

## **Negotiating the “Home-Making” Dilemma: A Comparative Study of Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri and Mohsin Hamid**

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### **Abstract**

Diasporic literature has increasingly become one of the defining literary modes of the contemporary global age, reflecting the complex experiences of migration, displacement, hybridity, and identity formation. Among the most compelling voices in this tradition are Jhumpa Lahiri and Mohsin Hamid, whose works explore the emotional, cultural, and existential dilemmas of constructing “home” in unfamiliar geographies. While Lahiri’s fiction often focuses on intimate domestic dislocations among South Asian immigrants in America, Hamid’s novels examine migration within broader global structures shaped by capitalism, war, nationalism, and postcolonial instability. Yet both writers interrogate the persistent tension between belonging and estrangement that defines diasporic consciousness.

This paper undertakes a comparative study of diaspora and the “home-making” dilemma in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies* alongside Hamid’s *Exit West* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. It argues that both authors redefine home not as a fixed geographical entity but as a fluid emotional and psychological negotiation shaped by memory, language, mobility, and cultural fragmentation. Their works reveal that diasporic identity exists in a liminal space between nostalgia and adaptation, inheritance and reinvention.

The paper further contends that while Lahiri often portrays home-making through familial intimacy and generational tension, Hamid situates it within transnational politics and global precarity. Together, these writers illuminate the evolving nature of diaspora in the twenty-first century, where migration no longer signifies a linear movement from one nation to another but a perpetual condition of in-betweenness.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Home-making, Hybridity, Cultural Identity, Migration

### **Introduction**

Migration has become one of the defining experiences of modernity. Wars, colonial histories, globalization, economic inequalities, and technological transformations have produced unprecedented movements of people across borders. As a result, literature increasingly reflects lives shaped by displacement, hybridity, and fragmented belonging.

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Diasporic writing occupies a particularly significant place in this landscape because it explores how individuals negotiate identity while suspended between cultures, nations, and memories.

The concept of “home” becomes central within diasporic discourse. Traditionally understood as a stable site of belonging rooted in geography, culture, and kinship, home in diasporic literature emerges instead as unstable, contested, and continually reconstructed. Migrants often inhabit liminal spaces where they are emotionally divided between inherited homelands and adopted societies. Consequently, home becomes less a physical location than a psychological and cultural process.

Among contemporary South Asian writers, Jhumpa Lahiri and Mohsin Hamid have produced some of the most nuanced explorations of this home-making dilemma. Although their literary styles differ significantly, both writers examine the emotional complexities of migration and the search for belonging in transnational contexts.

Lahiri’s fiction often focuses on Bengali immigrant families in America, depicting subtle emotional estrangements within domestic spaces. Her characters struggle with loneliness, generational conflict, cultural memory, and assimilation. In Lahiri’s work, home-making is intimate and deeply personal, shaped by food, language, rituals, and familial relationships.

Hamid, by contrast, situates diaspora within broader global and political frameworks. His novels explore migration in relation to neoliberal capitalism, terrorism, nationalism, and globalization. Yet beneath these larger political concerns lies the same existential question: where does one belong in a world marked by constant movement and instability?

This paper examines how Lahiri and Hamid negotiate the idea of home in diasporic contexts. Through comparative analysis, it argues that both authors destabilize conventional notions of national identity and belonging. Their works reveal home as a fluid, evolving condition shaped by memory, desire, mobility, and cultural negotiation.

Ultimately, the paper contends that Lahiri and Hamid transform diaspora from merely sociological phenomenon into profound existential condition. Their characters inhabit not simply foreign lands but fractured emotional landscapes where home must constantly be imagined, reconstructed, and renegotiated.

### **Diaspora, Hybridity, and the Question of Home**

Diaspora traditionally referred to the dispersal of communities from ancestral homelands, often through violence, exile, or colonization. However, contemporary diaspora studies have expanded the concept to include complex experiences of migration, transnational identity, and cultural hybridity.

Theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha emphasize the “third space” of hybridity where identities are negotiated rather than fixed. Diasporic individuals inhabit spaces between cultures, creating identities that resist singular national or cultural definitions. Similarly, Stuart Hall argues that identity is not stable essence but ongoing process shaped by history and representation.

Within this framework, home becomes deeply problematic. For migrants, home often exists simultaneously as memory, fantasy, loss, and aspiration. The homeland may become

idealized through nostalgia even as it transforms beyond recognition. Meanwhile, the host country may offer material opportunity but emotional alienation.

Diasporic literature repeatedly returns to this tension. Characters struggle to preserve cultural traditions while adapting to unfamiliar societies. Generational conflicts emerge because children of immigrants often experience belonging differently from their parents. Language itself becomes site of negotiation, carrying both intimacy and estrangement.

Lahiri and Hamid engage these concerns in distinct but complementary ways. Lahiri examines the subtle emotional textures of immigrant life, while Hamid foregrounds global mobility and political instability. Yet both reveal that home in the diasporic imagination is never singular or complete.

### **Jhumpa Lahiri and Domestic Exile**

Jhumpa Lahiri is renowned for her sensitive portrayal of immigrant lives shaped by quiet loneliness and cultural displacement. Her fiction avoids dramatic spectacle, focusing instead on intimate domestic experiences through which larger diasporic tensions emerge.

In *The Namesake*, the Ganguli family embodies the complexities of immigrant identity in America. Ashoke and Ashima migrate from Calcutta to the United States, carrying with them memories, rituals, and emotional attachments that remain difficult to reconcile with their new environment.

Ashima's experience particularly illustrates the pain of diasporic dislocation. She perceives America not as home but as unfamiliar landscape marked by isolation and cultural estrangement. Everyday activities — shopping, cooking, raising children — become reminders of absence. Lahiri writes diaspora not through grand political narratives but through ordinary emotional details.

Food, language, and rituals function as mechanisms of home-making. Bengali gatherings, traditional meals, and cultural ceremonies become attempts to preserve continuity within foreign space. Yet these practices also reveal fragility because they cannot fully recreate the homeland.

The second-generation experiences home differently. Gogol Ganguli, born in America, feels alienated both from American mainstream culture and from his Bengali heritage. His unusual name symbolizes fractured identity and cultural ambiguity. Unlike his parents, Gogol does not experience India as homeland but as inherited memory.

Lahiri thus demonstrates that diaspora transforms across generations. The immigrant generation longs nostalgically for lost home, while their children experience identity as hybrid and unstable. Home becomes negotiation rather than inheritance.

Importantly, Lahiri avoids simplistic resolutions. Neither assimilation nor cultural preservation provides complete belonging. Characters remain suspended between worlds, constructing provisional identities through relationships and memory.

### **Interpreter of Maladies and Emotional Displacement**

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri expands her exploration of diaspora through multiple narratives of emotional and cultural displacement. The stories repeatedly depict characters struggling with isolation, failed communication, and fractured intimacy.

Diaspora in Lahiri's fiction often manifests psychologically rather than geographically alone. Even within families, characters experience profound estrangement. Marriage, friendship, and parenthood become sites where cultural expectations collide with individual desires.

Stories such as "Mrs. Sen's" illustrate how migration disrupts sensory and emotional familiarity. Mrs. Sen remains emotionally anchored to India through memories of communal life, food preparation, and linguistic intimacy. America appears silent and emotionally barren by comparison.

Lahiri's attention to domestic details reveals how home is constructed through everyday practices. Cutting vegetables, writing letters, preparing meals, or speaking native languages become acts of cultural preservation. Yet these acts also underscore irretrievable loss.

Importantly, Lahiri portrays diaspora not only as suffering but as transformation. Characters gradually create hybrid forms of belonging that combine elements of multiple cultures. Identity becomes layered and evolving.

Her prose style reinforces this emotional subtlety. Lahiri writes with restraint and precision, allowing silence and small gestures to convey complex diasporic tensions. The understated nature of her narratives reflects the quiet persistence of immigrant adaptation. Ultimately, Lahiri presents home-making as deeply fragile process. Home is neither fully recoverable nor entirely attainable; it exists within memory, relationships, and moments of emotional recognition.

### **Mohsin Hamid and Globalized Diaspora**

While Lahiri focuses on intimate domestic spaces, Mohsin Hamid situates diaspora within broader global and political contexts. His fiction reflects a world shaped by neoliberal capitalism, transnational mobility, terrorism, and migration crises.

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the protagonist Changez experiences profound alienation after migrating from Pakistan to the United States. Initially seduced by American capitalism and cosmopolitan success, Changez gradually recognizes the racial and political exclusions underlying global power structures.

The novel's dramatic monologue form intensifies this existential tension. Changez narrates his story to an unnamed American listener, creating ambiguity and unease. Identity itself becomes unstable performance shaped by perception and suspicion.

For Changez, home is deeply conflicted. Pakistan represents emotional and cultural origin, yet it is also associated with political instability and postcolonial frustration. America offers opportunity and prestige but ultimately denies full belonging.

The aftermath of the September 11 attacks intensifies this exclusion. Changez becomes hyper-visible as racialized outsider. His body itself is politicized. Consequently, diaspora appears not as liberating cosmopolitanism but as precarious negotiation within unequal global systems.

Hamid critiques globalization's promise of borderless belonging. Economic mobility does not erase cultural and racial hierarchies. Migrants remain vulnerable to suspicion and exclusion, especially in moments of political crisis.

Unlike Lahiri's quieter domestic focus, Hamid foregrounds geopolitical tensions shaping diasporic identity. Yet both writers depict the emotional instability of belonging in foreign environments.

### **Exit West and the Fluidity of Home**

*Exit West* radically reimagines migration through elements of speculative fiction. The novel portrays refugees escaping war through mysterious doors that instantly transport them across borders. This magical realist device eliminates the physical journey, emphasizing instead the psychological and existential dimensions of displacement.

Nadia and Saeed migrate through multiple countries, inhabiting temporary settlements and unstable communities. Their relationship evolves as they adapt differently to displacement. Saeed remains emotionally attached to cultural and religious traditions, while Nadia embraces fluidity and reinvention.

The novel destabilizes traditional concepts of national identity. Borders become porous, migration universalized, and belonging increasingly transient. Home is no longer fixed geography but shifting emotional landscape.

Hamid suggests that contemporary existence itself is diasporic. Globalization, digital communication, and political instability have transformed mobility into defining human condition. Everyone, in some sense, inhabits unstable worlds shaped by movement and change.

Yet *Exit West* also foregrounds the emotional cost of displacement. Migration involves grief, loneliness, and transformation. Relationships fracture under pressure of adaptation. Memory becomes both refuge and burden.

Importantly, Hamid avoids portraying migrants solely as victims. His characters demonstrate resilience, creativity, and agency. They construct provisional homes through intimacy, community, and adaptability.

The novel ultimately proposes a more fluid understanding of home. Belonging emerges not through territorial permanence but through human connection and openness to transformation.

### **Language, Memory, and Cultural Inheritance**

Both Lahiri and Hamid emphasize the role of language and memory in diasporic home-making. Language carries emotional intimacy, cultural continuity, and inherited identity. At the same time, linguistic displacement intensifies alienation.

In Lahiri's fiction, Bengali often symbolizes familial intimacy and cultural preservation. Yet second-generation characters may experience ancestral languages as burdensome or unfamiliar. Linguistic hybridity reflects fractured belonging.

Hamid's prose frequently incorporates transnational rhythms and global references, reflecting contemporary cosmopolitan experience. His characters navigate multiple cultural codes simultaneously, revealing identity as performative and adaptive.

Memory functions similarly in both writers' works. Homeland memories sustain emotional continuity but may also become idealized fantasies detached from present reality. Migrants often inhabit temporal duality, emotionally divided between remembered past and uncertain present.

Importantly, both authors resist nostalgic romanticization. Return to homeland rarely resolves diasporic tension because both migrants and homelands change over time. Home exists not as static origin but evolving relationship between memory and experience.

### **Generational Conflict and Hybrid Identity**

Generational conflict constitutes another significant aspect of diasporic home-making in Lahiri and Hamid. First-generation immigrants often seek to preserve cultural traditions, while younger generations negotiate hybrid identities shaped by multiple influences.

In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke attempt to maintain Bengali customs within American society. Gogol, however, struggles with inherited expectations that feel disconnected from his lived experience. He neither fully belongs to Bengali culture nor feels entirely accepted within mainstream America.

This generational tension reflects broader diasporic dynamics. Identity becomes increasingly hybrid across generations, challenging notions of cultural purity and fixed national belonging.

Hamid's fiction similarly portrays characters navigating competing cultural loyalties. Yet his work often emphasizes global interconnectedness over binary East-West divisions. Younger generations inhabit transnational networks where identities remain fluid and multiple.

Both writers ultimately reject essentialist understandings of culture. Diasporic identity is not loss of authenticity but process of continual negotiation and reinvention.

### **Home as Process Rather Than Place**

A central insight emerging from Lahiri's and Hamid's works is that home cannot be reduced to geographical location. Instead, home becomes emotional, relational, and processual.

For Lahiri, home is constructed through rituals, memories, and intimate relationships. Domestic spaces acquire significance through emotional labor and cultural continuity. Yet these homes remain fragile because they exist between worlds.

For Hamid, home becomes increasingly fluid within globalized modernity. Migration destabilizes fixed identities, requiring adaptability and openness to transformation. Belonging emerges through human connection rather than territorial permanence.

Both writers therefore challenge nationalist assumptions equating identity with singular homeland. Diaspora produces plural, layered, and evolving forms of belonging.

Importantly, neither author offers complete resolution to the home-making dilemma. Their characters continue negotiating uncertainty, hybridity, and emotional fragmentation. Yet this incompleteness itself reflects contemporary diasporic reality.

Home in these narratives is less destination than ongoing negotiation — a continual balancing between memory and reinvention, rootedness and mobility, inheritance and change.

### **Conclusion**

The works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Mohsin Hamid offer profound explorations of diaspora and the complex dilemma of home-making in contemporary transnational life.

Although differing in style and thematic emphasis, both writers reveal that migration transforms not only geography but identity, memory, and emotional existence itself.

Lahiri's fiction foregrounds the intimate textures of immigrant life — loneliness, familial tension, cultural rituals, and generational estrangement. Her characters seek belonging within domestic spaces shaped by memory and adaptation. Hamid, by contrast, situates diaspora within global structures of capitalism, migration, and political conflict. His novels reveal the instability of belonging in an increasingly mobile and fragmented world.

Yet both authors ultimately converge in their rejection of fixed notions of home. Home emerges not as stable territory but as fluid process shaped by relationships, memory, language, and continual negotiation. Diasporic identity becomes inherently hybrid, resisting singular cultural definitions.

Importantly, Lahiri and Hamid also challenge simplistic narratives of assimilation or return. Neither complete integration into host societies nor nostalgic attachment to ancestral homelands provides total belonging. Their characters inhabit liminal spaces where identity remains perpetually unfinished.

This unresolved condition reflects broader realities of globalization and transnational modernity. Migration today is not exceptional phenomenon but central feature of contemporary existence. Increasingly, individuals across the world negotiate multiple affiliations, shifting identities, and fragmented homes.

Through nuanced narrative strategies, Lahiri and Hamid transform diaspora from sociological category into deeply human experience. Their fiction reveals both the pain and creative possibilities of living between cultures. In their works, displacement generates not only alienation but also new forms of consciousness and connection.

Ultimately, the “home-making” dilemma in Lahiri and Hamid becomes universal meditation on belonging itself. To search for home is to search for continuity, recognition, and meaning within changing worlds. Their novels remind readers that home may never be fully recoverable or secure — yet human beings continue building it through memory, intimacy, language, and imagination.

Like travelers carrying fragments of many landscapes within them, Lahiri's and Hamid's characters inhabit worlds where home is neither singular nor permanent, but beautifully and painfully in motion.

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