



# Nostalgic Reflections and Emotional Resolution in Jhumpa Lahiri's Works

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## Abstract

Nostalgia, a profound emotional longing for the past, frequently emerges as a key theme within diasporic literature. It encapsulates a sentimental desire to reconnect with moments of personal happiness tied to places, relationships, or cultural identity. This paper investigates the nuanced manifestations of nostalgia in Jhumpa Lahiri's seminal works—*The Namesake*, *The Lowland*, and *Interpreter of Maladies*. Drawing on Lahiri's own experiences of cultural displacement and identity negotiation, this study examines how nostalgia functions as both a psychological burden and a catalyst for emotional resolution among diasporic characters. Through this analysis, the paper explores how Lahiri's narratives portray the struggles of homesickness, alienation, and cultural assimilation, alongside the characters' search for belonging and identity reconstruction in the context of migration.

**Key Words:** Nostalgia, Identity, Immigrant, Displacement, Diaspora, Assimilation, Home-sickness

## Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's literature provides a compelling lens through which to view the immigrant experience, particularly the emotional tensions between an idealized past and an often-challenging present. Her narratives evoke a persistent sense of nostalgia that reflects her characters' struggles with cultural displacement, identity fragmentation, and the insider-outsider dichotomy. Lahiri's characters frequently inhabit a dual temporal space: an internal, subjective reality shaped by memory and longing, and an external, sociocultural environment marked by alienation and adaptation. This duality is central to understanding the psychological landscape of her diasporic protagonists, whose connections to Indian heritage remain a potent force shaping their self-perception and social interactions.

## Theoretical Framework: Nostalgia, Home, and Belonging

Nostalgia, traditionally viewed as melancholic reminiscence, has been reinterpreted by contemporary scholars as a complex emotional state that can simultaneously evoke loss and hope. It is inseparable from the concepts of home and belonging, each interwoven within the diasporic imagination. "Home" transcends physical locality; it embodies emotional security, shared cultural history, and collective memory (Waetjen, 2004). The disruption of

this anchored identity through migration produces a condition of "unhomeliness," wherein migrants experience both a psychic and social dislocation.

For diasporic Indians, nostalgia is particularly acute, manifesting as an "imaginary homeland" forged through fragmented memories and idealized cultural symbols (Naipaul, 1987). The tension between the emotional pull of the homeland and the lived realities of the host culture engenders a persistent state of liminality, exacerbated by racial and cultural marginalization. The host society's resistance to full assimilation perpetuates this condition, making nostalgia a defining feature of diasporic identity (Brah, 1996).

## Nostalgia in Jhumpa Lahiri's Works

Lahiri's transnational identity—born in Britain, raised in the United States, and rooted in Indian heritage—infuses her writing with authentic reflections on the immigrant psyche. She candidly acknowledges the emotional complexities of growing up between worlds, with India perceived as an unattainable "true home" and the United States as a place of belonging yet cultural estrangement. This personal experience informs the emotional texture of her characters, who grapple with nostalgia as both a source of pain and a means of preserving cultural memory.

### Nostalgia in *The Namesake*

In *The Namesake*, the themes of loneliness, isolation, and nostalgia for one's homeland are central to the immigrant experience portrayed through Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. These feelings surface intensely when the couple moves to Cambridge, Massachusetts. However, it is Ashima who suffers more deeply, as she is confined mostly to the home while Ashoke engages with colleagues and friends outside.

Ashima feels disconnected from her new environment and longs for her life in India. She often finds herself alone in their small, uncomfortable apartment, thinking about her family and friends in Calcutta. To stay connected, she reads old letters and rereads the same Bengali novels she brought from home. Even her attempts to recreate Indian snacks with American ingredients feel lacking, as they don't carry the same aroma or satisfaction.

Motherhood doesn't bring her joy at first due to her emotional detachment and sense of isolation. She deeply misses her family during her pregnancy and childbirth, imagining scenes from her home in Calcutta to comfort herself. Despite being surrounded by other pregnant women in the hospital, Ashima feels alone. She compares the impersonal experience in the U.S. hospital with the loving care she would have received from her extended family in India.

Ashima's cultural background makes it hard for her to adjust to American life. She sticks to her traditional clothing and food, avoiding full participation in American culture. Similarly, Ashoke also experiences nostalgia and homesickness. His choice to return to India to find a wife and his fondness for the Russian author Gogol reflect his deep connection to his heritage. Surviving a train accident in India shaped his worldview, and he sees Gogol as a symbol of survival and connection to home.

Despite building a life in America, Ashoke always dreamed of returning to India, a plan cut short by his untimely death. Still, he embodies the immigrant who turns nostalgia into strength, using it to move forward. The Gangulis initially visit India frequently, but as they settle down, these visits become less frequent. Yet, whenever they return, they regain a sense of belonging that their life in America lacks. Gogol and Sonia notice how confident and vibrant their parents become in Calcutta, a contrast to their reserved life in the U.S. Their homes in America reflect their longing for India. Ashima decorates their home with a painting made by her father, preserving a piece of her past. Even second-generation immigrants like Moushumi express their cultural ties through home décor that includes Indian textiles and symbols like Nataraj.

Over time, nostalgia shifts into adaptation. Ashima slowly becomes more independent and confident, adopting aspects of American life while still holding on to her roots. She never openly complains about missing India,

choosing instead to quietly manage her emotions. To combat their isolation, Ashoke and Ashima form a close-knit Bengali community. Ashima keeps a detailed address book of every Indian they meet, taking pride in their shared cultural bond. These relationships give them comfort and help recreate a sense of home through social gatherings and cultural celebrations.

After Ashoke's death, Ashima decides to divide her time between India and America, reflecting her in-between identity. Lahiri captures her sense of dislocation by describing her as a woman "without borders," belonging everywhere and nowhere. For Ashima, Calcutta only felt like home when she was far from it; now that she's returning, it feels strangely unfamiliar. She is overwhelmed by this shift and uncertain of where she truly belongs. Despite thirty-three years of longing for India, she realizes she will now miss her life in America—the job, the friendships, the memories with her husband.

### **Nostalgia in *The Lowland***

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* delves deeply into the emotional landscapes of its central characters, particularly focusing on themes of loneliness, isolation, guilt, and a persistent longing for the past. The novel captures the nostalgic emotions felt by Indian immigrants, especially first-generation Bengalis, as they grapple with assimilation in a foreign land while yearning for the comfort of their homeland. Despite their efforts to adapt to American society, these characters carry a lasting emotional burden—one shaped by their disconnection from the people, culture, and traditions they left behind.

The protagonist, Subhash, embodies this duality of experience. Upon his arrival in America, he experiences cultural alienation and frequently reminisces about his childhood in Tollygunge, Calcutta. In letters to his brother Udayan, he recalls scenes from their youth: "When I visit the mudflats, it takes me home. I think of the lowland, of paddy fields" (Lahiri 35). His memories of sneaking into the Tolly Club with Udayan and the contrast between the bustling chaos of Calcutta and the stillness of Rhode Island highlight the emotional dissonance he experiences. He struggles to reconcile the two worlds, remarking on how the vastness of America leaves no space for his past: "In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside... He was the sole link" (Lahiri 48).

Religious and cultural traditions further intensify Subhash's nostalgia. Festivals such as Durga Puja, which hold significant importance in Bengali culture, are notably absent from his life in America. As Durga Puja approaches, he feels a deep urge to return home: "As he was first getting to know America, the absence of the holiday hadn't mattered to him, but now he wanted to go home" (Lahiri 76). These moments underscore how cultural displacement compounds his emotional longing.

Subhash's grief over Udayan's death also contributes to his ongoing sense of nostalgia. Although he never openly expresses his sorrow, the memory of his brother shadows his life in America, especially in his relationships with Udayan's widow, Gauri, and their daughter Bela. Subhash's emotional distance from Gauri stems in part from this unresolved grief. As Siddhartha Deb observes, "Subhash... finds in the beaches of Rhode Island a resemblance to the delta lowlands surrounding Calcutta," suggesting that the American landscape becomes a mirror for his memories (Deb).

Gauri, too, is marked by a powerful sense of nostalgia, although her response differs from Subhash's. Following Udayan's death, she seeks refuge in America, hoping that physical distance will erase emotional pain. Yet, she is frequently haunted by memories of her life in Calcutta. At one point, she places her cheek against a wooden table and inhales deeply, recalling the scent of furniture from her bedroom in Tollygunge—a symbolic moment of longing and memory (Lahiri 183). Her love for Udayan is deeply entangled with anger and grief: "Anger... amounted to her love for Udayan," Lahiri writes, highlighting the emotional complexity of her nostalgia (Lahiri 198).

This unresolved emotional turmoil prevents Gauri from fully engaging with her new life in America. She struggles to bond with Bela and distances herself from Subhash. Ultimately, she chooses to leave both, in pursuit of personal peace, though this decision brings more guilt than relief. In later years, she reflects on the emotional harm she caused: “She understood now what it meant to walk away from her child... It was a crime worse than anything Udayan had committed” (Lahiri 275). Her nostalgic attachment to her past—both the love and the trauma—prevents her from forming a new identity free from regret.

Cultural and racial biases in America further complicate the characters' experiences. Gauri, for instance, is misidentified as a servant by a driver due to her appearance and accent, an event that symbolizes the subtle ways in which immigrants are othered. Such encounters reinforce her feelings of displacement and her longing for a place where she once belonged. Her choice to remain an Indian citizen, never fully embracing American citizenship, reflects her emotional resistance to complete assimilation: “She was still a green-card holder... But she had never returned to India” (Lahiri 302).

Lahiri also touches on historical nostalgia in the context of political movements. The Naxalite uprising, which is central to the novel, stems in part from peasants' longing for control over land they had lost. This historical background deepens the personal nostalgia experienced by the characters, linking their emotional states to broader socio-political contexts.

In *The Lowland*, nostalgia is not merely a sentimental attachment to the past; it is a psychological force that shapes identity, relationships, and belonging. Lahiri portrays characters whose lives are defined by their inability to escape memory and who struggle to reconcile their past with their present. Through Subhash and Gauri, the novel powerfully illustrates the emotional cost of migration and the enduring pull of homeland and history.

### **Nostalgia in *Interpreter of Maladies***

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection of nine short stories, she poignantly captures the emotional disconnect between one's sense of belonging and their physical place of residence. A recurring theme throughout the collection is the diasporic experience—marked by a longing for the homeland, the erosion of native culture, and the reconstruction of “home” in a foreign land. Lahiri portrays nostalgia as a defining aspect of the diasporic condition. Rather than expressing a desire to return to India, her characters strive to recreate a feeling of home in America. This effort is particularly evident among the female characters, who play a central role in preserving cultural identity and nurturing a sense of belonging. They do so by clinging to memory, practicing religious traditions, preparing traditional food, and forming social networks—all strategies that help sustain familiar customs in an unfamiliar environment.

This cultural preservation often manifests as a quiet resistance to assimilating into American life. These characters, instead of fully embracing their host culture, consciously maintain aspects of their native lifestyle—be it through clothing, dietary choices, social customs, or religious practices. Their persistent attachment to the past, often fueled by fond memories, complicates their integration into American society. As Vijay Mishra notes, diasporic individuals remain emotionally tethered to their homeland—*desh*—and view other lands as *videsh*. They carry their homeland with them, not in physical form, but through memories, stories, and meaningful objects.

In *A Temporary Matter*, the emotional distance between Shobha and Shukumar triggers a sense of nostalgia for the early, happier days of their relationship. Lahiri notes how Shukumar reflects on the intimacy they once shared, such as when she used to smile at him or whisper his name during rare moments of closeness.

In *Mrs. Sen's*, the title character deeply misses her childhood and the warmth of her extended family back in India. Her memories of the crowded, lively family home stand in sharp contrast to the solitude of her life in the U.S. To fill the void, she looks after Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, and through his eyes, we see her attempt to recreate Indian life within the confines of her apartment. Though she tries to adjust, she repeatedly emphasizes,

“Everything is there [in India],” reflecting her inability to fully connect with American society. One way she clings to home is through audio recordings of family members' voices, reliving each familiar accent and story. She shares with Eliot tales of communal food preparation and celebrations in India, demonstrating how memory sustains her identity. Her homesickness is further intensified when she receives letters from home, reminding her of the growing distance between her and her loved ones. The joy she feels upon receiving news from her family—and the vivid descriptions of her Indian cooking—serve as emotional links to her homeland. Lahiri describes Mrs. Sen's nostalgia as rooted in sensory memory, such as the smell of her sari infused with cumin and mothballs.

Lahiri has acknowledged that her depiction of nostalgia is influenced by her own upbringing as a child of immigrants. She states, “I feel that I have inherited a sense of that loss because it was too palpable all the time I was growing up, the sense of what my parents sacrificed in moving to the United States.”

In *When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine*, Lahiri explores the theme of homesickness through Mr. Pirzada, a visiting scholar from Pakistan who regularly dines with Lilia's family. Through young Lilia's perspective, Lahiri conveys the emotional isolation of expatriates—physically present in America, but emotionally tied to their homeland. Lilia becomes aware of her parents' own quiet detachment from American life. Despite being settled and secure, they remain emotionally connected to India, even recalling once-inconvenient things like power outages as nostalgic memories. Food becomes a key medium for cultural continuity, as shown in the detailed preparation of Bengali dishes in their home. Mr. Pirzada's presence allows Lilia's family to engage more freely with their cultural identity—through language, food, and conversation. He, more than others, embodies deep nostalgia. His constant checking of a watch set to Dacca time symbolizes his mental and emotional presence in his homeland. For Lilia, this habit illustrates the time difference not just in hours but in emotional reality: “...life was being lived in Dacca first... Our meals, our actions, were only a shadow of what had already happened there.”

*A Real Durwan* similarly highlights nostalgia through Boori Ma, an elderly sweeper who clings to stories of her former luxurious life, though the truth of her past is ambiguous. Her recollections—feasting on goat meat twice a week, owning property with a fish pond—contrast with her present hardship. Separated from her home in East Pakistan and now living in Calcutta post-partition, she finds solace in imagining her past grandeur. As Paromita Chakravarti puts it, Boori Ma “has no home but in memory.”

## Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's literary oeuvre intricately maps the emotional terrain of nostalgia within the diasporic experience, revealing its dual nature as both a source of pain and a vehicle for resilience. Through her nuanced portrayal of immigrant lives, Lahiri elucidates the persistent tensions between memory and present reality, loss and adaptation, alienation and belonging. Her characters' journeys underscore the psychological complexity of migration and the enduring human quest for identity and home. Ultimately, Lahiri's works contribute to a richer understanding of nostalgia not merely as longing but as a dynamic force shaping diasporic consciousness and emotional resolution.

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