

Cultural Translation and Hybrid Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts*

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Abstract

*Jhumpa Lahiri's Whereabouts (2021) resists conventional diaspora narratives by portraying identity as a fluid and affective process shaped by cultural translation and hybridity. Drawing on Talal Asad's theory of cultural translation and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," this paper argues that the protagonist's emotional dislocation and liminality are not merely personal but embedded in asymmetrical power dynamics of cross-cultural meaning-making. Through qualitative textual analysis and thematic interpretation, the study examines key passages to show how identity is continuously reconfigured through fragmented memories, spatial movement, and symbolic acts of self-translation. The novel's minimalist style, absence of proper nouns, and use of unnamed spaces underscore Lahiri's resistance to fixed cultural identities, emphasizing universal human experiences over specific cultural markers. Recurring metaphors such as water and mobility further illustrate the instability of belonging in a globalized world. The analysis suggests that identity in *Whereabouts* emerges through negotiation rather than assimilation, existing in the in-betweenness where meaning is contested, unstable, and emotionally charged. Methodologically, this study relies on interpretive strategies rooted in cultural theory to explore recurring motifs and narrative structure. It contributes to literary scholarship by reframing the novel not only as a meditation on solitude but as a nuanced exploration of identity as an ongoing process shaped by language, memory, and transcultural experience.*

KeyWords: *Hybridity; Emotional displacement; Liminality; Self-translation; Transnational subjectivity; Cultural theory.*

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1. Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's third novel, *Whereabouts* (2021), marks a radical departure from her English-language works, which include the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003), and subsequent works *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). After relocating to Italy, Lahiri immersed herself in Italian language and culture. As Islam (2024) observes, "She undergoes rigorous training with her teacher, reads and writes with the help of the dictionary, meets people, and tries to strike up conversations; she gradually manages to cope with the challenges that a new language offers" (p.46). This study is significant because it addresses the urgent need to understand how identity is negotiated in a multilingual, globalized literary landscape, offering insights into how language reshapes belonging and subjectivity.

This linguistic transition garnered widespread attention, with Cornetta (2021) in her book review noting that Lahiri's decision to abandon English "set people off." Lahiri's first Italian-language memoir, *In Other Words* (2016), was translated into English by Ann Goldstein. Subsequently, Lahiri self-translated *Whereabouts* (2021), followed by her second memoir *Translating Myself and Others* (2022), and her short story collection *Roman Stories* (2023), all originally written in Italian. This paper seeks to answer the research question: How does *Whereabouts* portray cultural translation as a process of negotiating identity and emotional displacement within the liminal spaces of a globalized world?

This multilingual trajectory underscores Lahiri's evolution and the creation of transnational identities. Her relationship with Italian represents a profound connection, which she describes in *In Other Words* as "an exquisite tension. Love at first sight" (Lahiri, 2016, p. 17). She characterizes her move to Italy and abandonment of English as a form of "linguistic exile" (Lahiri, 2016, p. 21). Her deliberate linguistic shift raises questions about her motivations and their impact on her identity.

Lahiri's linguistic unease has deep roots. Born in the UK and raised in Rhode Island by Indian immigrant parents, she grew up learning Bengali at home and English at school. This duality created tension between the two languages. Islam (2024) notes, "Lahiri has had a crisis since her childhood. At the age of two, she struggles to learn Bengali to please her parents, and at school, she masters English as an immigrant does to survive" (p.46). Critics and readers further complicate her identity, often categorizing her as a diaspora or

immigrant writer. Lahiri (2002) highlights these frustrations in her essay “Intimate Alienation,” where she recounts being variously labeled as an American, Indian-American, British-born, Anglo-Indian, or NRI writer (p. 113-120).

Frustrated by such labels, Lahiri turned to Italian to forge a new identity and voice. In an interview with Francesca Pellas on *Literary Hub*, she remarked, “I used to look for an identity that could be sharp, acceptable, mine. But now the idea of a precise identity seems a trap” (Lahiri, 2017). Writing in Italian, she explains in *In Other Words*, was “a risk that I feel inspired to take” (Lahiri, 2016, p. xvi). She elaborates in *Translating Myself and Others* (2022) that writing in Italian allows her “to feel free” (Lahiri, 2022, p. 11) and to “develop another pair of eyes, to experiment with weakness.” (p. 18) Eventually, Lahiri succinctly frames her choice: “Why Italian? To open doors, to see differently, to graft myself onto another” (p. 22).

Lahiri turns to Italian as a way to escape the confines of a fixed identity, seeking the freedom to explore new perspectives and express vulnerability. Rejecting the concept of a precise identity as a limitation, she embraces the risk of writing in a new language to forge a creative voice that goes beyond her previous literary self. Writing in Italian allows her to experiment with a fresh narrative approach, free from societal and familial expectations, and to craft a more universal, unburdened identity that was previously unavailable to her in English. Now that Lahiri, with Italian, is free from all societal and familial constraints, she can write “the everywoman English denied her” (Rashid, 2021) in his review of *Whereabouts* in *The Guardian*.

Whereabouts (2021) is a contemplative novel by Jhumpa Lahiri set in an unnamed Italian city. The novel follows an unnamed protagonist as she steers a life marked by solitude, emotional disconnection, and the search for belonging. Through her introspective journey, Lahiri explores themes of displacement, memory, and the complexity of identity within a transnational context.

This paper argues that *Whereabouts* by Jhumpa Lahiri represents a profound exploration of cultural translation and identity in a transnational context. Through Lahiri’s deliberate shift from English to Italian, the novel challenges conventional boundaries of linguistic and cultural belonging. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and Talal Asad’s critique of power

dynamics in translation, the analysis reveals how cultural translation and language function as means of negotiating the complexities of dislocation, memory, and identity formation in an increasingly globalized world.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, centered on close reading and interpretive engagement with Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* (2021). The primary objective is to examine how the protagonist's identity is shaped through processes of cultural translation, as theorized by Talal Asad, and how her experience of liminality and hybridity reflects Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualization of the "third space." This analysis focuses specifically on key motifs such as space, memory, water, and solitude as recurring narrative patterns that construct the protagonist's identity. Passages are selected based on their thematic richness and symbolic resonance, aligning with the interpretive, hermeneutic nature of the study.

The methodology involves a thematic and discursive textual analysis, wherein selected passages are examined for their representation of emotional dislocation, solitude, memory, and spatial movement. These elements are interpreted through the dual lenses of Asad's cultural translation — which emphasizes the negotiation and transformation of meaning across cultural boundaries—and Bhabha's notions of hybridity and the third space, which foreground the instability and fluidity of identity in cross-cultural contexts (Asad, 1986; Bhabha, 1994).

A key analytical strategy is the identification of symbolic spaces and metaphors that reflect the protagonist's negotiation of belonging. For instance, recurring motifs such as stairwells, windows, public transport, and theater-going are interpreted as representations of liminal or transitional spaces — sites where cultural identities are performed, reimagined, and contested (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4). These symbolic landscapes function as manifestations of the "third space," where the protagonist navigates between internal and external expectations, cultural memories, and present realities. In applying Asad's framework, particular attention is paid to moments where the protagonist attempts to make sense of herself within dominant cultural frameworks. Asad (1986) argues that cultural translation is not a neutral act: "The language of translation implies a power relationship: it is not simply a matter of recording the meanings of other cultures, but also of inscribing these meanings within one's cultural frame" (p. 157).

This perspective informs the analysis of the protagonist's emotional displacement, especially in sections where she observes others engaging in social rituals or familial obligations but feels unable to fully participate or identify with them (Lahiri, 2021, p. 30). These interactions are interpreted as acts of cultural misalignment, where translation becomes a process of negotiation rather than assimilation. To ensure depth and coherence, the analysis follows a hermeneutic approach, beginning with an overview of the narrative structure before moving toward focused interpretations of key scenes that exemplify the protagonist's hybrid identity and liminal existence. This interpretive method allows for a nuanced exploration of how cultural translation and hybridity shape both the character's self-perception and her relationship to the world around her.

By centering the discussion on Asad and Bhabha, this methodology avoids reducing the novel's themes to linguistic or autobiographical concerns. Instead, it positions *Whereabouts* as a literary site where identity is continuously negotiated, reshaped, and reimaged at the intersections of culture, language, and space.

3. Literature Review

The intersection of multilingualism, self-translation, and identity formation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* (2021) has generated diverse critical responses, highlighting its distinct place within transnational literature. Scholars have approached the novel through various lenses—focusing on Lahiri's linguistic shift from English to Italian, the narrator's fragmented selfhood, and the dynamics of cultural displacement and solitude. Collectively, these studies underscore *Whereabouts* as a fertile site for exploring how language mediates identity and cultural negotiation in a globalized world. However, a significant critical gap remains: limited engagement with cultural translation as a dynamic and power-laden process that operates across linguistic, emotional, and psychological registers. This review synthesizes key contributions to situate *Whereabouts* within broader discourses on multilingualism, cultural hybridity, and transnational identity.

Sandra Vlasta's (2023) essay, *Shifting Multilingualism: Jhumpa Lahiri's Expansion from (Multilingual) Author to (Self-)Translator*, provides a valuable overview of Lahiri's linguistic trajectory. She examines Lahiri's turn to Italian as both a creative reinvention and a critical departure from her English-language oeuvre. Vlasta contextualizes this linguistic migration within frameworks of

multilingualism and self-translation, highlighting how Lahiri's literary shift enables a reimagining of identity across languages and cultural boundaries.

Abdul Sakir's (2018) article, *La Quotidienne: The Residue of Everyday in Jhumpa Lahiri's Whereabouts*, interprets the novel through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the everyday. Sakir argues that Lahiri captures internal dislocation not through dramatic events, but through the monotony and subtle depth of routine life. The narrator's emotional detachment and fragmented encounters—such as her nonchalant reflection on an affair—reveal how the quotidian becomes a mechanism of shielding oneself from vulnerability. While Sakir effectively underscores the novel's interior focus, his analysis does not extend to the political implications of language and cultural mediation.

Tanjil Rashid's (2021) review in *The Guardian* emphasizes the novel's stylistic innovation, particularly its minimalist prose, vignette structure, and original composition in Italian. Rashid describes Lahiri's linguistic reinvention as akin to a "heart transplant," portraying the protagonist's drifting solitude as reminiscent of Antonioni's cinematic characters. He praises Lahiri's abstraction from cultural specificity as a form of universality and positions *Whereabouts* as a meditation on modern detachment rather than diaspora identity. Though insightful, Rashid's treatment stops short of theorizing cultural translation as an active process of negotiation.

In *Language as a Moving Anchor* (2022), Vani Kannan critiques Lahiri's linguistic abstraction, arguing that the novel reflects a retreat from relational or political accountability. Drawing comparisons with politically engaged writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and June Jordan, Kannan questions the privilege underlying Lahiri's refusal to anchor identity in culture or place. While she raises ethical concerns about representation, her focus remains on language as disconnection rather than translation as transformation.

A Foucauldian reading by Sarwar et al. (2022), titled *Alienation and Assimilation*, explores the unnamed protagonist's cultural detachment through the lens of power and resistance. The study frames the narrator's emotional turbulence as a product of internalized surveillance and the impossibility of fully assimilating into a dominant Western culture. While useful for understanding themes of control and alienation, this approach centers on assimilation rather than viewing translation as a space of identity reconfiguration, as theorized by Talal Asad and Homi K. Bhabha.

Taken together, existing scholarship offers valuable insights into *Whereabouts* through themes of minimalism, solitude, and linguistic reinvention. However, few studies interrogate cultural translation as an affective, embodied, and political process that structures identity in Lahiri's novel. This paper addresses that gap by analyzing *Whereabouts* through Asad's critique of translation as embedded in power and Bhabha's notion of the third space—a conceptual zone where identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated. Rather than treating cultural translation as a metaphor, this study foregrounds it as a lived negotiation of belonging, alienation, and hybridity in a transnational context.

4. Theoretical Framework

The concept of cultural translation, central to this paper, extends beyond the mere linguistic transfer of meaning to encompass broader processes of intercultural negotiation, identity reconfiguration, and power-laden exchanges (Kroneman, 2019, p. 35). First introduced by anthropologist Roger Keesing (1985), the term refers to a growing field of study among anthropologists and social scientists who examine how individuals and communities interpret, adapt, and transform cultural meanings across contexts. As Kroneman (2019) observes, “cultural translation is about understanding ourselves and developing ourselves by interacting with others, who are ‘different’” (p. 35). This definition underscores the transformative potential of cultural encounters, positioning translation not merely as an act of communication but as a process of self- and world-making.

However, as Conway (2012) notes, cultural translation remains a contested concept, with competing definitions emerging from two primary fields: anthropology/ethnography and cultural/postcolonial studies. In anthropology, it often refers to the ethnographer's task of rendering a foreign culture intelligible to outsiders—what Dick Kroneman calls “a practice aimed at fostering cross-cultural understanding” (Conway, 2012, p. 22). In contrast, within postcolonial and cultural studies, cultural translation expands to include the negotiations individuals undertake when transitioning between cultural contexts, including migration, multilingualism, and identity transformation (Conway, 2012).

It is in this latter context that Talal Asad's critique becomes particularly significant. Asad (1986) challenges the ethnocentric assumptions underlying much of cultural translation, arguing that: “The language of translation implies a power relationship: it is not simply a matter of recording the meanings of

other cultures, but also of inscribing these meanings within one's cultural frame" (p. 157). For Asad, translation is never neutral—it is a deeply political and asymmetrical process, shaped by historical, institutional, and discursive forces. His perspective illuminates the complexities of the protagonist's alienation in *Whereabouts*, where her movement across spaces is fraught with the struggle to translate her identity within dominant cultural frameworks. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, written originally in Italian and later self-translated into English, embodies this tension, offering a literary enactment of cultural negotiation where language becomes both a mechanism for asserting identity and a site of dislocation.

Complementing Asad's framework, Homi K. Bhabha's theories of hybridity and the "third space" provide a critical lens for understanding how identity emerges through intercultural encounters. Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes cultural translation not as a process of assimilation or replacement, but as a creative and subversive act that resists essentialist definitions of identity: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (p. 37).

This notion of the "third space" is crucial to interpreting the protagonist's fragmented self-perception in *Whereabouts*. She exists in a liminal zone—neither fully embedded in her Italian surroundings nor connected to any identifiable cultural past. Her introspective monologues reflect a continuous performance and renegotiation of identity, aligning with Bhabha's idea of hybridity: "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). While Bhabha develops this idea in postcolonial contexts, it resonates strongly with contemporary narratives of transnational subjectivity, where identity is constantly mediated by memory, language, and spatial movement.

Robert J.C. Young (2012) further elaborates on this dynamic by describing cultural translation as a process of hybridization, wherein cultures move, communicate, reinterpret, and adjust through language. He emphasizes how migrants, often caught between multiple cultural contexts, experience and interpret interactions in what he terms "contact zones"—spaces where cultural meanings are not fixed but fluid and continuously evolving. In this way, cultural translation becomes not only a linguistic act but also a site of

negotiation that reflects the complexities of identity and belonging in a transnational world. (Pp.155-175).

Together, Asad and Bhabha provide complementary insights into how identity is shaped by linguistic and cultural translation. While Asad emphasizes the power-laden nature of translation, Bhabha highlights its transformative and creative possibilities. By situating *Whereabouts* within this dual theoretical framework, this paper examines how Lahiri's novel exemplifies the tensions and negotiations inherent in living between languages, cultures, and histories—where identity is neither stable nor singular, but continuously performed and redefined.

5. Results and Discussion

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* (2021) unfolds through forty-six vignettes that trace the interior life of an unnamed female protagonist navigating solitude, emotional dislocation, and the search for belonging in an unnamed Italian city. The novel resists conventional plot structures, instead foregrounding the psychological and affective dimensions of identity formation in a transnational context. This discussion explores how the protagonist's fragmented selfhood emerges not only as a personal condition but also as a result of cultural translation, hybridity, and liminality, drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" and Talal Asad's critique of translation as a power-laden process.

5.1. Cultural Translation and Emotional Displacement

The protagonist's emotional detachment is deeply intertwined with the process of cultural translation, which, as Talal Asad (1986) argues, is never neutral but always embedded in power relations: "The language of translation implies a power relationship: it is not simply a matter of recording the meanings of other cultures, but also of inscribing these meanings within one's cultural frame" (p. 157). For the protagonist, this negotiation plays out not only linguistically but emotionally, as she moves between spaces—both physical and psychological—that resist full integration. Her alienation becomes evident in social settings where others seem effortlessly connected, while she remains on the periphery. Observing a group of young people sharing food on a train, she remarks: "They share these comestibles, placing wedges of fruit and pieces of chocolate into each other's mouths as if they're all mothers, and also all children eager to be fed." (Lahiri, 2021, pp. 154–155)

This intimate interaction highlights the gap between her and those who inhabit their identities without question. Her inability to fully participate reflects Asad's assertion that translation involves not just linguistic mediation but the negotiation of meaning across unequal cultural fields. The protagonist's alienation is not merely personal; it is structural, and shaped by the power dynamics inherent in cross-cultural encounters. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" [emphasis added] offers a lens through which to understand the hybrid nature of the protagonist's identity. In this in-between space, identity is neither fixed nor assimilated but constantly negotiated. The protagonist's position—neither fully integrated into Italian society nor rooted in her past—reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as: "the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (p. 37). Her recurring sense of instability mirrors the protagonist's negotiation of identity in a globalized world, where belonging is not a destination but a continuous process of becoming.

In the chapter "At the Ticket Counter", her relationship with theater serves as a metaphor for cultural translation. Introduced to the theater by her father, she recalls his love for this world and his attempt to share it with her (Lahiri, 2021, p. 57). Her present habit of attending performances alone, choosing different seats to "enjoy the concerts and performances from different points of view" (Lahiri, 2021, p. 56), reflects her reinterpretation of this inherited cultural practice.

The chapter "At My Mother's" shifts focus to the protagonist's relationship with her aging mother. The protagonist's visit to her mother's home reveals the growing physical and emotional distance between them. Despite her mother's frailty and illness, the protagonist struggles with a sense of dread and an inability to emotionally connect with her mother's aging body: "I'm overcome by the obligation to cure her various ills, to reverse the symptoms of her decline, to enliven that thin, drawn face." (Lahiri, 2021, p. 135)

This sentiment reflects a deep sense of cultural displacement as the protagonist explores the physical decay of her mother's body and her role in caring for her. The protagonist's internal panic stems from her fear of loss and the responsibility she feels for her mother's well-being. According to Asad's perspective, cultural translation involves an understanding of the body as a vessel for emotional expression and the intersection of individual agency with societal expectations. The protagonist's response to her mother's health issues

reflects a personal attempt to translate this cultural and emotional burden, despite the fear it evokes: “I fear I’m a terrible daughter who ignores her mother, whose fault is to be excessively alive.” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 136).

Moreover, the protagonist's sense of emotional disconnection is compounded by her mother's calm acceptance of the inevitable. As Bhabha (1994) suggests in his theory of hybridity, this generational disconnect between mother and daughter represents an interaction of both resistance and adaptation, where the protagonist struggles to reconcile her feelings of guilt and obligation with her mother's resigned stoicism. The daughter's projection of panic onto her mother's health underscores the emotional distance between them, even as they share physical space.

5.2. Fragmented Identities and Existential Dislocation

In an interview with NPR's Mary Louise Kelly, Lahiri notes: “...there is plot, I would argue. It's much more interior in some sense. It's a first-person novel. There's a consciousness” (Lahiri, 2022). This statement underscores the novel's focus on the protagonist's inner world, emphasizing its meditative and introspective nature. Unlike traditional plot-driven novels, *Whereabouts* relies on the protagonist's fragmented reflections and observations to create meaning, mirroring her existential dislocation and identity struggles. She articulates her ambivalence toward solitude: “Solitude: it's become my trade. As it requires a certain discipline, it's a condition I try to perfect. And yet it plagues me, it weighs on me in spite of my knowing it so well” (Lahiri, 2021, p.27). This passage captures the paradox of solitude—presented both as a deliberate choice and a burden imposed by her fragmented identity. Through this lens, solitude functions as a metaphor for the liminal state of cultural hybridity, where the protagonist navigates between cultural affiliations without fully belonging to any.

Asad's (1996) perspective on the emotional labor of translation illuminates the protagonist's solitude as a site of ongoing negotiation with her fragmented self. Translation, both linguistic and cultural, requires the individual to mediate between multiple worlds, often at the cost of a cohesive identity. In *Whereabouts*, the protagonist's introspective narrative reflects this emotional labor, as her thoughts and observations reveal the constant interplay between belonging and alienation.

At the second appearance of the chapter “In My Head” (pp. 77–78), the protagonist confronts a profound sense of disorientation: “Why does it take so long to get out of the house this morning? What bewilders me? I’m finding it harder and harder to get up and do things right away: react, move, concentrate ... I lose track of myself” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 77). This existential bewilderment intensifies when she further observes: “I’m flummoxed by this unraveling of time, I’m losing grip on myself,” she goes on, “I’m afraid of forgetting something crucial—my cell phone or my identity card, my health insurance or my keys. And I’m afraid of running into trouble” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 78). These moments signify a broader existential crisis, marked by the “unraveling of time” and a fear of losing control over her identity and surroundings. This sense of fragmentation can be understood through Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” [emphasis added], where hybrid identities emerge amidst cultural and temporal dislocation (Bhabha, 1994). In this space, the protagonist negotiates her fragmented self, caught between a past she cannot fully reconcile and a present fraught with uncertainty.

Furthermore, these moments resonate with Talal Asad’s theory of cultural translation, which emphasizes the challenges of piloting different frameworks of meaning across contexts. Asad (1986) argues that cultural translation involves a continual reinterpretation of selfhood, often resulting in alienation and a precarious relationship with one’s surroundings. The protagonist’s fear of “forgetting something crucial” or “running into trouble” reflects the anxieties of navigating a globalized, transnational world where identity and stability are constantly in flux.

Through these reflections, Lahiri illustrates the fragile balance between identity and stability, using the protagonist’s internal conflict to explore the broader themes of dislocation, hybridity, and existential uncertainty. Her narrative captures the universal experience of grappling with fragmented selves in a rapidly changing, interconnected world.

5.3. Memory and the Weight of the Past

Memory functions as both a tether to the past and a source of emotional fragmentation for the protagonist. In the chapter “On Vacation”, her recollection of her father’s preference for staying home - “he believed that it was better to relax at home, without packing a suitcase” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 83) - alongside her mother’s yearning for travel reveals the conflicting models of life she internalized. This duality shapes her present ambivalence toward

vacations: “What I end up feeling far from isn’t so much the daily grind – it’s my family, my childhood” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 84).

Similarly, in the chapter “At the Ticket Counter”, her memory of her father introducing her to the theater connects her present enjoyment of performances with her familial past. Yet this memory is tinged with loss: “Our plans for a theater trip ended tragically with his sudden death” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 57). In “In My Head”, the memory becomes a burden as she reflects on her mother’s dependence: “She’s always been afraid of being alone and now her life as an old woman torments her” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 27). The narrator struggles with the emotional weight of her mother’s fear and her desire for solitude: “Was it the fear of her fear that led me to a life like this?” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 27). Across these chapters, Lahiri portrays memory as both a connection to one’s roots and a source of emotional displacement, revealing the narrator’s ongoing negotiation of her identity in light of her past.

5.4. Solitude as Negotiation and Resistance

Solitude functions as a central theme, shaped by the narrator’s inherited tendencies and her personal choices. In the chapter “In My Head”, she contrasts her mother’s fear of solitude - “She protected me from solitude as if it were a nightmare” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 27) - with her embrace of it. While her solitude provides freedom, it is not without challenges: “I admit to leaving the lights on and the radio playing in my empty house to ease my discomfort” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 28). This tension mirrors her father’s contentment with solitude, described in the chapter “On Vacation”: “True peace, for him, meant staying indoors, staying put in a familiar place” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 83).

Her solitude also acts as a form of resistance against her mother’s lingering expectations. She acknowledges that her mother would like to “reconstruct that amalgam” they once shared (Lahiri, 2021, p. 27), but she deliberately maintains physical and emotional distance. This act of defiance is evident in the chapter “At the Ticket Counter”, where her independent theater-going habits—choosing a “different seat each time” to gain “different points of view” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 56)—symbolize her rejection of fixed roles and her assertion of agency. Through these contrasts, Lahiri portrays solitude as both a negotiated space of autonomy and a site of unresolved emotional conflict.

5.5. Identity as Ongoing Negotiation

Throughout the novel, the protagonist exists in a state of liminality—what Bhabha (1994) describes as the “third space” of enunciation—where cultural boundaries blur and subjectivity is constantly redefined. Her frequent reflections on disorientation, fragmentation, and emotional instability reveal an ongoing negotiation of selfhood: “I could be riding a train or traveling by car or flying in a plane, among the clouds that drift and spread on all sides like a mass of jellyfish in the air” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 154). This image of drifting clouds encapsulates the protagonist’s fluid and unstable sense of self. There is no arrival, no final destination—only constant movement through spaces that refuse to offer stability. Her suitcase, repeatedly packed and unpacked, symbolizes the impermanence of her existence.

Bhabha’s idea of hybridity further illuminates this condition: “Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 112). The protagonist’s psyche is fragmented by her constant oscillation between the desire for connection and an equally strong impulse to retreat into isolation. Her inability to “react, move, concentrate,” (p.154) and her fixation on tangible symbols of identity—keys, cards, and insurance—highlight the fragility of her sense of self within this liminal space. Edward Said’s reflections on exile capture the protagonist’s feelings of alienation: “Exile is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (Said, 2000, p. 173).

Although the protagonist has not been exiled in the literal sense, she experiences a similar rupture—an emotional dislocation that cannot be easily mended. Her solitude becomes a liminal space where her identity is continuously rewritten, often in opposition to dominant cultural narratives.

5.6. Water as Metaphor for Cultural Liminality and Emotional Translation

Jhumpa Lahiri uses water as a powerful metaphor to explore the protagonist’s emotional displacement and sense of cultural in-betweenness. In the chapter “In the Pool”, the protagonist finds herself among women sharing stories of grief, yet real connection remains elusive: “As I take in these losses, these tragedies, it occurs to me that the water in the pool isn’t so clear after all. It reeks of grief, of heartache. It’s contaminated.” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 42) This metaphor underscores the protagonist’s emotional alienation and illustrates how cultural translation is not only linguistic but also deeply affective. As Talal Asad (1986) notes, translation constructs new power relations (p. 161), and

here, the water becomes a space where shared experiences fail to bridge differences—highlighting the instability of cross-cultural emotional exchange.

In the chapter “By the Sea”, the blurred horizon between sea and sky mirrors the protagonist’s indeterminate position—neither fully integrated nor entirely detached. The sea represents an unattainable peace, echoing Edward Said’s notion of exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (Said, 2000, p. 173). In this way, Lahiri uses water not just as a setting, but as a narrative device to illustrate the fluid, contested nature of identity in the hybrid third space.

5.7. Transculturalism, Minimalism, Multilingualism, and Self-Translation

Lahiri’s decision to write *Whereabouts* in Italian and self-translate it into English exemplifies her linguistic migration and hybridity. As Adriana Elena Stoican (2024) notes, “Lahiri’s linguistic migration embodies a form of transcultural becoming, where identity is continuously reimagined across languages and aesthetic forms” (p. 111). Writing in a non-native language allows Lahiri to distance herself from fixed cultural labels, enabling both the author and protagonist to explore identity beyond conventional diasporic frameworks. Lahiri herself explains, “I used to look for an identity that could be sharp, acceptable, mine. But now the idea of a precise identity seems a trap” (Lahiri, 2017). This aligns with Rita Wilson’s (2020) reading of self-translation as a dynamic enactment of “being-in-difference” (Bhabha, 1997), emphasizing the iterative crossing of borders between internal and external worlds (Rita Wilson, 2020, p.128).

Lahiri’s minimalist style further reinforces this transcultural vision. Stoican identifies this approach as a deliberate strategy to strip away cultural specificity, resonating with Advaita Vedanta’s concept of *nāmarūpa* (name and form), where transcending labels leads to self-awareness (Stoican, 2024, p. 116). Lahiri herself reflects: “I’ve made solitude my trade... And yet it plagues me, it weighs on me despite my knowing it so well” (Lahiri, 2021, p. 27). Minimalism becomes a transcultural tool that reinforces Lahiri’s exploration of identity as fluid and relational, rather than tethered to fixed cultural markers. This reflects Asad’s notion of cultural translation as a process of creating shared understanding amidst diversity.

Multilingualism is central to Lahiri’s exploration of identity, both personal and artistic. Writing *Whereabouts* in Italian signifies Lahiri’s linguistic and cultural

reinvention, embodying Bhabha's "hybrid moment" where language becomes a site of negotiation and transformation (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). Lahiri states in *In Other Words*: "I've been writing in Italian for almost two years, and I feel that I've been transformed, almost reborn." (Lahiri, 2016, p. 151) This act of rebirth parallels the protagonist's nomadic existence, where detachment from cultural specificity becomes a source of identity fluidity.

Self-translation in *Whereabouts* exemplifies Lahiri's resistance to traditional hierarchies between original and translated texts, asserting her creative agency. Stoican (2024) views this process as a transcultural act that unifies the fragmented self by moving fluidly between cultural and linguistic spaces (p. 115). Lahiri's decision to translate her work disrupts expectations of linguistic and cultural authenticity, highlighting her dual role as both mediator and creator. Spagnuolo (2017) observes: "Self-translation can thus be seen as a continuation of the writing process, as moments where the self-translator can re-enact his/her authorial voice" (p. 80). This insight aligns with Rita Wilson's (2020) interpretation of self-translation as a dynamic enactment of "being-in-difference," emphasizing the iterative crossing of borders between internal and external worlds. (p.128).

Through its engagement with transculturalism, minimalism, multilingualism, and self-translation, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* challenges static notions of identity and belonging, offering a nuanced portrayal of identity as fluid, negotiated, and embodied. Lahiri constructs a narrative that foregrounds the transformative potential of cultural and linguistic negotiation, positioning identity not as fixed or assimilated, but as continuously reconfigured in response to shifting emotional, spatial, and cultural contexts.

Her minimalist aesthetic reinforces this transcultural vision by emphasizing shared human experiences and dissolving rigid cultural boundaries. The deliberate omission of proper nouns—whether for people, places, or institutions—underscores Lahiri's intent to move beyond culturally specific markers. As Batra (2022) observes: "The author has not used any proper nouns denoting people, including the narrator, which helps the novel transcend limited cultural milieu and render it universal color" (p.183). This stylistic choice enables *Whereabouts* to resonate across linguistic and cultural borders, inviting readers to connect with the protagonist's emotional journey on a deeply personal yet universally relatable level.

Throughout *Whereabouts*, Lahiri crafts a narrative voice that is restrained yet deeply introspective, allowing the protagonist's fragmented perceptions to mirror her fragmented identity. The narrator's interactions with her surroundings are filtered through a lens of emotional ambiguity, where even mundane settings become sites of introspection and existential questioning. As Jasmine Liu (2023), in her review of the novel, insightfully notes, "The narrator's portrayal of people, places, and feelings are never innocent; each one represents an interrogation into her pleasure, interests, and irritations." This suggests that every observation is a mirror—reflecting the narrator's struggles with cultural in-betweenness and personal dislocation. Rather than simply describing her environment, the protagonist uses space and relationships as tools for self-inquiry, revealing how deeply her identity intertwines with the act of observing and being observed.

By writing in Italian and self-translating into English, Lahiri enacts a form of linguistic migration that mirrors her protagonist's emotional and existential dislocation. Her multilingual trajectory becomes a metaphor for identity in motion—a process of reinvention and resistance against the constraints of national, cultural, and linguistic categorization. Rita Wilson (2020) describes self-translation as a dynamic enactment of 'being-in-difference', highlighting how such acts reflect an ongoing, iterative crossing between internal and external worlds. (p.128).

Through the lenses of cultural translation, hybridity, and liminality, *Whereabouts* emerges as a profound meditation on identity, belonging, and emotional displacement. The protagonist's recurring sense of instability—evident in her fragmented memories, spatial movement, and emotional detachment—reflects Homi K. Bhabha's conceptualization of identity as constantly reconfigured within the "third space". Simultaneously, Talal Asad's critique of cultural translation illuminates how meaning-making in transnational contexts often results in alienation, affective labor, and power-laden negotiations.

Finally, Lahiri resists conventional diaspora narratives by foregrounding the psychological and affective dimensions of displacement. The protagonist's solitude, memory, and mobility illustrate the complexities of living in-between cultures—not as a condition of loss, but as a site of continuous becoming. In doing so, *Whereabouts* invites readers to rethink what it means to belong—not

as a destination, but as a lifelong, fluid negotiation shaped by language, memory and cultural translation.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored how identity is constructed in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* through the dual theoretical lenses of Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" and Talal Asad's theory of cultural translation, arguing that the novel resists conventional diaspora narratives by foregrounding identity as a fluid, negotiated process shaped by language, memory, and emotional dislocation. Through a close textual analysis and engagement with critical perspectives—including transculturalism, multilingualism, self-translation, and minimalism—the paper has demonstrated that the unnamed protagonist does not inhabit a stable cultural or emotional position. Instead, she exists in a state of liminality, where identity is continuously reconfigured within the interstices of cultures, languages, and internal conflicts. Future research could expand this inquiry by comparing Lahiri's Italian works with other self-translated or multilingual narratives to trace broader patterns of transnational subjectivity and cultural negotiation.

By examining the protagonist's fragmented selfhood, her emotional detachment, and her negotiation of belonging across physical and metaphorical spaces, this study has shown that identity in *Whereabouts* is not rooted in origin or assimilation but emerges through processes of cultural mediation, linguistic migration, and relational becoming. The recurring motif of water, the symbolic use of spatial movement, and the affective dimensions of solitude all reinforce the idea that identity is neither fixed nor fully knowable, but constantly in motion—mirroring Bhabha's conceptualization of hybridity as an ongoing performance of self in between cultures.

Furthermore, Talal Asad's critique of cultural translation illuminated how these negotiations are never neutral but deeply embedded in power dynamics. The protagonist's struggle to inscribe herself within dominant cultural frameworks—whether familial, linguistic, or societal—reveals the emotional labor involved in navigating transnational subjectivity. Her introspective monologues and fragmented memories reflect the instability of meaning-making in cross-cultural contexts, underscoring Asad's assertion that translation constructs new fields of power relations.

Lahiri's multilingual trajectory —writing in Italian and self-translating into English—serves as both a narrative and stylistic enactment of this hybrid condition. Her minimalist prose, deliberate omission of proper nouns, and focus on universal human experiences further align with a transcultural vision that challenges fixed notions of identity and belonging. As Batra (2022) observes, this stylistic abstraction enables the novel to transcend limited cultural milieus and resonate universally—a literary strategy that reinforces the protagonist's liminal existence while inviting readers to engage empathetically with her emotional world.

Finally, *Whereabouts* invites us to rethink what it means to belong—not as a destination, but as a lifelong negotiation. By foregrounding the psychological and affective dimensions of displacement, Lahiri resists reductive categorizations of identity and instead offers a nuanced portrayal of the self as perpetually in formation. This paper has thus contributed to existing scholarship by positioning *Whereabouts* not only as a meditation on solitude but as a profound articulation of identity formation in a globalized world, where the self is continually shaped by the interplay of language, memory, and cultural expectations. In doing so, the novel exemplifies how cultural translation operates not merely as a linguistic act, but as a mode of being-in-difference, where identity is lived, felt, and reimagined across emotional and cultural borders.

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