Edumania-An International Multidisciplinary Journal

2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006
DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

Diaspora and Dislocation: The Search for Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies

Sargar, Shivaji D.
Director, CDOE, University of Mumbai
Kuchekar, Geeta
A PhD Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Mumbai

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) captures the nuanced experiences of Indian immigrants and their descendants as they navigate the complexities of cultural displacement and identity. This paper explores the themes of diaspora and dislocation in Lahiri's stories, examining how characters grapple with a fractured sense of belonging as they oscillate between their Indian heritage and American surroundings. Through close textual analysis, the study investigates how migration disrupts traditional notions of home, family, and self, leading to emotional alienation and cultural hybridity—stories such as 'Mrs. Sen's 'The Third and Final Continent' and the titular *Interpreter of Maladies* reveal characters caught between nostalgia for the homeland and the pressures of assimilation. Lahiri's subtle yet poignant storytelling underscores the psychological toll of displacement, where even seemingly successful immigrants struggle with unspoken loneliness and miscommunication. The paper also considers how generational differences shape diasporic identity, with first-generation immigrants clinging to tradition while their American-born children negotiate dual cultural affiliations. Employing postcolonial and diaspora theory, this research highlights the liminal spaces Lahiri's characters inhabit, neither fully Indian nor entirely American and the resulting search for belonging. The study argues that *Interpreter of Maladies* presents diaspora not merely as a physical relocation but as an ongoing emotional and cultural negotiation, where the ache of dislocation persists even in moments of apparent integration.

Keywords: Diaspora, Dislocation, Belonging, Cultural Hybridity, Immigrant Identity

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

Introduction:

Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies (1999) poignantly captures the immigrant experience through the lens of cultural displacement and the longing for home. In "Mrs. Sen's," the titular character, an Indian woman living in America, embodies the struggles of diaspora—caught between her nostalgia for Calcutta and her uneasy adaptation to a foreign land. Through her interactions with Eliot, the young boy she babysits, Lahiri explores themes of isolation, cultural preservation, and the disorienting effects of migration. Jaskaran Singh and Dr. Kavita Rani's article provides a compelling analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's diaspora fiction, effectively highlighting themes of identity, displacement, and generational conflict. While comprehensive in scope, incorporating narrative techniques or comparative perspectives could enhance its depth. Nonetheless, it offers valuable insights into Lahiri's exploration of immigrant experiences.

Mrs. Sen's life in America is marked by dislocation—she clings to rituals like chopping vegetables with a traditional blade, wearing vermilion in her hair, and seeking fish that reminds her of home. These acts become symbols of resistance against assimilation, yet they also highlight her inability to fully belong in either India or America. Her failed attempts at driving—a metaphor for independence and mobility in her new country—underscore her fear of navigating an alien world. Meanwhile, Eliot, though American, mirrors her sense of detachment, living in a silent beach house with an emotionally distant mother. Their bond reveals the universal human need for connection amid displacement. The story critiques the myth of immigrant success, exposing the loneliness beneath the surface. Mrs. Sen's breakdown after her grandfather's death—her refusal to drive, her weeping over saris she never wears—culminates in a car accident that symbolizes her fractured identity. Ultimately, Lahiri suggests that diaspora is not just a physical relocation but an ongoing emotional negotiation, where belonging remains elusive. Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" poignantly explores the immigrant experience through the lens of cultural memory and dislocation. Mrs. Sen, an Indian woman living in America, is deeply steeped in nostalgia, clinging to rituals that connect her to her homeland. Her meticulous chopping of vegetables with a traditional blade—a practice she describes as central to Indian weddings—becomes a sacred act of cultural preservation. This blade, transported from India, serves as more than just a kitchen tool; it is a tangible link to her past. Her vivid recollections of communal cooking sessions, where women would gather to slice "fifty kilos of vegetables through the night," starkly contrast with the silence

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

of her American apartment, highlighting her profound isolation. A key moment occurs when she asks Eliot, "If I began to scream right now, would someone come?" This question underscores her alienation—while in India, her voice would have summoned an entire neighborhood, in America, she feels invisible and unheard.

Driving emerges as the story's central metaphor for assimilation, reflecting Mrs. Sen's struggle to adapt to her new environment. Her terror of merging into traffic mirrors her broader fear of navigating American life. Her husband's insistence that she learn to drive, assuring her that "everything will improve," encapsulates the pressure immigrants face to conform. However, her eventual refusal—"I hate it. I won't go on"—signals her resignation and inability to fully integrate. The car accident she experiences is not just a physical mishap but a symbolic manifestation of her cultural collision. The policeman's demand for a license she doesn't possess further underscores her sense of illegitimacy in this new world, reinforcing her status as an outsider.

The illusion of home is another critical theme in the story. Mrs. Sen's apartment, with its plastic-covered lamps and carefully stored saris, resembles a museum of her unfulfilled life. These saris, unworn and preserved like relics, symbolize a performative identity she can no longer access. Her lament—"They think I live in a palace"—critiques the idealized image of immigrant success perpetuated by those back in India, who remain unaware of her loneliness and struggle. This illusion is further emphasized through the contrast with Eliot's mother, whose practical, Western attire ("cuffed beige shorts") represents American pragmatism, alienating Mrs. Sen even more as her vibrant saris mark her as an outsider.

Despite their differences, Eliot and Mrs. Sen share a bond rooted in dislocation. Though American, Eliot experiences his own form of loneliness, with a mother who is emotionally absent—pouring wine after work and retreating to smoke cigarettes, leaving him to fend for himself. This mirrors Mrs. Sen's yearning for connection, revealing dislocation as a universal condition. The irony lies in Mrs. Sen's pity for Eliot's separation from his mother, unaware that his home life is just as fractured as her own.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" is particularly relevant to Mrs. Sen's experience. She exists in a liminal state, neither fully Indian nor American, unable to reconcile her past with her present. Her eventual surrender—taking the bus instead of driving, eating clam cakes instead of traditional Indian meals—signifies a painful compromise rather than acceptance.

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

Lahiri's story resists tidy resolutions, as seen in the bus ride where Mrs. Sen is chastised for the smell of her fish, a moment that captures the immigrant's perpetual otherness.

In its quiet devastation, "Mrs. Sen's" serves as a haunting exploration of diaspora's emotional toll. Lahiri reveals that belonging is not a destination but an unresolved journey, where home remains a distant memory and dislocation is the only constant. The story's power lies in its portrayal of Mrs. Sen's unsaid grief—a woman who, like the vegetables she chops, is reduced to fragments in a world that cannot accommodate her whole self. Through her, Lahiri illuminates the universal struggle of navigating identity in an unfamiliar land.

> "By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables. He thought of his own home, just five miles away, and the young married couple who waved from time to time as they jogged at sunset along the shore." (Lahiri, 125)

This evocative moment in "Mrs. Sen's" powerfully encapsulates the story's central themes of diaspora and dislocation through its layered understanding of "home." When Mrs. Sen refers to home, she unmistakably means India - not her current American apartment where she mechanically performs cultural rituals like vegetable chopping to maintain some connection to her roots. This distinction reveals the profound displacement experienced by immigrants, for whom home becomes an imagined space of cultural memory rather than physical reality. Eliot's simultaneous reflection about his own home - physically close yet emotionally distant - creates a poignant parallel, suggesting dislocation manifests differently but universally. The young married couple's casual waves from their sunset jogs symbolize the superficial connections available in their new environment, where proximity doesn't guarantee belonging. Lahiri masterfully contrasts these two experiences of alienation: Mrs. Sen's stems from geographical and cultural separation from India, while Eliot's emerges from emotional distance within his own community. Together, they illustrate how the immigrant condition amplifies but doesn't uniquely possess this sense of dislocation. The waving neighbors become emblematic of the partial acceptance immigrants often encounter - acknowledged but not fully integrated, seen but not truly understood. This moment crystallizes the story's exploration of how "home" transforms for those caught between worlds, becoming either an inaccessible memory or an unfulfilled present reality, with characters left to navigate this liminal space where complete belonging remains perpetually out of reach.

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

Dr. J. Madhavi's article provides a perceptive analysis of cultural duality in Interpreter of Maladies, effectively exploring Lahiri's portrayal of immigrant identity struggles. While the thematic examination is thorough, incorporating comparative literary perspectives could strengthen its scholarly impact. Nevertheless, it offers valuable insights into Lahiri's nuanced depiction of belonging in diasporic literature.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent" poignantly captures the immigrant experience through themes of diaspora and dislocation, tracing the narrator's journey from India to England and finally to America. His initial sense of displacement is palpable in his solitary routines—eating cornflakes and milk, boiling water for tea in a thermos, and meticulously budgeting his expenses—small acts that underscore his foreignness and his attempts to impose order on an unfamiliar world. The noisy, impersonal environment of the YMCA in Cambridge amplifies his isolation, a stark contrast to the communal life he knew in Calcutta and even in London among fellow Bengali bachelors. His eventual move to Mrs. Croft's house introduces an unexpected anchor in his life. Though eccentric and imperious, Mrs. Croft, at 103 years old, becomes a figure of stability, her rigid rituals—like declaring the moon landing "splendid"—mirroring his own need for structure in a world where he feels untethered. Their relationship, though transactional, is one of mutual recognition, bridging generational and cultural divides as two outsiders navigating their own forms of loneliness.

The narrator's arranged marriage to Mala further complicates his dislocation. Their initial interactions are marked by awkwardness and emotional distance, reflecting the broader immigrant struggle to reconcile tradition with the demands of a new life. Mala's tears for her family and her rigid adherence to bridal customs—covering her head with her sari, wearing vermilion—highlight her own displacement, while the narrator's detachment underscores his reluctance to fully embrace his role as a husband. Yet, their relationship evolves through shared vulnerability, particularly in the pivotal moment in Mrs. Croft's parlor when Mala's laughter breaks the tension, forging a genuine connection. This moment symbolizes the possibility of belonging not through forced assimilation, but through mutual understanding and patience. Their eventual life together—exploring Boston, building a home, raising a son—reflects the slow, often uneasy process of making a foreign land feel like home.

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

The story's closing reflections underscore the duality of the immigrant experience. Though the narrator has achieved the American dream—a house, a family, citizenship—he remains acutely aware of the miles he has traveled and the selves he has left behind. Mrs. Croft's death, the first he mourns in America, marks the end of his fragile early chapter in this new world, yet her legacy endures in his memory. Driving down Massachusetts Avenue years later, he points out her street to his son, a gesture that encapsulates the immigrant's perpetual negotiation between past and present. His son's astonishment at the cheap rent highlights the generational divide: the narrator's struggles are inconceivable to a child of privilege, just as the moon landing was unimaginable to Mrs. Croft. Ultimately, Lahiri's story suggests that belonging is not a fixed state but a gradual, often bittersweet, process of reconciliation. The narrator's journey—from solitary boarder to husband, father, and citizen—reveals the resilience required to build a life across continents, where home is not a place but a mosaic of memory, adaptation, and quiet triumph.

> "The first morning when I came into the kitchen, she had heated up the leftovers and set a plate with a spoonful of salt on its edge on the table, assuming I would eat rice for breakfast, as most Bengali husbands did. I told her cereal would do, and the next morning when I came into the kitchen, she had already poured the cornflakes into my bowl". (Lahiri, 201)

This poignant moment in The Third and Final Continent perfectly illustrates the subtle yet profound cultural negotiations that define the immigrant experience. When Mala prepares a traditional Bengali breakfast of rice with salt, she instinctively follows the domestic patterns of her homeland, attempting to recreate familiar rhythms in this foreign space. Her gesture reveals both her deep-rooted cultural conditioning and her earnest desire to fulfill expected wifely duties. The narrator's preference for cereal, however, immediately disrupts this expectation, exposing the quiet cultural chasm between them. His rejection of the rice isn't merely about taste - it symbolizes his prior adaptation to American norms during his solitary existence before Mala's arrival. What makes this exchange particularly revealing is Mala's silent adjustment the next morning, where she serves cereal without comment. This wordless compromise encapsulates the unspoken negotiations that characterize immigrant relationships, where cultural identities must constantly adapt and evolve. The scene beautifully captures how diaspora reshapes even the most mundane domestic routines, turning something as simple as breakfast into a meaningful cultural negotiation. Through these small, everyday moments, Lahiri shows how immigrant identities are constantly

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

being remade - not through grand gestures, but through countless minor adjustments that gradually transform both individuals and their relationship to each other and their new home. The progression from rice to cereal mirrors the larger arc of their marriage, moving from initial dislocation toward mutual understanding and, eventually, genuine connection.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's The Third and Final Continent masterfully explores the immigrant experience through themes of dislocation, adaptation, and the quiet negotiation of identity. The narrator's journey—from solitary boarder to husband and father—reveals how belonging is not a fixed state but a gradual process shaped by small, everyday compromises. Through symbolic details like the shift from rice to cereal, Lahiri illustrates how cultural identity evolves in diaspora, where traditions are neither fully abandoned nor rigidly preserved, but carefully recalibrated. Ultimately, the story suggests that home is not found in geography, but in the fragile, resilient connections forged between people navigating the space between past and present, memory and reinvention.

References:

1. Davidson, L., & Vidhya, A. (2022). Transformation of identity in diaspora: A study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *The Interpreter of Maladies*. *Special Education*, *1*(43).
2. Gupta, A. (2016). Loss of identity, clash of culture & displacement in *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Creative Launcher*, *1*(4), 24–28.
3. Lahiri, J. (1999). *Interpreter of maladies: Stories*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
4. Madhavi, J. (2024). Cultural duality: Exploring identity and belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. *SP Publications*, *6*(8).
5. Rahmatullah, M., Rafi, S. M. A., & Mannan, M. Negotiating diasporic identities and female subjectivities: A critical intersectionality approach to Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies".
6. Singh, J., & Rani, K. (2023). Diaspora experience in fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri. *Diaspora*.
7. Sevilla, J. E. (2019). Transnational spaces of identity recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. *Journal of English Studies*, *17*, 103–125.

@2026 International Council for Education Research and Training 2026, Vol. 04, Issue 02, 396-403
ISSN: 2960-0006 DOI: https: https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/9218

8. Kumar, Y., & Sushil, G. Cultural identity struggle in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Received: May 25, 2025

Accepted: Nov 30, 2025

Published: May 12, 2026