two qualities of being in a native and host nation, which is unique among Indian English fiction. It also discusses the concept of culture

as well as the distinction between fixed and fluid identity. All of these concepts' discourse leads us to the current meaning of Diaspora and its flexible location between East and West, ancient and new definitions of migration. Though the word "Diaspora" conjures up images of isolation and rootlessness, in the age of globalisation, the entire global paradigm and definitions have shifted and widened their scope. Today, Diaspora can "refer to a conquered land that was conquered for the aim of colonisation and assimilation into the empire" (Bhatt 37). Because Diaspora is no longer associated with feelings of loss, panic, rootlessness, and grief, cultural studies conducted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have given birth to multiculturalism and tolerance for diversity. This evolving Diaspora of the twenty-first century gives rise to concepts such as transnationalism, which incorporates terminology such as hybrids and third space. These terms are frequently used by authors who portray the experience of migration through fictional characters. Interpreter of Maladies (1999), a collection of nine short tales, established Jhumpa Lahiri as a diasporic literary figure. She refuses to be labelled as either an Indian or an American because she identifies with both. Characters in her works share these characteristics as well. All of the short stories in Interpreter of Maladies are based on the concept of diasporic experience in various forms. Each narrative focuses on characters who have left their own nation for another or who have been identified with multiple national identities at one time. This form of transition brought both satisfaction and psychological concerns, and Lahiri has explored such identities in several stories.

When it comes to cultural identity, the protagonists generally manoeuvre between two worlds. The first generation of immigrants has firsthand knowledge of their home country's culture. As a result, it is only natural for them to be exposed to their local culture. However, the second generation has inherited some of their ancestors' characteristics. They accept pieces of their native culture as well as what can be ingrained in their identity, which includes elements of American culture. The Indian culture occupies a prominent part in the lives of first-generation immigrants as they navigate through alienation, displacement, and, eventually, finding their perfect blend of both cultures. Second-generation immigrants have a strong love for American culture, which their parents may not understand. We also notice that religious transnationalism develops among Asian American immigrants. They may not consider Christianity to be their religion, but they accept Christian rites and rituals as part of American culture. For the normally rigid first-generation immigrants, religious tolerance and acceptance of Christian traditions are a new cultural virtue, a by-product of transnationalism. The short stories in Interpreter of Maladies are about a wide range of human emotions. "A Temporary Matter" and "Mrs. Sen's" are two stories that take the issue of couple friction and highlight how immigrant Indian couples must fight a double war of adjusting to the alien land's culture while appreciating the sacred tie of their marriage. With its western structure and freedom, American life poses a challenge to them. Over time, surviving there with Indian roots and maintaining a smooth sailing in the marriage gets difficult.

### 3. THE NAMESAKE

Geography plays a significant role in determining one's identity. Even in the global period, one identifies with one's native nation as well as the city in which one lives. However, in this century, the definitions of "home" and "nation" have evolved. In 21st-century literature, the concepts of "nation" and "boundaries" are examined in a new perspective. The entire world was battling colonialism in the nineteenth century. For the people, the only reason to live was to participate in national movements. People who fought for the country's integrity were referred to as "nation." However, post-colonialism hit this religious soul like a tonne of bricks. Because of a surge of global migrations that began in the 1970s, the idea of nationalism began to lose its original connotation. The rise of post-colonialism has altered people's perceptions of nation and borders. When individuals began to migrate to the world's commercial centres for various reasons, culture became a multifaceted and fluid term. The word "hybrid culture" was coined with the term "post-colonialism," which has long been a contentious term among those who dispute the impotence of nationalistic feelings. In his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Ernest Gellner shatters the strict notion of nationalism by saying:

Nationalism is not what it appear to be, especially not to itselfnationalism's cultural shards and patches are frequently arbitrary historical constructs. Any kind of shred would have sufficed. However, this does not imply that the principle of nationalism is in any way contingent or incidental. (56)

The concept of culture has evolved in tandem with the concept of nation. In her fiction, JhumpaLahiri challenges the notion of a linear culture or set identity. She arrived in 2003 with *The Namesake*, a film about two generations of Bengali immigrants who come to America and establish a life for themselves. In *The Namesake*, Lahiri uses her experience growing up on the cultural borderland between India and the United States to illustrate the many life experiences of Asian-Americans. This novel depicts the shifting nature of immigrants' cultural creation in America. As the title implies, there is a back-story to the protagonist's name and the strange significance linked with it. AshokeGanguli is a young man who is nearly resurrected after being injured in a train accident and given a copy of Gogol's "The Overcoat." After months of pain and bed rest, he decides to leave the city and travel across the world. With his wife Ashima, he travels to America. When they have a newborn boy, they wait for Ashima's grandma to send them a decent name by airmail, but the mail never arrives. They give him the nickname Gogol, which eventually becomes his name in the school registration when the grandmother passes away before the boy is named. Now, Gogol is an odd name because it is neither Bengali nor American. Gogol, who likes his name at first, becomes embarrassed as he becomes older. This perplexity, burden, and boredom are too much for him to take. He legally changes his name to Nikhil and is relieved to finally have a logical name that no one disputes. We follow Gogol as he grows up, goes to an Ivy League school, and becomes a successful architect. He falls in love with an American girl named Maxine, but they break up. Finally, he marries a Bengali girl, but the marriage ends in divorce. He becomes conscious of his roots and cultural issues as a result of this quest.

#### 4. UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

Migrations from all over the world have sparked a new wave of philosophies about the meaning of home, nation, and culture. Even if a nation is extremely powerful, it cannot meet all of its demands without the import and export of goods, raw materials, and other items. Similarly, no country can meet all of its needs only with its own human resources. Individuals, on the other hand, aspire to conduct new work for themselves. Some people aspire to be successful in education, while others aim to be successful in business or the arts. It's likely that the original nation won't provide them with the resources they need to advance in their goals. As a result, many consider immigrating to nations with more developed resources in order to better themselves. In this approach, both the host nation and the individual profit the world's most powerful and developed countries, such as America, have adopted this definition of success or advantage. America is known for being a multicultural country, and its beauty lies in the nation that it provides opportunity to all who enter its borders. The United States has a multicultural appearance due to political, sociological, and economic factors. The United States welcomes people of all intellectual and physical talents, resulting in a country with more immigrants than any other in the world. Following colonialism and independence in 1776, America has risen to become the world's most powerful country in terms of trade, economy, education, and industry. "We are all foreign-born or the descendants of the foreign-born," Randolph Bourne writes in his famous essay "Transnational America" about the immigrants who have become an integral part of American life, "and if distinctions are to be made between us, they should rightly be on some other ground than indigenusness" (252). These lines for America by Randolph Bourne are revolutionary. These perceptions give immigrants in America a distinct identity. Randolph Bourne and other 20th-century pioneering writers have forever altered the perception of diverse ethnic groups in the United States. South Asian writers, such as those from India, are an inextricable part of both the present and the past of the United States. Jhumpa Lahiri is another author who has stated that she is neither American nor Indian. Lahiri, like many others, is the embodiment of transnational writers who refuse to be bound by nationality or culture. Lahiri married a prominent Latin American journalist, Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, and her trip from England to America, which began with Indian roots, has stopped in Rome. Lahiri published *Unaccustomed Earth* in 2008 after the popularity of *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*. *Unaccustomed Earth* is a collection of short stories about immigrants and their search for cultural identity in a strange land. In these stories, many people demonstrate the agony connected with the seeking of identity in a place where one does not totally belong. The title alone is enticing, causing the reader to imagine oneself in the shoes of immigrants who tread into an unfamiliar area, certain that this is not their home, but continue on with their lives.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* is her second collection of short stories. The eight stories are set in various places throughout the world and centre on the lives of Bengali American families. This collection of short stories is separated into two parts. There are five short stories in the first half: "Unaccustomed Earth," "A Choice of Accommodation,"

"HellHeaven," "Only Goodness," and "Nobody's Business," while the second part is a trilogy on Hema and Kaushik's terrible narrative. The title derives from Nathaniel Hawthorne's prologue to *The Scarlet Letter*, which suggests that a change of residence might be beneficial to a person if they plant their roots in unfamiliar soil. Entering a distant place and establishing there is a major effort for first-generation immigrants, characterised by anxiety, disputes, troubling emotions, and the loss of one's own tradition and adoption of a new culture. The connectivity of generations, loyalty to their native culture and occasionally betrayal of the same due to circumstances, loss of their original identity and reinvention of an individual's identity are all themes in these stories. First-generation migrants are unaccustomed to the foreign place, and it takes a long time for them to adjust to the new culture and begin a new life. Their children, second-generation immigrants, embark on their own adventures in search of their own identities.

## 5. THE LOWLANDS

The globalisation phenomenon in post-independence India has become a watershed point not just in the nation's history, but also in the world's. The infantile nation is moulded by the currents of instability that are sweeping the planet, having recently been touched by the influence of Western powers and now having access to the wonders of the West due to its exposure to technology. This period of India's transformation into a new nation has become a unique crossroads at which there is a sense of belonging to the culture and echoes of the nation's past. At the same time, India is attempting to create a courageous path forward in its growth. JhumpaLahiri's novel *The Lowland*, published in 2013, attempted to capture this spirit. *The Lowland* is a narrative about many different people with many different identities. In fact, it causes us to reconsider the concept "identity." The book tells the narrative of two brothers, Udayan and Subhash, who are defined by each other and pursue opposing lifestyles. They are intertwined identities with qualities that link and divide them. The namesake lowland is a low-lying area near their home that floods during the monsoon and acts as a quiet testament to the brothers' life in turmoil. Though Lahiri rejects any form of literary label, she asserts the importance of Bengal in her life during the 2014 Jaipur Literary Festival. 'The influence that the absence of a place can have on a person is an inherent part of my existence,' she adds of Kolkata. I can't imagine a world without it (India Today 2014). Lahiri also informed the audience at the Jaipur Literature Festival that a visit to Kolkata brought the storey of *The Lowland* in front of her and plagued her a lot. She determined that she would write about it. Other Bengali writers have also published fictional works about the Naxalite movement because Bengalis have suffered greatly as a result of it. Gauri, a clever lady torn between fate's whims and her ties to two brothers, appears in *The Lowland*. The storey follows them over a sixty-year period, charting not just their personal highs and lows, but also the ups and downs of a country on the cusp of upheaval. The identities represented here are from various Asian American traditions. Despite the fact that the novel begins in South Calcutta, it spends the majority of its time in America, with various individuals, historical events, socioeconomic conditions, political personalities, and the intellectual world. Lahiri has produced a collage of these intertwined events and individuals, representing the

south Asian community's transnational environment. The novel's first chapters give a vivid picture of the two brothers' childhood in Calcutta. Udayan and Subhash, two brothers from Calcutta, grow up in Tollygunge, a filthy neighbourhood that contrasts sharply with the Tollygunge club to which it is close. The brothers are aware of a life better than their own, an elite group to which they are denied admission, and they are tempted to peek inside. This is their first encounter with the colonial world, which will shape the rest of their lives. Though the British have departed India, their quiet hand still wields authority, as access to the club is restricted and acres of land are fenced off for the enjoyment of a few.

The Tollygunge club and the Tollygunge community represent two distinct identities in terms of time, culture, and colonisation. The Tollygunge Club is located in Kolkata's southern district, nine kilometres from the city's main centre. In 1895, the Club was founded. It has become a meeting place for British bankers and merchants. The goal behind the club's founding was to provide a safe haven for cops fleeing a suffocating city, allowing them to create a home for themselves in a strange environment. For British officers, India was a completely foreign setting, and they yearned for the comforts of home. It is the first club of its kind from that era, and it outperforms the competition in this regard. The club was originally an equestrian organisation focused primarily to riding and all manner of equestrian sport, with a special collection of flora and fauna. It contains all of the amenities that are rarely found in one location. In these and many other ways, 'Tolly,' as it has become lovingly known, is unrivalled in India, if not the world. Rasa Pagla was the name given to Tollygunge in the 18th century. It was a jungle, with European garden cottages strewn about here and there. Beautiful villas in little towns distant from the madness of the metropolis appealed to European officers who had previously lived in cities. In 1774, Colonel William Tolly made the Adi Ganga River navigable. Tolly was given to this Rasa pagla after Colonel's name. The British began funding Tollygunge Club and Tollygunge Golf Club in the nineteenth century. Soon after, the area grew into a bustling suburban area. There, the uniformed class made their living, and life was simple and naive. Tolly Club's arrival in Kolkata is emblematic of a world unknown to Indians at the time. It is also a metaphor of the unconscious blending of cultures on the Indian subcontinent prior to the modern culture of globalisation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We can say that Transnationalism is a term that refers to the interdependence of countries all over the world. It is not only a political term in this century, but it is also widely used in literature. Writers from industrialised countries, as well as individuals who have personally experienced migration, have written extensively about the experiences of people leaving their native country in search of a better life, which is now referred to as transnational studies. These studies have become more important as people migrate from their native countries to other countries in quest of better prospects. Interpreter of Maladies (1999), a collection of nine short tales, established Jhumpa Lahiri as a diasporic literary figure. She refuses to be labelled as either an Indian or an American because she identifies with both. Characters in her works share these characteristics as well. Jhumpa Lahiri is another author who has stated that she is

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