
**BETWEEN HOME AND NOWHERE: IDENTITY CRISIS AND
EMOTIONAL DISLOCATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *WHEREABOUTS***

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction has consistently explored the complexities of migration, cultural identity, alienation, and belonging. Her novel *Whereabouts* presented the emotional journey of an unnamed female protagonist who experienced psychological and cultural displacement while attempting to negotiate her relationship with the past and present. The present study examined the representation of identity crisis and emotional dislocation in Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, focusing on the protagonist's struggle to establish a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar urban environment. The study analysed how Lahiri portrayed identity as a fluid and evolving process shaped by memories, cultural experiences, personal relationships, and emotional conflicts. Through a close textual analysis of the novel, the research explored themes of displacement, fractured self-perception, cultural alienation, loneliness, and the search for connection. The study employed a qualitative approach and examined the ways in which the protagonist's experiences reflected the complexities of living between different cultural and emotional spaces. The analysis revealed that *Whereabouts* did not present belonging as a fixed geographical condition but as an ongoing process of self-negotiation and acceptance. The protagonist's journey demonstrated that identity was continuously reconstructed through interactions between memory, environment, and personal transformation. The study concluded that Lahiri portrayed displacement not merely as a condition of loss but also as an opportunity for self-reflection and the discovery of an evolving sense of identity.

KEYWORDS: Identity Crisis; Emotional Dislocation; Belonging; Displacement; Cultural Identity; Diaspora; Jhumpa Lahiri; *Whereabouts*.

3. INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's literary works have frequently explored the complexities of identity, migration, cultural displacement, and the human desire for belonging. Her narratives often focused on individuals who existed between different cultural, emotional, and geographical spaces, experiencing conflicts between inherited traditions and contemporary realities. Through her portrayal of diasporic experiences, Lahiri examined how individuals negotiated their identities while confronting feelings of alienation and uncertainty. In *Whereabouts* (2021), Lahiri presented a deeply introspective narrative centred on an unnamed female protagonist whose emotional journey reflected the complexities of displacement, isolation, and the search for belonging.

The novel explored the life of a middle-aged woman living in an unnamed city who appeared physically settled but remained emotionally disconnected from her surroundings. Although she inhabited a familiar urban space, she experienced a profound sense of detachment from both her past and present. Her displacement was not limited to geographical movement; rather, it existed as a psychological and emotional condition in which she struggled to establish meaningful connections with people and places around her.

The protagonist's experience revealed the complexity of identity formation in a world where cultural belonging was no longer stable or permanent. She remained caught between memories of her past and the realities of her present life, unable to completely return to her former identity or fully embrace her current environment. This conflict created an identity crisis in which questions of home, selfhood, and emotional attachment became central concerns.

The present study examined how *Whereabouts* represented identity crisis and emotional dislocation through the protagonist's experiences of loneliness, cultural alienation, and fragmented self-perception. It analysed how Lahiri portrayed belonging as a dynamic and continuous process rather than a fixed state connected only to a particular geographical location. The study also explored how memories, language, relationships, and personal transformation influenced the protagonist's understanding of herself and her place in the world.

Through a close textual analysis of *Whereabouts*, this research investigated the relationship between displacement and identity construction. It argued that Lahiri's novel presented

emotional dislocation not merely as a condition of isolation but also as a journey towards self-awareness and acceptance. The protagonist's search for belonging ultimately revealed that identity was constantly evolving and shaped by the ongoing negotiation between past experiences and present realities.

Research Problem

The study addressed the problem of how individuals experienced identity uncertainty when they existed between conflicting cultural, emotional, and social spaces. It examined how displacement affected the protagonist's perception of home, belonging, and self-identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the representation of identity crisis and emotional dislocation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*.
2. To examine how displacement influenced the protagonist's understanding of home and belonging.
3. To explore the relationship between memory, cultural identity, and self-perception.
4. To investigate how Lahiri presented belonging as an evolving process rather than a fixed condition.

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*. The novel was examined through the theoretical perspectives of diaspora studies, identity theory, and concepts of belonging. The analysis focused on major themes such as displacement, alienation, fractured identity, emotional isolation, and the protagonist's search for connection.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Diaspora Theory and the Concept of Displacement

Diaspora theory provided an important framework for understanding the experiences of individuals who lived between different cultural, geographical, and emotional spaces. The concept of diaspora was not limited only to physical migration but also included psychological experiences of separation, alienation, and the continuous negotiation of identity. In diasporic narratives, individuals often experienced a sense of being positioned between the culture of origin and the culture of the present environment.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, displacement was represented not merely as a geographical condition but as an emotional and psychological experience. The protagonist lived in an unnamed city where she felt disconnected despite being physically present. Her inability to develop meaningful attachments with her surroundings reflected a deeper form of internal displacement. She remained emotionally suspended between memories of her past and the realities of her present life.

The novel therefore reflected a significant aspect of diasporic identity—the experience of being “between worlds.” The protagonist neither completely belonged to the cultural memories of her past nor fully integrated into the social environment of her present. This condition created a continuous negotiation of identity, where belonging remained uncertain and constantly changing.

4.2 Identity Theory: Identity as Fluid and Negotiated

The study also employed the concept of identity as a fluid and evolving process rather than a fixed or permanent category. Modern identity theories suggest that an individual's sense of self is shaped by various factors, including cultural background, social relationships, memories, experiences, and changing environments. In *Whereabouts*, the protagonist's identity was shown as fragmented and constantly reconstructed. She struggled to reconcile different aspects of herself—the cultural values inherited from her past, the expectations of her present environment, and her personal desires. Her inability to fully identify with either space resulted in a fractured sense of self. Lahiri presented identity as a process of continuous negotiation. The protagonist's experiences demonstrated that identity was not something permanently achieved but something that evolved through personal reflection and interaction with the world. Her journey revealed that individuals often carried multiple identities that interacted, conflicted, and transformed over time.

4.3 Concept of Home and Belonging

The theoretical understanding of home and belonging formed another major foundation of this study. Traditionally, home was understood as a physical location associated with cultural roots, family, and personal history. However, contemporary literary studies viewed home as an emotional and psychological space created through memory, relationships, and a sense of connection. In *Whereabouts*, the protagonist questioned the meaning of home because neither her remembered past nor her present surroundings provided complete emotional security. Her homeland existed mainly through memories, while her current city remained emotionally distant. Thus, home became less about a geographical place and more about an internal search for stability and acceptance. The novel ultimately suggested that belonging was not a

permanent destination but an ongoing process of self-understanding. The protagonist gradually recognised that acceptance came not from finding a fixed place but from embracing the changing nature of her identity.

4.4 Application of Theoretical Framework to the Study

The theoretical framework helped analyse the protagonist's journey through three interconnected perspectives:

1. Displacement – to understand her emotional and cultural alienation.
2. Identity Formation – to examine her fragmented and evolving sense of self.
3. Belonging and Home – to explore her search for emotional connection and acceptance.

Through these perspectives, the study examined how Lahiri represented the modern individual's struggle to locate a sense of belonging in a constantly changing world.

5. Displacement and the Quest for Home

5.1 Physical and Emotional Displacement

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, displacement emerged as both a physical and psychological experience. The protagonist's life in an unnamed city reflected a condition of emotional distance rather than simple geographical separation. Although she had established a stable physical existence in the city, she remained disconnected from her surroundings and experienced a persistent feeling of not belonging. Her displacement was therefore not created only by movement from one place to another but by her inability to develop a meaningful emotional relationship with the place she inhabited.

The city became a symbolic representation of the protagonist's inner isolation. The crowded streets, public spaces, and everyday interactions did not provide her with familiarity or comfort. Instead, she remained an observer rather than an active participant in the social world around her. Her physical presence among others contrasted with her emotional absence, revealing the psychological consequences of displacement. She experienced a separation between herself and the environment, where the city existed as a place she occupied but never completely possessed.

The protagonist's displacement also emerged from her inability to reconnect with the past. Although her memories of her homeland represented an important part of her identity, they gradually lost their ability to provide emotional stability. The past remained significant, but it could no longer function as a complete source of belonging. Similarly, the present city failed to offer the emotional connection she desired. This tension placed her between two incomplete worlds, creating a continuous state of uncertainty.

Thus, Lahiri presented displacement as an internal condition in which an individual could feel disconnected even without experiencing physical migration. The protagonist's experience demonstrated that alienation was not always produced by geographical distance but also by emotional and psychological separation from places, people, and memories.

5.2 The Search for Home Beyond Geography

The concept of home occupied a central position in the protagonist's journey throughout *Whereabouts*. Traditionally, home was associated with a particular geographical location, cultural heritage, and emotional security. However, Lahiri challenged this conventional understanding by portraying home as an unstable and evolving concept. For the protagonist, neither her remembered past nor her current environment provided a complete sense of belonging.

Her memories of the past created a complicated relationship with home. While memories initially appeared to preserve her connection with her cultural identity, they also reminded her of the distance between who she had been and who she had become. The homeland existed as a remembered space rather than a living reality. As a result, nostalgia became both a source of comfort and a reminder of loss.

At the same time, the city where she lived represented a space of uncertainty. Although it was the place of her everyday existence, she struggled to establish emotional attachments there. Her experiences suggested that physical residence alone could not create belonging. A place became meaningful only when it provided emotional connection, recognition, and a sense of identity.

Through the protagonist's experiences, Lahiri suggested that home was not necessarily a fixed location but an emotional state created through self-understanding and acceptance. The search for home gradually transformed into a search for inner stability rather than a search for a particular geographical space.

5.3 Internal Displacement and Self-Discovery

The protagonist's displacement ultimately became a journey of self-exploration. Her inability to belong completely to either her past or present forced her to examine the different aspects of her identity. She confronted the tension between inherited cultural values and the realities of her contemporary life, creating an internal struggle regarding who she was and where she belonged.

This internal displacement shaped her understanding of identity. She recognised that she was no longer the same person connected entirely to her past, but she also had not fully adapted to

her present environment. The emotional space between these two identities created uncertainty, but it also encouraged self-reflection.

The protagonist gradually understood that belonging could not be achieved only through external acceptance. Instead, it required an internal process of reconciliation with her own contradictions. Her journey revealed that identity was continuously shaped by experiences, memories, and personal transformation.

Therefore, *Whereabouts* presented displacement not only as a painful experience of alienation but also as a transformative process. The protagonist's search for home became a deeper search for self-awareness, where belonging emerged through acceptance of change rather than through attachment to a single place.

6. Cultural Identity in Flux

6.1 Conflict Between Heritage and Modernity

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, cultural identity was represented as an evolving and unstable experience shaped by the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary realities. The protagonist's struggle was not simply related to geographical displacement but also emerged from the difficulty of negotiating between the cultural values associated with her past and the social expectations of the modern city where she lived.

The protagonist carried the influence of her cultural heritage, which had shaped her understanding of family, relationships, belonging, and personal identity. However, the urban environment in which she lived operated according to different values, emphasising individuality, independence, and emotional distance. This contrast created a conflict between the identity she had inherited and the identity she was expected to construct in her present surroundings.

The tension between these two cultural spaces produced a feeling of uncertainty. The protagonist could not completely reject the values connected to her past, yet she also could not fully return to the world from which those values originated. Her cultural heritage continued to influence her thoughts and emotions, but it no longer provided the complete sense of security and belonging it once offered.

Lahiri therefore presented cultural identity as a space of negotiation rather than a fixed category. The protagonist's experience demonstrated that individuals living between cultural worlds often develop hybrid identities, where different influences coexist, conflict, and transform over time.

6.2 Cultural Alienation and the Experience of Otherness

The protagonist's cultural alienation emerged from her inability to establish a complete emotional connection with the society around her. Although she participated in the everyday life of the city, she remained psychologically distant from its people, customs, and social rhythms. The environment around her appeared unfamiliar, creating a persistent feeling of being an outsider.

This alienation was not caused by complete cultural separation but by a subtle sense of disconnection. The protagonist understood the world around her, yet she struggled to feel emotionally integrated into it. Her experiences revealed that belonging required more than physical presence; it required recognition, emotional attachment, and a sense of shared identity.

The protagonist's cultural uncertainty also reflected the broader experience of individuals who existed between multiple identities. She was unable to completely identify with her cultural past, but she also felt excluded from the present world she inhabited. This created a condition of "in-betweenness," where identity remained constantly unsettled.

Through this portrayal, Lahiri explored how cultural displacement affected an individual's emotional life. The protagonist's alienation demonstrated that cultural identity was not only connected to traditions and practices but also to feelings of acceptance, familiarity, and emotional belonging.

6.3 Language as a Marker of Identity and Disconnection

Language played an important role in shaping the protagonist's relationship with identity and belonging. In *Whereabouts*, language represented more than a medium of communication; it functioned as a connection between personal memory, cultural history, and emotional expression.

The protagonist experienced difficulty in expressing her inner emotions within the linguistic environment of her present life. Although she could communicate effectively, she felt that language no longer carried the same emotional depth and cultural meaning that it once possessed. As a result, communication became incomplete, reflecting her larger struggle with belonging.

Her experience suggested that language was closely connected to identity formation. The language associated with her past represented emotional familiarity and cultural memory, while the language of her present environment represented adaptation and survival. The distance between these linguistic experiences reflected the larger distance between her past and present identities.

Thus, Lahiri used language as a symbol of cultural displacement. The protagonist's inability to fully express her emotional world revealed how individuals could feel isolated even when they possessed the ability to communicate.

6.4 Memory, Nostalgia, and the Construction of Identity

Memory played a significant role in shaping the protagonist's understanding of herself. Her memories of the past preserved her connection with her cultural background, but they also highlighted the distance between her former identity and her present existence.

The protagonist's memories functioned both as a source of comfort and as a reminder of loss. While they allowed her to maintain a connection with her past, they also prevented her from completely embracing her present reality. The past became a space that she could remember but could not fully return to.

This relationship with memory contributed to her fragmented identity. She existed between remembrance and reality, unable to completely abandon the past or fully accept the present. Her identity was therefore shaped by a continuous dialogue between what she had experienced and what she was becoming.

Lahiri's representation of memory suggested that identity was not formed only through present circumstances but also through personal histories and emotional experiences. The protagonist's journey demonstrated that individuals carried their past within themselves, even while adapting to new environments.

6.5 Cultural Identity as an Ongoing Negotiation

The protagonist's cultural identity remained constantly in motion throughout *Whereabouts*. Rather than presenting identity as something permanent and unchanging, Lahiri portrayed it as a continuous process of adjustment and reconstruction.

The protagonist gradually recognised that belonging did not require complete attachment to one cultural space or complete rejection of another. Instead, identity involved accepting contradictions and negotiating between different aspects of the self.

Her journey revealed that cultural identity was shaped through interaction between memory, environment, relationships, and personal growth. The struggle between past and present ultimately became a process through which she developed a deeper understanding of herself.

Therefore, *Whereabouts* presented cultural identity as fluid, complex, and continuously evolving. Lahiri demonstrated that living between cultures could create uncertainty but could also lead to greater self-awareness and a broader understanding of belonging.

7. Isolation, Connection, and the Desire for Belonging

7.1 Emotional Isolation in Urban Spaces

In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*, emotional isolation emerged as one of the most significant aspects of the protagonist's experience. Although she lived in a populated urban environment surrounded by people, she remained psychologically detached from those around her. The novel presented loneliness not as a result of physical separation but as an emotional condition in which an individual failed to establish meaningful connections with others.

The protagonist's daily life consisted of regular interactions with colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers; however, these encounters rarely developed into deeper relationships. She participated in the social life of the city but remained an outsider within it. Her physical closeness to others contrasted with her emotional distance, creating a sense of invisibility and isolation.

Lahiri used the urban setting as a representation of modern emotional disconnection. The city appeared crowded and active, yet it failed to provide the protagonist with intimacy or belonging. The fast-paced nature of urban life created relationships that were often temporary and superficial, intensifying her feelings of loneliness.

The protagonist's isolation therefore reflected a broader human experience—the paradox of feeling alone despite being surrounded by people. Lahiri suggested that belonging depended not on physical proximity but on emotional understanding and genuine human connection.

7.2 Superficial Relationships and Failed Connections

Throughout *Whereabouts*, the protagonist attempted to form relationships with people around her, but these interactions frequently remained incomplete and emotionally unsatisfying. Her conversations with colleagues, neighbours, and strangers provided temporary moments of contact but failed to overcome the deeper emotional distance she experienced.

The relationships in the novel often remained at the level of social obligation rather than genuine emotional exchange. The protagonist communicated with others, but she felt that these interactions did not allow her to reveal her complete self. As a result, every encounter reinforced her awareness of isolation rather than reducing it.

This inability to establish meaningful relationships reflected her larger struggle with belonging. She desired recognition and understanding, yet she found herself unable to communicate the complexity of her inner experiences. The emotional gap between herself and others became another form of displacement.

Lahiri portrayed these failed connections as a reflection of modern relationships, where individuals often remain connected socially but disconnected emotionally. The protagonist's

experience revealed that companionship alone could not eliminate loneliness unless it was accompanied by empathy and emotional intimacy.

7.3 The Desire to Be Seen and Understood

The protagonist's search for belonging was deeply connected to her desire to be understood by others. Beyond simple companionship, she longed for relationships where her emotional struggles, memories, and identity conflicts could be recognised.

Her loneliness originated not only from the absence of people but from the absence of meaningful understanding. She felt that others could not access her internal world, creating a barrier between herself and those around her. This desire for emotional recognition became a central part of her journey.

The protagonist's longing for connection reflected her struggle with self-identity. She wanted others to understand her because she herself was attempting to understand the contradictions within her own identity. Her search for external connection was therefore also a search for internal clarity.

Lahiri suggested that the human desire for belonging was closely connected with the need to be acknowledged. The protagonist's experiences demonstrated that true belonging required not only acceptance by society but also a deeper understanding of oneself.

7.4 Introspection: Refuge and Isolation

The protagonist's introspective nature played an important role in shaping her emotional experience. Much of the narrative focused on her thoughts, memories, observations, and reflections about her existence. This self-reflection allowed her to examine her identity and understand her emotional conflicts.

However, introspection also intensified her isolation. While reflection helped her analyse her experiences, it frequently separated her further from the people around her. She became increasingly absorbed in her internal world, making it difficult to establish external relationships.

This dual nature of introspection revealed the complexity of her emotional condition. Her inner world became both a place of comfort and a source of loneliness. Through this conflict, Lahiri explored the difficulty of balancing self-awareness with human connection.

The protagonist's isolation was therefore not merely imposed by external circumstances; it was also connected to her internal struggle to understand herself and her place in the world.

7.5 Belonging as Self-Understanding

The protagonist's search for connection gradually transformed into a deeper search for self-understanding. Throughout the novel, she realised that belonging could not be achieved only

through relationships with others. It also required reconciliation with her own fragmented identity.

Her attempts to connect with others, even when unsuccessful, contributed to her personal growth. Each experience forced her to confront her expectations, fears, and emotional limitations. Gradually, she began to understand that belonging was not simply about being accepted by others but about accepting herself.

Thus, Lahiri presented belonging as both a social and personal process. The protagonist's journey demonstrated that genuine connection began with an understanding of one's own identity and acceptance of personal complexity.

7.6 Conclusion of the Section

In *Whereabouts*, Jhumpa Lahiri portrayed isolation and connection as interconnected experiences. The protagonist's loneliness emerged from her inability to establish meaningful emotional bonds, yet this loneliness also encouraged self-reflection and personal transformation.

Her search for connection revealed that belonging was not achieved merely through physical presence or social interaction. Instead, it required emotional recognition, self-acceptance, and the ability to embrace the changing nature of identity. The novel ultimately suggested that the journey towards belonging was inseparable from the journey towards understanding oneself.

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