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Lives Between Worlds: Hyphenated Identity and the Experience of Dual Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent"

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of hyphenated identity and the experience of dual belonging in the short stories "Mrs. Sen's" and "The Third and Final Continent" by Jhumpa Lahiri. Both stories portray the experiences of diasporic individuals who live between two cultures and attempt to balance the memories of their homeland with the unfamiliar realities of the new world. The characters inhabit a state of cultural in-betweenness, where their sense of belonging remains partial as they navigate between the memories of their homeland and the expectations of the adopted country.

Their experiences reflect a hybrid space where old traditions, memories and new experiences interact continuously. This in-between space becomes a site where conflicting values and emotions coexist. Thus, rather than presenting assimilation as complete change, the stories reveal how identity evolves through negotiation of different cultural influences.

Instead of holding a fixed sense of identity, the characters reflect a complex reality marked by multiple, sometimes contradictory affiliations. By examining the narratives, the study highlights how Lahiri presents the complex realities of diasporic life where identities of individuals navigate overlapping cultural worlds shaped by memories, longings and new beginnings.

Keywords: hyphenated identity, diaspora, in-between space, home.

Diasporic literature often deals with questions of identity, displacement, belonging and the struggles to adjust to new cultures. It tells the stories of people who live between places, languages and traditions. One of the most important writers in this field is Jhumpa Lahiri – the American author of Indian descent – whose Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) beautifully captures the emotional struggles of people who carry two worlds within them, yet donot feel fully at home either.

The concept of “hyphenated identity” is central in Lahiri’s work. The hyphen in labels like Indian-American is not just a simple connection between identities, but it represents a space where people live between two cultures. This hyphen binds and as well as separates—showing a sense of belonging as well as estrangement. This in-between space is filled with everyday struggles—memories of homeland, efforts to adjust, moments of confusion.

The concept of hyphenated identity is deeply rooted in postcolonial and diasporic theory. Stuart Hall redefines identity as a matter of positioning, not fixed essence. In the essay titled “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” Hall argues that cultural identity is a matter of “becoming”. It keeps changing as we live through new experiences, move to new places and interact with different cultures. Many people from diaspora communities feel that their true identity belongs to their homeland—something they see as pure, original and rooted in the past. But Hall argues that diasporic people cannot simply return to a past “which is waiting to be found...” (435) Instead, he encourages us to see identity as something that gradually takes shape through our experiences, history, culture and the world around us.

Homi K. Bhabha adds a deeper layer to this idea by showing that identity is often formed in between cultures, not fully belonging to one or the other. He describes it as the “Third Space”—a space where cultures meet, mix and create something new. He argues that identity is formed through differences, not through a return to purity. This in-between space is a space of possibility which can lead to new ideas, new ways of living and hybrid identities. According to Bhabha:

What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of origin and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular and communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation (Bhabha, 1–2).

For Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha, identity is not something fixed and permanent. It is about learning to live with change, accepting difference and finding meaning in the space between cultures. For people in the diaspora, identity is not about returning to some lost homeland but about living between worlds, adjusting to new surroundings and redefining who they are. Bhabha’s ideas of in-between space and Hall’s idea of identity as “becoming” help us to understand the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, who writes about people living between two cultures—trying to hold on to their past while also learning to belong in a new place.

Extending this understanding of identity and cultural in-betweenness, Avtar Brah, in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* presents a powerful critique of the tendency to view diasporic communities as monolithic or unified. She argues that such communities are “differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces” (Brah, 180–1) shaped by varied experiences. These internal differences—formed by race, gender, class, sexuality, religion or culture—challenges any simple idea of a single, unified diasporic identity. Through this perspective, Brah helps us see diaspora not as something fixed, but as a dynamic space of dialogue, contestation and possibility.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story *Mrs. Sen’s* shows the struggles of immigrant life, especially from a woman’s point of view. The story centers on Mrs. Sen, an Indian woman living in America, who finds it difficult to adjust to her new surroundings. As she takes care of an American boy named Eliot, we begin to see her loneliness and sense of disconnection. Her strong connection to her homeland appears in her everyday routines—especially cooking which becomes a symbolic act of preserving cultural identity. Through her conversations with Eliot, we witness her world of nostalgia, her difficulty in fitting into a new world and her resistance to losing her identity. In contrast, her husband, Mr. Sen, who works at a university seems more comfortable in America. Through this contrast between the husband and wife, Lahiri shows that the experience of migration is not the same for everyone.

Mrs. Sen's identity is rooted in the vibrant memories of Calcutta, her native language, traditional food and daily rituals. Despite her physical presence in America, her emotional and cultural self is located elsewhere. When she says, "everything is there" (Lahiri, 113), she expresses her deep emotional connection to a world she can no longer access, yet one that remains alive within her. She remembers the lively social life of her old neighborhood, where women gathered on rooftops during family celebrations—laughing, gossiping, slicing vegetables late into the night. "It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter," (Lahiri, 115) she recalls. For her, this noise was not a disturbance at all, it reflected a deep sense of belonging. Set against this memory is the stark silence of her life in America: "Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence." (Lahiri, 115) This silence reflects her loneliness and sense of separation from her culture. Her struggle with something as simple as driving also shows this gap. Her inability to drive is not just a personal limitation; it becomes a metaphor for her inability to fully enter the American cultural framework.

In this state of in-betweenness, Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire" helps us understand Mrs. Sen's experience more deeply. Brah explains that for many people in the diaspora, home becomes a "mythic place of desire" - not a physical place they can return to, but a feeling that resides deep within. This sense of longing is seen in Mrs Sen's life. Though she lives in an apartment in America, her inner world is populated by memories of Calcutta – its bustling fish markets, its crowds, the presence of family. Her longing for "home" is never fulfilled, and her domestic space in America is filled with cultural fragments and rituals that remind her of what has been lost. Her nostalgia, her longing for homeland finds expression in her childlike question to Eliot: "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (Lahiri, 119) The question carries a deep sense of pain—the hope that distance could somehow be overcome and that she could return to the world she still calls home.

In another moment of despair, Mrs. Sen asks Eliot, "Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (Lahiri, 116) This is not just a question about safety. It shows a deep sense of loneliness, the absence of the invisible threads of community that once held her life together. She then remembers her life in India, saying: "At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements." (Lahiri, 116) In this recollection, we see a world of togetherness where grief and joy are shared by all, where people are always present for each other.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent" - the concluding story of *Interpreter of Maladies* also offers a deep reflection on the immigrant experience. It is the journey of an Indian—from Calcutta to London and finally to Boston—whose journey is not just about changing places, but about slowly learning how to live in new worlds. Lahiri's portrayal of the immigrant experience resonates deeply with Stuart Hall's reflections on identity in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." Hall's idea that cultural identity is not fixed, but a continuous process of "becoming" helps us to understand Lahiri's narrator. His identity is formed not by rejecting his origins or fully embracing the culture of the new nation. Instead, it evolves gradually, through his everyday experiences and small adjustments. His life stretches across continents—India, England, America— with each stage adding new habits, expectations and understandings to his identity. An important moment in this journey is his encounter with Mrs. Croft, a 103-year-old landlady. Initially appears eccentric and overly formal, Mrs. Croft gradually becomes a figure of admiration. Over time, in adapting to her world—respecting her need for decorum, helping her with kindness—the narrator not only earns her respect but also begins to feel at home. It shows that finding a place in a new world often happens through simple, human connections.

This slow integration deepens with the arrival of his wife, Mala, in America. With her entry into his life in Boston, Mala brings not only companionship but also traces of another world – the textures, smells and rituals of the life they have left behind in India. The narrator’s attention to the details of what Mala brings – “two pullover sweaters... she had knitted...two pairs of drawstring pajamas, a letter from my brother, and a packet of loose Darjeeling tea,” (Lahiri, 191) – offer a deeply symbolic meaning in the story. Each item Mala brings is small, domestic and ordinary, yet together they become a powerful expression of care, cultural memory and familial continuity. The sweaters she knitted, the pajamas she packed and even the letter from his brother speaks of rootedness and familial connection across continents.

Through the careful use of everyday items, Lahiri reveals how diasporic individuals recreate a sense of belonging in unfamiliar places. What may appear trivial – “a cake of Pears soap from India”, “the fragrance of the coconut oil”---becomes a repository of memory and identity. Moreover, sensory images such as the “smell of steamed rice” or “chicken curry made with fresh garlic and ginger” are the most powerful triggers of memory which fill the American space with the feeling of Calcutta. What emerges in this domestic setting is neither a replication of India, nor a complete assimilation into American norms. It is something in-between-- a hybrid space where elements of both cultures coexist. This condition is reflected here: “We are American citizens now, so that we can collect social security when it is time. Though we visit Calcutta every few years, and bring back more drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea, we have decided to grow old here” (Lahiri, 197) which suggests a practical acceptance of American life alongside a lasting emotional attachment to the homeland.

In contrast to Mrs. Sen’s case, Lahiri resists romanticizing the homeland in this story. The death of the narrator’s mother, his arranged marriage, his early struggles – all these remain part of his consciousness but they are presented without sentimentality. The narrator’s past informs his present but does not imprison him. He honours the past, learns from it, and moves forward. By the story’s end, the narrator is neither fully Indian nor fully American – he is both and more. Lahiri closes the story on a reflective tone:

Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri, 198)

This closing reflection captures the essence of Hall’s idea: cultural identity is a journey, not a destination. It is built slowly over time, shaped by the places we live in, the people we meet and the experiences we go through. The narrator’s sense of wonder is not confusion; it shows his realization that without noticing it fully, his life has been shaped by different worlds he has moved through.

Both the stories reflect what may be called a “hyphenated identity” – Indian-American, caught between two worlds. Yet the characters inhabit the hyphen in strikingly different ways. Mrs. Sen’s life in America is shaped by her deep attachment to India which makes it difficult for her to negotiate the unfamiliar environment. Her representation of India is always fixed, idealized and unchanging – always more vibrant, more real than America. In contrast to Mrs. Sen’s resistance, the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” slowly adapts to the new environment. The narrator does not abandon his Indian heritage, but adapts to the demands of American life through small, everyday acts of change and understanding.

Thus, in “Mrs. Sen’s” and “The Third and Final Continent”, Jhumpa Lahiri portrays lives lived between worlds, where identity is not fixed but something that grows over time. Her characters do not fully belong to one place or another; instead, they live in an in-between space – caught between past and present, homeland and new land, old habits and new ways of living. In this space, identity is not fully lost, but it is not completely settled either.

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